WHY DOGS STOPPED FLYING

POEMS

KENNETH W. BREWER

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Poems
by

Kenneth W. Brewer

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This book is dedicated to my loving wife,
our extended family, and our many
friends. I love you all.

The book is also dedicated to a more
responsible attitude toward the planet
we live on and all the other beings
who live here with us.

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WHY DOGS STOPPED FLYING

"They chatter when they should be dumb,
And when they *ought* to speak are mum."

Marie de France, "The Cock and the Fox"
(trans. By W. W. Skeat)

WHY DOGS STOPPED FLYING

Before humans, dogs flew everywhere.
Their wings of silky fur wrapped hollow bones.
Their tails wagged like rudders through wind,
their stomachs bare to the sullen earth.

Out of sorrow for the first humans—
stumbling, crawling, helpless and cold—
dogs folded their great wings into paws
soft enough to walk beside us forever.

They still weep for us, pity our small noses,
our unfortunate eyes, our dull teeth.
They lick our faces clean,
keep us warm at night.
Sometimes they remember flying
and bite our ugly hands.

BELTED GALLOWAYS

Imagine a black cow
with the middle third
a belt of white carpet.

Or imagine an Oreo
with four legs, a tail,
and a slobbering head.

There, you have it.
The Belted Galloway.
Like a jack-a-lope postcard.

I've seen them, though,
a small herd
in Pine Valley, Utah.

Gentle, munching creatures,
they looked at me
through the rail fence,

at my white beard
streaked with black.

BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRDS

For David Lee

All afternoon,
"little warriors"
guard the feeder
from each other.

Fierce wings
beat the air
like Milton's angels
in heavenly war.

They fight
for sweet water
hanging
from a roof.

All around me,
loud as any firmament
I shall ever hear,
tiny wings whir.

BROTHER SLUG

Uncircumcised, I turned
to face the wall in after-practice showers.
The other boys dangled snakes
compared to my slug.

But I kept shy in most ways,
pulling the skin over my head,
hiding poverty in its tattered bag,
committing myself to blindness.

Then a woman's hand coaxed me out
in the back seat of a '57 Chevy,
the convertible top popped
like a bottle of Bud.

In my mind, a banana slug
the size of Portland
glistened and slimed its slow way
toward Salt Lake City.

So I thank her now for teaching me
how small things can grow
nurtured to attention
in the otherwise dark.

CAT

I trapped
the tri-colored cat
in the hallway

so she rolled
on her back,
dug claws in the rug,

smiled, then
sprang
through my legs

into the kitchen,
under the table,
laughter

rippling her body
to the twitch
of her tail.

CHICKADEE DRIVE-IN

To watch them eat sunflower seeds
at the crab apple tree feeder,
I would guess they invented
the fast-food restaurant.

Each chickadee darts in,
grabs a seed in its beak,
flies to a distant branch
to park and eat,
never doffs its black cap,
no tips, no chit-chat,
just a quick meal on the fly.

But if the cook's remiss
and forgets to fill the feeder,
then the chattering begins.
I think of old people
used to certain ways, rhythms,
expectations of time and place.

I see their arms flutter
in their black sleeves,
their beaks shrill with upset,
their eyes large, intent,
focused on some distant branch
they expect to clutch.

They never flock.
They eat alone.
Fast food or nothing.
Then one day,
beneath their folded wings,
the branch breaks.

COYOTE ON A CLOUD OF NITROGEN

Like Lucy in the Sky,
Coyote floats, her ragged fur
fluffed out to wing span.

Below, in a brown haze,
cars, trucks, airplanes full of people
who have left their spirits at the curb,

zigzag the planet as if perpetual motion
were the only law of Nature, and time
a commodity to be spent or banked.

"Why am I laughing?" asks the Angel Coyote.
"I should weep for these humans."
But her tears, falling, turn to mud.

CURL

For Kathryn and Manon

1.
The human ear curls, coils, turns
into and around like seashell,
trilobite, riding the body, turtle shell
latched to bone, building
in which we live, our second skin,
our shelter, our hook, herald, hospice.

