

2006

For Every Action

Mark Halperin
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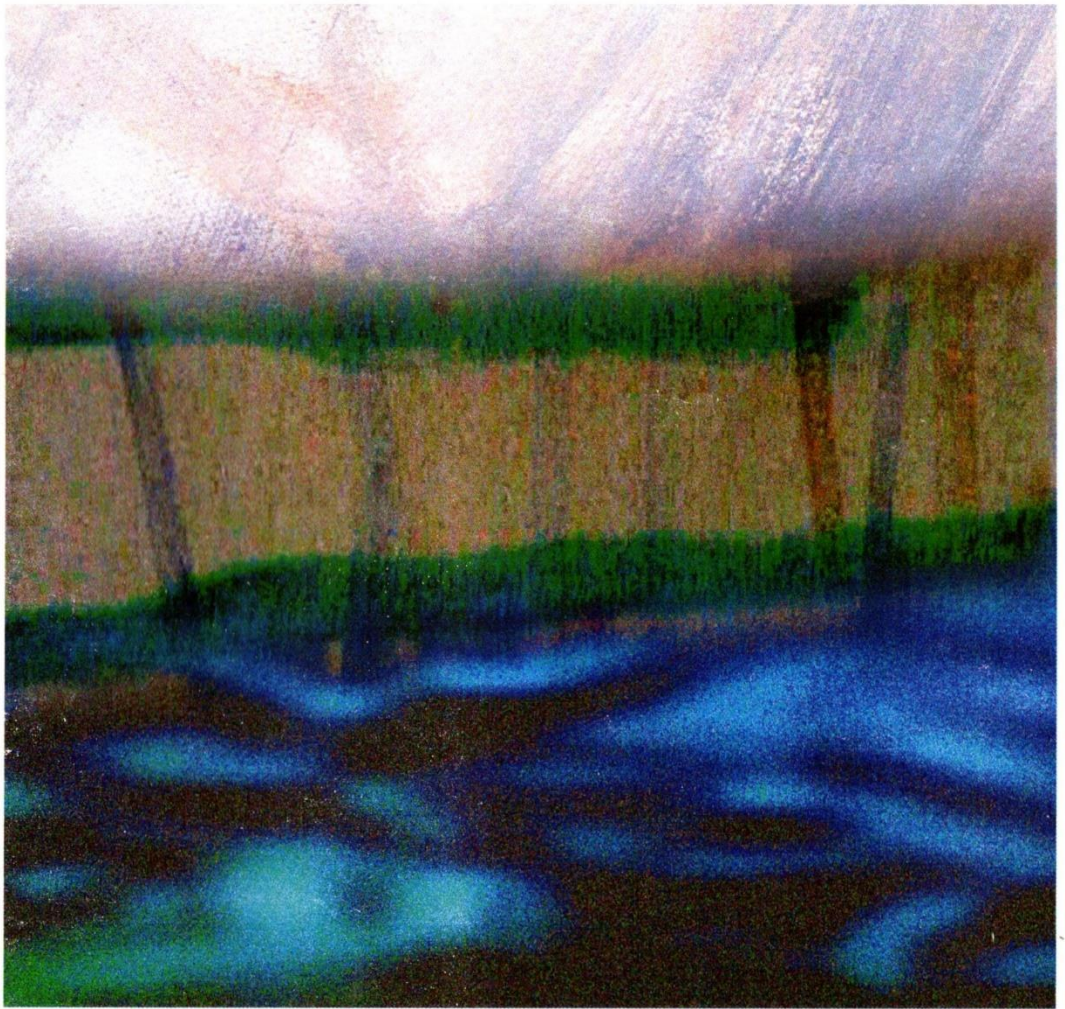
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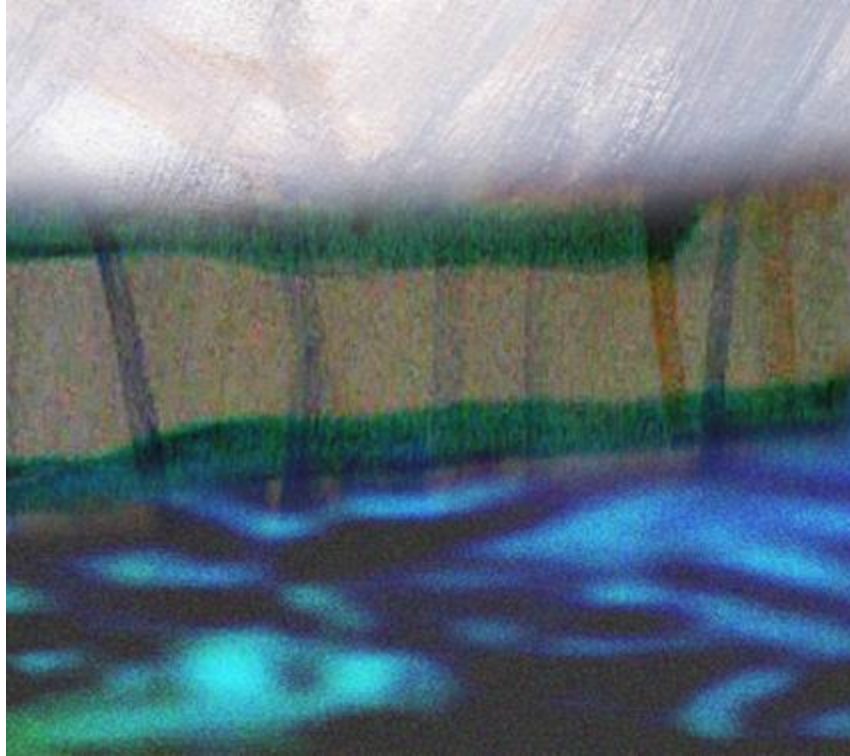
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Chiron Review "Cold Water," "Night Watch," and "What Father Left"

