First Principles

A towhee lands at my feet. In-dwelling is simple, his lungs heave a rhythm, I breathe beside. The marvel is simple, the single seen in its whole.

Beak open to the heat, the bird rarities me the bedraggled loss of a tailfeather, asymmetrical spotting, the snow-white on his right wing a heavy drift. Span exceeds, alter abounds, fells me open, the stretch-verb *flight*. The blooming, buzzing confusion leaps without fall, revere, ware the jumble glory anew.

The first lesson learned is distinction. Start with the easiest to pronounce. They call this a cat. What acts otherwise is a dog. Say how she sounds. “Close,” says taxonomy, “the proper word in her language is *bark.”*

You are sure you heard her make some other noise. Perhaps each speaks her own dialect.

Why is this one not a dog? “A horse too is four-legged, furred, with a tail. But a horse is tall, fast at running, able to carry a rider where the reins will.”

A horse, you point at the animal eating grass. “That is a deer,” taxonomy corrects. No, a horse—a horse changed by amaze at the tall weed dapple, twin branching tree setting roots in his head, head of all horses with his tangle crown, rooting deep in his mind, horses seeing the majestic tangle, changed to become charge and fog in the deep wood.

Etymology

1

No bird sings the leafless
maple shakes without rustle:

These silent things

they are closed mouths
roaring outside your window

Say you too ache A twinge
rhythms under your skin

You are so like these many things
that sound inside themselves:

Vexed squirrels
rustle in their burrow
An underground spring
babbles its rolling subterra
The springing stretch of new cells
rabbles
to plump the hazel-shell

No bird sings aloud

The noiselessness
you hear is countermelody
Those perched feathers sing in dream

a grace you might render
as air between words

Fail to find the proper name

The faltering tongue
comes to halt
as a question

2
I will never live long enough to be fluent
in the simplest syllable
each vowel
awkwards in my mouth

Do I sound like that really? How does a mouth
mold to fit its referent?

Even what's closest is thrown far from its sound

Was it ever here?

Out the corner of my eye I see something move
I sit up in bed so sure
I was alone
My head twists to catch sight of the intruder

twists seizing into seeing
its own
swinging motion me looking back
from the glass

There is an elsewhere
Home mimicked in the mirror

Were we ever here?

What could I ask that reversed self

that would permit passage to those
things beyond the thingly other words

What in the language
would hold sway there swallow me whole?

3
Every word is an other's Choose any Greek noun
common to your vocabulary stores Think
of the long walk it took
                to reach you It derives
from sounds spoken before writing's advent

A child could tell her name's origin-use tale easy reverie
when the word tasted cumin and clove the sparkle
of white caps how it shaped
                Mediterranean fire

        Sun belonged then to prayers on a beach
                Hands raised by the faithful
        how well it would fervent in a prayer
                for a god now lost

        But the noun was not
lost Looking in the mirror
                I speak a name

4

The word of another My name
is not mine We are called
until we answer

"Who are you" our eyes ask as an infant
first seeing their reflection

"Do you belong to those
creatures? They vanish
leaving the room They return
looking like those vanished creatures"

Lost in the other's land you hear the strange ones
Native to this place towering
over your body
they make a word you never spoke A word they speak

until your ears
accommodate themselves
to this cryptic habit acclimate
to the repeated vowel and dental tick

"Who is that" your ears ask
at the refrain "Who belongs
to that clarion riff
Who is owned by that
rouse signal?"

Birds sing in dream a dreamsong swells
its language breaking polyphonic dawn

You have a name
This sound you say
to yourself must be yourself

You forget your displaced
stance in the world
You say you are at home