The human ear bends sound
through outer hairs and canals.
Drummed into the middle hall,
sound vibrates into circles through
hammer, anvil, stirrup, cochlear
promontory, and the round window.

The inner great hall of cochlea,
snail-shaped bone, and labyrinth,
moves sound across hair cells
atop the organ of Corti, changing
acoustic to electric and I hear
rain click on the bay window,
the Schnauzer snore on the couch,
tires sizzle on wet pavement,
the Nutcracker Suite on the radio
down the hallway in another room,
my slow breaths exhaling and inhaling
a circular rhythm, all of this
funneled into my folded brain
to keep this moment clear till sound,
like a tremolo of the heart's desire, stops.

2.
Falling from mountain springs
into the slower, winding traces
of the valley, the river's winter
colors deepen, the snowy banks
dotted with tufts of green and brown,
ice-trimmed currents clear

to the muddy bottom like flowing
granite walls constantly shifting.

Younger, I walked the river's edges
to see and listen. Canada geese and
mallards would startle me with
wing-beat rattle from wind-sheltered
bends behind high banks. They roiled
calm water into shattered glass. Some
mornings I would sit, study
mouse and fox tracks, imagine
the dramas of frozen nights,
animal eyes ablaze like the moon.

Older now, I dream my ice-caked
beard dripping from steamy
coffee, the sun rising above
the Wasatch range and spreading
light across the valley, trout
holding deep in the river, their
dull backs moving easily, ducks
drifting with bills curled
under their wings, all of us alive
and waiting for the warmth
that always arrives, that
changes the river, inside or out.

3.
What about love, the great
shape-shifter? Love curls
around us like a cat draped
over our shoulders, purring,
licking a paw, when suddenly
claws sink into our skin, out again.
Hope, joy, sorrow, even the
words roll from our tongue,
unfurl from inside-out searching
for an outside-in, an opening

thin or thick like lips upon reed,
fingers upon string, flesh upon bone,
river upon rock, snow that trickles
down glass wrinkling the world,
till what we think we know shifts
and all we have left is one note.
The sound of love.

DERMATOPHAGOIDES

In extreme density perhaps 3,500 mites
live in a gram of dust, like angels.
They feed on flakes of skin, hair,
all the detritus we shake away.

Not even the air around us is empty.
Dust mites have their own detritus.
Invisible pellets of mite feces float
like balloons on the slightest whisper.

FIELD GUIDE

A robin will pose in a child's aim
and surrender its feathered body,
claws, tail, black and white throat.

Some children learn quickly
the living robin hops, cocks its head,
tugs night crawlers and sings.

Other children hold death in their hands,
eager to poke the vacant eyes, hang
the stiffening body on their mind's wall.

FISHING BEFORE THE FROST

For Leslie Norris

In these mountain Valleys,
frost eats more tomatoes
fresh from the fence row
than I ever do.

My wife's labor's lost
sometimes in late August
when I turn to fishing
for lunk-bellied browns.

In the chill early evening,
trout rise to hatches
and the bats and I do well
in our separate catches,

bats with their mitt-like wings
full of the invisible things
of the darkening air, and me
with my grass-lined creel.

Most autumns here
when tomatoes turn almost pink,
I have learned to expect
the worst of weather's flukes.

Each morning I check the fence
for vines blackened by surprise,
tomatoes turned to lumps of coal
beneath the silver, lacy frost.

Some years the changes
come far too early
and bring my wife to tears
and me to poetry.

Yet, come evening, I disappear
to the dark river where trout rise
wordless as winter dreams
cold in these aging hands.

FOX AT PLAY

I watched a red fox
in the wheat field
between the blue house
and the Bear River.

She stood, ears pricked,
head tilted to one side,
then suddenly leaped
all four legs

straight in the air
and down pounced
on a mound of snow,
a meadow vole.