Kickass Review “Drinker” and “Homage: Photos”
Mid-America Poetry Review “Sonnet”
NeoVictorian/Cochlea “In May” and “Living in the Future”
On Earth “Quail in December” and “No Two Snowflakes”
Prairie Schooner “Dispute (1),” and “Estonian Gray”
Rattle “Bruises”
Rhino “Chimer”
Smartish Place “A Window” and “If, Desire”
Square Lake “Imagining Others”



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for B

CHIMERA

This could be a dream; can you be sure
you're here? I wondered as a child,
and again, now, as the cashier's smile
drops at my puzzled look, first dour
then tight. *I must have left my wallet home,*
I say, call, and there it is, the tone

in my wife's voice, exasperation, like my mother's
when scarves or single gloves or ear-
muffs slipped away. They'd disappear
and still do, as if another
voice they felt more loyal to had called.
It was them and me, or no one was at fault.

You turn into somewhere else. I'm almost afraid
to drive. Which distraction's the last?
Someone wearing my clothes and past,
his attention-span too short to fade,
keeps veering off, although we're tethered, one
anxious for a world he's exiled from,

the other barely hanging on to this
wavering place—chimera, not two,
but so tangled, so commingled, who
knows which are parts and which the abyss
of here and now? It could be no one does—
or everyone but me, music or noise.

AT THE VUILLARD SHOW

Of course the colors hold,
pink against ochre, cold

and muted harmonies,
unbalanced masses like seas—

voids in the picture space.
After a while, they erase

themselves, and no lack of drawing,
of figure or outline, of missing

or collapsed contour or border
attracts attention any more.

It's the messiness, interiors
where dress-patterns clash with wallpapers,

the utter insistence on chaos
down to brush-strokes one loves,

the loose jumble, clutter
and tilting of spaces so that more

can collect, the refusal to shade
when another rosette might be made

or a cross or daub of pigment
might be shoehorned in.

When that impulse is
mastered or spent, his

work seems all the same,—
too careful and mundane.

NO TWO SNOW FLAKES ARE THE SAME

How could anyone have checked, or is this
something else to accept on faith, like *enough*
is enough or *what's good for big business*
is good for the country and *each time I love*
you is said it's different? How do you tell
Africans, for whom it's usual

to substitute egret feathers in
translations: no two plumes are a match, and why
does that sound that less dubious? Once you begin
asking there's the icy cold, the six-sided-
symmetry—too much that's unique to trust
induction. Here the rare returns like dust

you can't brush off and yearnings that go on
to become those persistent selves we resume

each morning as if by magic. The power of reason,
like past and future, could be a myth, and Hume,
be right: cause is no more than an habitual
association. Like doubt, but less cruel.

