

The Endlings

I. George: Galapagos, 2012

I think it clever of the turtle . . .

—Ogden Nash, “The Turtle”

Parts of him were always hard, though not, as fate would have it, the parts that truly mattered. In his quest to find the perfect mate, he left no stone unturned. Just his luck — they were indeed all stones. And just as well, really. A tortoise on her back is not exactly prone to wait rapturously for love. Perhaps he thought time would always crawl at the same tectonic pace, and felt stunned and cheated to discover how quickly it snakes away. Perhaps he'd renounced the soft vices of the flesh long ago, a Zen ascetic, sleeping in his casket all night, traipsing through paradise with nothing but the bowl on his back. Whatever the case, he one day found himself with nobody left to love, and nothing left to lose, and no one to blame but himself, his life not a failure, but unsucceeded, his heart half fossilized in the sediments of regret, dense relic from when the future still held all he could desire.

II. Martha: Cincinnati, 1914

Rara avis—Juvenal, *The Satires*

Naturally, she sensed something was up. Her vast congregation, at the height of its dominion, carved rivers through the sky on their boundless migrations, more numerous and mournful than the rice of a thousand weddings. Yet somehow she found herself eerily alone, sole ruler of a cool roost in a sultry enclosure — grounded, deflocked, cooped up like a housewife

from a bygone era. Small wonder she felt
 dead inside, like the eggs she still brooded over,
 delicate and rare as any conceived by Fabergé.
 A fruitless concern. When it comes to putting all
 your hopes in one basket, nature never learns.
 So here she was, the last passenger pulling in
 to the last stop on the line, spooked by the sound
 of her own toes on the platform, cooing
 for the chaos of rush hour, in no real rush
 to get home knowing no one will be waiting
 with eyes bright as sequins, having put the kids
 to bed and kept supper warming on the stove.

III. Benjamin: Hobart, Tasmania, 1937
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
 —Men at Work, "Down Under"

Neither canine nor feline, he didn't roar
 like a nationalist rally or howl
 at the egg-white moon, but he could pry
 his jaws wider than the gap between instinct
 and intellect. And if he carried his gender
 in a pouch, he was only being prudent, given
 the stiff tufts and thorns of the deep bush.
 And though he was never exactly social,
 he knew his neighbors well enough, sniffing
 in their direction as he went out each night
 to try and catch a quick bite. But then came
 the settlers, unsettling with their dogs and hens,
 their pens and guns. He tried to skirt their fences,
 but they, having stake in the land, mistrusted
 the land, suspected it would claw back
 what it could through fiendish means, and he
 was the devil's closest relative. They started
 a smear campaign, labeled him a serial
 chickenizer, threw him into solitary
 with no chance for pardon or parole—
 more proof the long arc of history bends
 toward frontier justice. Meanwhile, no one guessed
 how priceless, how peerless, he'd become

or else he'd never have found himself
shut out of his only home like a rum-
sozzled spouse at 3 a.m., no doghouse
he could crawl to to escape the weather
deemed unusual and cruel even
by local standards, wanting nothing
but a place to lie low for a few hours,
resolved, when love's cold shoulder unfroze, to make
a clean break, and leave this bleak cage for good.

Hummingbird Nest

Come, sweet, let me share this morning's marvel—
a world in a thimble, a pearl in a nutshell.

Doused in sky hues, sheened in lake enamel,
a pearl in a thimble, a world in a nutshell.

Such truffles within, the yolk's dollop of caramel:
evolution in a nutshell, a tremble in a thimble.

No heart so small it can't grow wings to travel
the globe like a marble, a sea-tumbled pebble.

In every breath, a whiff of the eternal,
an age in a thimble, a lifetime in a nutshell.

Sweet, when I am gone, let none be regretful.
Lock my ashes in a thimble, my dreams in any nutshell.

After Fire and Rain

Gullies in the hillside have gorged themselves
on last week's rain, cleaving deeper with no thatch
to stitch them, while all throughout the valley

uncanny features that ought to be obscured
by scrub and brush stand naked in the sunlight—
the stone chimney like a gaunt arthritic finger

hexing the sky, the metal posts with their barbed wire
melted clean off, the panes of glass so brittle
they break beneath the weight of your gaze. And still

life comes teasing back—in the dark buds poking
from the scorched manzanita, black and auburn
as the coat of a Rottweiler pup; in the quills

of wild mustard, another fence-defying migrant,
clustered in the margins of the footpath;
in the lightning-splotched leaves of milk thistle

spreading out like a rich man on the subway and for much
the same reason. In fact, the whole canyon appears
oddly nonchalant to what would seem a loss

of faith-breaking magnitude, having been here, perhaps,
too often not to know the worst disaster,
though certain, is never quite the end of the world.