Her reddish flanks froze.
Her forepaws stretched,
clawed the snow.
She tilted her head.

Again she leaped,
four pogo sticks
with a red back
and a pointed snout,

a dozen times,
while I laughed
behind my picture window,
slapped my legs

as if a circus
had come to the farm,
till she caught one,
tossed it high like a furry ball.

Then only snow remained.

GOAT'S MILK

In the cool Pine Valley mountains
above an August desert heat,
every goat gave three quarts a day
of smooth and creamy milk.
Herders kept one-third, sold the rest.
Then one sunrise the southern sky
burst into light like a match
and slowly darkened to a pink haze.

Eleven million curies of iodine-131
caught the winds at detonation
then sprinkled back to earth
like salt over the horizon's shoulder,
like small angels of death
the color of goat's milk.

GOLDENROD SPIDER

She nestles inside a yellow daylily
halfway down its long tube, behind the anthers.

Hyperiod hemerocallis open their mouths
to the sun like sirens to large bee flies.

When the bee fly comes for nectar,
the goldenrod kills it, holds the body half a day.

She eats what she wants, lets the shell fall,
then crablike crawls into yellow and waits.

GREAT SPANGLED FRITILLARY

The *Speyeria cybele* prefers wet meadows
and nectar from black-eyed Susans.

The female lays pale brown eggs
near violets. The caterpillar eats,

grows beyond its skin many times,
turns into a dark brown chrysalis.

This splits open as an adult male spreads
wings, blood pumping to his hairy claspers.

Imagine the change: from a thing that crawls
to a thing that flies. But the price is high.

Life is short for Fritillary males.
They suck nectar, breed and die.

HENSLOW'S SPARROW

I too have named a bird:
Brewer's Hindsight.

Its habitat is worldwide
and perhaps beyond.

If feeds on errors,
especially those of others.

Its whistle is a falling,
mournful "WHEEE-ooooo."

Often observed shaking its head
at the scene of some disaster,

or on a street corner flapping its wings,
it pecks at the other birds.

It marries forever,
though not to the same mate.

We can observe it in old fields
nervously scratching the earth
like Henslow's Sparrow.

HOME

Squirrels have faith in branches
even when those thin limbs bend
and dip quickly to the empty air,
the space where squirrels live
part of their lives, but not all.

Birds, too, believe in trees,
that the branches will hold them.
Not even birds can live in the air
forever, but they must fold
their wings to their sides and roost.

On this planet, flight is temporary.
All of us who have enough faith
to give our bodies to the air
understand the trust in landing, too,
of returning to something solid.

HOW TO TRAIN A HORSE TO BURN

One method always works.
Tie the horse in its stall
and pile the old straw high.

Douse the straw, the stall,
all the wood, all the tack.
Open all the windows for a draft.

Stuff cigarettes up your nostrils,
cram cotton in your ears,
light a match and run.

Horses hate fire.
They whinny, snort, scream.
They buck and kick.

Flames grow in their big eyes,
smoke chokes them,
the hooves and flanks heat up.

Then the shoulders, the neck, the withers.
The tail begins to burn like a torch
whipping the bark-dark, then the mane.

Takes a long time
to teach a horse to burn.
They never get used to it.

But no record exists
of one horse
burning another.

LARGEST LIVING ORGANISM ON EARTH

Imagine a honey mushroom
the size of 1,665 football fields
beneath Oregon's Malheur National Forest.
This *Armillaria ostoyae*, this fungus,
more animal than plant,
sends its rhizomorphs to suck
the water from trees.

A mushroom can have 36,000 sexes.
Imagine a mushroom high school
in the hallway between classes.
Imagine the combinations, the cliques,
the gametes, the spores, the std's,
the constant fusings,
the constant sound of sucking.

The futon, open, occupies
too much of my wife's study.
Folded, for sitting, it would be
comfortable, would fit the Feng Shui.

But Feng Shui fails to please
the two Schnauzers who prefer the futon
flat, who sit before us, staring,
till we obey like good people.

