

David Koehn

THE CORMORANT

The brief shadows of five cormorants
Hasten across a small island before the V
 Of each disappears
In the glare on the lake's surface.

One cormorant descends toward the water--
Angling as the shadows of fish angle,
 As reflected clouds
Drift over the bottom. The cormorant flits

Into water, a dark spear. A black angel
 In Lethe, blades scythe
The water. With such yellow eyes desire
Appears where above mirrors the below.

Both wings snip through the water.
 Then, like Arp's bird,
Smooth its body into an onyx curve.
A school of brim scatter like cattail seed

Leaving trails of a palimpsest
 Of light in the absence
Of their flight. The hooked bill snapped shut,
The neck snaked up to the head, a tail flaps.

An oval school of brim, out of proportion
To our two shadows on the lake
Return. A cormorant alights on a mangrove.
In the peaking sun, shade folds its dark wings.

THE TOLL

Radio 94.3 plays The Police then interspersed
94.3 plays sound bites from *Svengali*.

All the while, 10,000 feet above the mountains
My children return to their mother, earlier

A tall writer read a short story about the Himalayas,
As a hummingbird nectared the lilac at the podium...

As a hummingbird nectared the lilac at the podium...
The radio's pentimento ends with my car's

Approach to the toll booth, where there is moon,
Then fog, then fog under moon. No coin for the toll.

Elsewhere, always, elsewhere, a girl picks up
The phone, I write "The phone" and my phone rings.

It is work. She leaves a message, says, "Hi! We're here."
Some Chiclets piled on top of coins in the ashtray.

The cityscape glitters at the far end of the bridge.
Yeti, DJ, hummingbird, (It is catching up to me

Now...from the same distance, the train sounds
Louder when approaching than when it has passed.)

Why can't I pay what I owe? The toll man says,
"Don't worry; I have all the time in the world.
Don't worry; I have all the time in the world."

MS. YEN'S MUSIC STUDIO SUMMER RECITAL

In a bevy of little Pans' mouths, a display of recorders.
Over their kneel-down marimbas, each mallet hovers,

Hammers the size of dumplings. I have known these songs:
The Sea Shanty's oblong wobbings; a Sentimental Waltz gone

Suddenly drunken; a William Tell Overture drowned
By a student's unrhythm. In the expansive round

Of mothers and fathers--braced by a not-quite-encouraging Ms. Yen,
Smiling and nodding--I succumb to the embarrassed silence

Nursed by ill-applied devotion, and stories of Hesiod
Visiting his personal muses on Helicon. The small god

Accepting, at the end of his drama, all the false applause
As he believes all the mistimed measures, the pauses

Not endured patiently, the other children's clumsinesses
Were improvements to the ledger the collapsing universe

Intended. The program calls for Ms. Yen to sing Think of Me,
Her vaporous voice, her thick accent, a special treat.

Now, an unmistakable child in lederhosen, a style
Only a mother could love, dangles his toes over the pedals.

What a small figure the memory of ourselves strikes. The black
Bench conveying up the reluctant boy aside a black

Wave that is the grand piano. For the wind, the summer
Hints at the skylight's angles. Ms. Yen dims the dimmer.

A row ahead two girls fire their fingers in unison
Playing rock, paper, scissors: fist, palm, gun.

DRIFT

A swarm of blue dragonflies
Bend river over the hemimetabolous iridescence
Of their eyes. I point out the oily-cloud of the burble
To my daughter who wants to know “Did you bring
Your cell phone?” Water clear enough
To point out the river’s trout, I think of the spider
Found in the washcloth this morning;
How Anna’s hummingbird at dawn hovered in the drainage.

Cliff sides collapse around us like lost ruins—
Granite’s jointing into slabs and columns.
She departs for the other side of the world,
Soon. She will promise to call. I recall
What she told me, You are your ringtone,
So choose carefully. Mayflies, the latest hatch
Squirrel around a partially submerged torso
Of a fallen Willow’s dotterel, roots
The tangled bust of some ancient river god
Waiting to snag the unwary.

On rivers like these, I think of a lost friend,
How he would study the 50 varieties of caddisfly
So he might tie himself, in his own way, to the river.
I think of his newborn daughter, “but a grub.”
What Greek tragedy lurks in the currents?
Molting crayfish gaze up at us, reverent
In widespread awe of their new skins, claws raised
In praise of their Olympians; my daughter, a reverie
Of Cybele, drifting over her subjects.

At the oxbow, we dismount. Atop a thicket
Of Aspen the yellow hood of a Western Tanager flashes
Amidst the green hearts of the cottonwood.
Three ducklings skitter towards cover, bobble.

SOME LINES TO A JAZZ SINGER

I arrive to disappointment:
No thin hips, no sculpted thigh,
No button nose,
You, they call pretty?
But that voice!
Inflorescence, like pinnate satin?
Oh good god, anything but that.
Anything but more god damn poetry.
Give me Yarrow—the weed
In the empty lot,
Yarrow, the main ingredient
In love potions, Momma's tea.
Yarrow—placed under pillow
Says a proverb, reveals
Your true love in dreams.
The plant carried by Achilles into battle
To stop the bleeding of his wounds.
Your hips sway your lips.
That note you hold, holds me, stuck
In its well like the lovers
Caught in their coital gruit.
I want to tell you
“My wife, she won't mind.”
It might be the truth
But I don't quite believe me either.
I think that song is meant for me.
Your voice like a salve for bruises.
Tonic for this chest wound. Aromatic
For my asthma. Prescription for this itch.
Why have you brought me here?
Oh, you are a bad man's play thing.
Yarrow, flower of divination,
I-ching thing, Chiron's gift,
After the show, I puff myself up.
If I had a cigar and wide-brimmed hat
I'd be the half-beast, half-man
My wife needed me to be.