They rule our daily lives,
allow us, graciously, to sleep with them, tethered
by the leashes wrapped round our wrists.

To entertain us, they write poems
about us as if we were dogs.
They draw us as if we held the pencil,
as if we imagined their enormous wings.

LOONS

1.
The U-Haul neatly splits
their divorce—her possessions
in the back, his up front,

the baby's spread out
among father, mother,
and all the grandparents.

Unlike loons, humans
do not mate for life.
Out brains outweigh us.

In the quiet of evening,
we hear the loons
far away on dark water.

Their calls sharpen the night
as if the next word from anyone
could bring us all to tears.

I help my son
carry the last of the furniture
from the lake house.

We rope everything into place,
slam shut the truck door
and drive away.

2.
I measure cities by noise.
The largest roar and clatter
regardless of the hour

and nothing short of freakish
Nature can muffle them—
several feet of snow before dawn, perhaps.

I have sat on porch steps
to watch traffic in endless lines,
have smelled bus fumes and semis,

caught the language of people
in a hurry, mopped sweat
from the radiating, trapped heat.

I have waited in the midst
of thousands on six-lane
interstates blocked with wreckage,

felt the impatience, the hostility
take shape like a fried egg,
grease splattering on skin,

all of us annoyed with the dead
by the side of the road,
who block our progress.

A city is no place for the dead.
They are too slow, too quiet.
They ask too much of us.

3.
And what have I done
with my life? What
song can I sing out

across this dark water?
I have made of my life
a string of words

long enough
to reach the moon,
far short of the sun.

I lack the elegance
of a single loon
swimming through shadows

of white pine on water,
wailing to its family,
like a ship of solid bone.

4.
Oh my children,
I would carry you
on my back forever,

but still you would
swim, dive into the water
deep as life itself

and leave me afloat
on this dark lake
calling your names

as if words alone
could enfold you
in feathery shields,

keep you safe from eagles,
from turtles,
from gulls.

But I cannot.
In spite of it all,
still I try another song,

another voice,
one more word
to the moon.

MAGPIE SPRINGS

A week after water began
bubbling up in our front yard,
Black-billed Magpies, *Pica hudsonia*,
claim the place, their pennants,
black and white, flapping brightly,
their tails, iridescent green, dipping
like quill pens into the trickled stream.

Whenever I approach, they pause,
cock their heads to eye me,
but never fly off. They hop
back a bit the closer I come.

I appreciate their presence,
like cavalry patrolling against
insects, small mammals, carrion.
But they also like the cherry trees,
and, if pressed, will eat sunflower seed
fallen from the bird feeders.

In Europe, Magpies sometimes speak,
tell the Europeans how to raise families,
build pocket nests with domed roofs.
Here, they merely drink and bathe,
and though I ask many questions,
they will not speak to me.

MARTHA (1 SEPTEMBER 1914)

Ectopistes migratorius Martha,
the last of billions, of flocks big as cities.
She could fly 60 miles an hour.

How many shotgun shells
did it take to kill
a billion passenger pigeons?
And when we tied captured birds
upon stools to lure others,
why did we sew shut their eyes?

What did Martha see last
in that September sky of Cincinnati?
The human hand that lifted
her feathered body,
kept it on ice for the taxidermist?

In that morning light
perhaps the back of her neck
flickered from bronze to green.
Her slate-blue head, black bill,
Martha—pale cinnamon throat,
white abdomen, red iris, red legs, red feet—
she must have been some sweet pigeon.

MOURNING CLOAK

In Cache Valley, the Mourning Cloak
casts the first butterfly shadow of spring.

Black wings trimmed in yellow,
does it mourn the winter passing?

In our naming, we mourn ourselves,
wingless, stuck to the ground like snails.

"NOW THE SUN HAS COME TO EARTH"

From Ian Campbell's "The Sun Is Burning"
sung by Kate Wolf (Gold In California)

1.
All summer we watch
the white-lined sphinx at dusk
gathering nectar in Bobbie's flowers.
Bergamot seems a favorite.

The caterpillar, though, eats
my evening primrose
and I'd be angry save
the metamorphosis.

On summer twilights
I've been known to pull a lawn chair
to a stand of evening primrose
and stare as the yellow blossoms un-

fold like small suns
bursting open in the dark.
I will also watch the sphinx
hover from flower to flower for hours.

2.
The first summer of the 21st century
we drive the 40 miles to Ogden
every day of May and June
so a human sun can burn

through the cross hairs of four tattoos
on Bobbie's body, small crosses
nearly invisible, unlike
the rose on her shoulder.

In the hospital waiting room,
each day I add some pieces
to a jigsaw puzzle, a half-formed
schooner on a half-formed sea.

3.
On a map I have, the radiation
fallout from the Nevada tests
stretch like black fingers across
the country west to east and beyond.

Utah is not visible on the map.
Nothing but black on the spot
where over a million people live,
the place of "the low use segment."

4.
I hover for weeks after, afraid
to touch her in our bedded nights,
afraid we will not survive
such fierce sun come to earth.

5.
But we do.

OLD FENCES

In wheat fields along the Bear River,
old fences poke above the snow.
Gray, split, broken, they mark
boundaries meaningless to any creature
but the humans who built them.
Even those, when dead, have no use
for fences, nothing left to keep in or out.

Fences never kept the moon out of the rye,
and barbed wire never stopped a bull.
What's a fence to crow or coyote?
Imagine water refusing to cross a line.
Imagine snakes looking for the gate.

Still, I admire a well-built fence,
a hopeless detail in cosmic time.

SCARLETT PENSTEMON

For Keith Wilson

Bees can't see red
but hummingbirds can
so the scarlet penstemon
curls its lower lip,
picks it lover as certain
as Cleopatra picked Caesar.

In the southern Utah summer,
in the late afternoon
of long shadows, shimmering,
the scarlet penstemon pouts,
and, oh, sweet Jesus, to be
a broad-tailed hummingbird then.

SHEEP

For Ellen Meloy

The Virgin River vanishes
in canyon rock
leaving tear stains
for the mountain sheep
who graze on stone,
who know the earth is steep
in every direction, who know
geometry is merely
the shape of stone,
empty space,
memory of hooves.

We want to ask
"How can you live here?"
But we drive fast
past their answer,
our attention always
ahead of us.

SOLITARY VIREO

A small bird, not much bigger
than a blue-throated hummer,

the vireo sings its Latin name—
"I am green. I am green."

With a white circle
around each eye

and an olive-green back,
the vireo looks like

a rodeo horse
taught to fly.

THE COURAGE OF FROGS

The first time I heard that story,
I admired the courage of the Princess.
To touch her lips to green skin.
To risk warts blistering her mouth.
What if all the hidden courtiers
were about to point and laugh?

But I learned to think otherwise,
to measure life beyond royalty.
What that frog must have sacrificed
to be touched by such pale lips,
fat and dry, beneath hairy nostrils,
and eyes stuck to face-front vision.

To trade frog legs, able to leap 20 times their length,
for legs like tree stumps rooted to earth,
trade a tongue long and quick,
give up a three-chambered heart,
skin that breathes even under water,
and ears connected tympanum to lungs.

I learned to measure life by loss.
The Brooding Frog of Australia gone.
The Golden Toad of Costa Rica gone.
The Vegas Valley Leopard Frog,
the Rancho Grande Harlequin Frog,
the Mountain Mist Frog—extinct.

Death and deformation wear human masks,
descend like angels of acid rain, ozone
thinned to scalding, ultraviolet radiation.
And what symbol do I imagine now?
That Christ-like Prince of Frogs
strung on a cross of human bone.

THE DIGNITY OF COCKROACHES

Death comes to cockroaches
like a foot
wider than the ceiling.

The dying
lift their legs
in a last gesture,
a memory
of pretzel salt,
a toothpick
daubed with mustard,
sugar floating
like an oil slick on coffee.

These working class geese
have no pedigrees beyond
this icy reservoir dock
where the Logan River pools
then falls through the city
to disappear in the west desert.
Here these geese unload
the ships of our pockets,
our bread upon the water.

THE SILLIEST DEBATE

The mountain gorillas of Bwindi
need their legs, their arms, their hands.
Unlike humans, they do not need syntax.

Syntax is like the grid of a city—
we need it to find our way
to work, to home, to school,
to the Super WalMart with its own grid
laid out like a Melville sentence.

Some humans claim syntax
makes us smarter than gorillas.
We have Maalox, Tylenol, Anusol, Viagra,
and we can compose compound-complex
sentences that have multiple nouns and verbs.

We are the Adamic species.
We name everything, even "ecotourists,"
humans who pay to watch
the mountain gorillas of Bwindi
sleep, eat, nurture, have a little sex.

Imagine mountain gorillas
paying to watch humans
run through the maze of Detroit.

THE TARANTULA HAWK

Not a hawk at all,
the blue and orange wasp
hovers above desert milkweed,
dips its legs into the milky hoods
where pollinia weep for love
and latch onto those thin limbs
for a whirling lift away
to be dropped like Ophelia
into another milky stream,
a dream of flight, an explosion
of pollen.

All the spring while,
we drive in our machines,
stop at desert inns to sleep,
sometimes joining, wet and heavy,
upon dark beds, our thin skins
glistening, our wings and hoods,
petals, sepals, pistil, stamen.

WATCHING THE WATERFALL

Water drops over four tiers of stones
into a small pond full of koi
and a solitary red water lily folds
as the day shadows toward evening.

Tree spores parachute to the ground.
Wasps hover above fumitory and zinnias.
A black-capped chickadee visits the feeder.
The Schnauzers read each tree trunk's mail.

I never planned to be here, now.
I have lived like a river
winding its way toward something
ahead in the next empty space.

WHAT HAPPENS TO PANSIES IN UTAH

My wife set out three pots—
blue pansies, yellow pansies,
snapdragons.

"Why are there flowers
on the picnic table?"
I asked.

Six mule deer
sailed over the picket fence
like kites on a windy day.

They walked to the flowers,
clipped each pansy neatly
half-way down the stem.

They ruminated, snipped,
watched me
watching them.

"It's a test," my wife said.
"I want to know what
the deer will not eat."

"Snapdragons," I said.

But I felt guilty
as if the deer and I
were cheating,

were passing notes
with all the right answers
while the teacher took a bath.

"I should know by morning," my wife said.
"Probably," I said,
as I smiled at the deer,

gave them that wink
reserved for those who know
how it all ends.

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE JOSHUA FOREST

"[We] gravitate toward spaces that are metaphors for our inner lives."

Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam*

Where the fingers of the Mojave Desert
touch the eastern rim of the Great Basin,
I walked every Sunday morning
January to May, in the mountains' shadow,
among Joshua Trees, a forest
growing west to the horizon
and the empty bottom of the Basin.

Joshua leaves clump together
like Napoleon's bayonets braced
against a hostile world.
Joshuas keep a distance,
each an unwelcome neighbor,
an angry relative—water rights
at the root of it all.

But they have their friends.
Yucca moths spread pollen tree to tree,
anther to ovary, and leave their eggs.
Red-shafted flickers nest in Joshuas,
lizards live in the dead branches
and woodrats chew off the leaves for beds.
Some friends get lost—the giant sloth.

Mormon pioneers named the trees,
but I do not believe that Joshuas pray
or point to the Promised Land.
I believe they surrender to the sun,
to the arid earth, to the hot wind,
to flickers, to the offspring of moths.
They throw up their limbs to live.

AFTER THE BIG BANG

Coyote and Rabbit kept talking as before
but neither could hear the other.
Eventually, they stopped talking.

Eventually, their stories disappeared
and they turned into animals.
Only skin and bones remained,
and a hunger nothing could fill.