REHEARSAL

I slide a hand down my vest
to strip out tippet,
scanning for rises, groping, patting here and there,
my eye on the moving water, feeling the way
over rounded rocks toward the river bank.
Overhanging branches, logs, hard to get to lies
and tricky currents that belly out line just enough for unnatural drifts, and still
the fishing that follows isn't bad,
though even as I start
casting, I keep thinking about the chances of finding the missing dispenser
in the tall, late-autumn grass.

Maybe I do cut the outing short.
There's been one decent rainbow,
heavy bodied, strong in the chilly water, energetic enough to get my heart racing with leaps
and plunges,
another, smaller. Turning back, eyes down
as though embarrassed,
I'm remembering you see nothing, nudging leaves aside with your shoe toe, swishing a stick
through the underbrush
till the first mushroom appears

and then they're all around, as though you'd locked on to a frequency.
The shine—the brushed aluminum among stones, weeds—I'm entertaining
fond hopes, bad analogies, trying to retrace a way
I can't recall, through a dozen different tries.

I hear myself rehearsing
how poorly the dispenser worked, expensive for what it was—
what possessed me to purchase it?
I've tagged it an indulgence, pure and simple, something
I'll miss owning
more than using,
and settled on the opening for my wife: how mine
was a lucky and unlucky day.
I've prepared the story of one more extraneous possession
gone, my over-laden vest lightened,

made one last stab:
might it have fallen into the car trunk? The thought's past like a meteorite.
I'm scanning the ground I've walked again
out of a sense of duty, as if such looking were required
before accepting loss.
I'm wading the stream a washed-out bridge
spanned once, almost losing my footing
when I see it

as I pull myself out of the water onto the mud a few hundred feet from my parked car.
With contaminated joy,
I reach down.
Spider webs are drifting in the air; light falling like shed hair.
Look at me across the damning distance:
picking it up, me who despises half-truths more than lies.

DISPUTE (1)

He hears every word she says, and maybe
more, an undertone or innuendo.

She assumes that he sees what she can see

as they sit side by side in the car, she
driving, he adjusting the radio.

If he hears every word she says, maybe

he's a little tense, unaccountably
worrying today about tomorrow.

She assumes that he sees, as she can see

their need to talk, the sheer futility
of disregarding signs. She has to know
he's heard every word she said. It may be

he's nodded without listening. Lately,
he wanders off at meals. Where does he go?

She assumes he sees what she can see

but won't admit it. He likes to disagree,
to test her, cantankerous. So yes or no,
has he heard every word? And can she see
what she assumes as he sees it, just once maybe?

DISPUTE (2)

He's utterly confused and can't conceive
he's understood her. As he sees it, she
insists that he admit what she believes

is obvious is obvious. She's peeved
she must repeat. She drives. He fidgets. Maybe
she's utterly confused. She can't conceive

she's wrong. His endless explanations leave
her cold. No radio. If only he
didn't insist, admitted other beliefs,

hers... Then, all's clear, they're done. Her chief
complaint is that he didn't attempt to be
more understanding. Try to conceive

how someone else might see things. He's relieved,
but unconvinced. You'd have to be able to read
what sits in other minds, and he believes

you can't. How can we know another's grief,
another's pain—impossibilities.

Both stare straight ahead. Neither can conceive
the other's place, or what that one believes.

IN MAY

A cold, drizzling morning in May, my wife
off visiting—I've fed the bird, the cat,
the dog and myself, straightened, cleaned and what
remains, I'll get to soon, as if my life

only consisted of preparations. Have I dropped
a towel, forgotten a spoon? Don't ask me. I've
dreams I can't tell, hungers that cut like knives
and set me adrift. When I wake some knot

has held, and I'm still here, an obligation
that can't be ducked, someone lost, walking
in circles and beginning to catch on, talking,
ticking items off a list, but not yet done.

SAFE

You know the feeling: how you don't dare run
or let on that you've spotted them—they'd close
in, shut off your escape routes. It was the metro's
turn last time: late, an exit locked and one

guy coming down, another moving from

behind. You made it out by walking fast
then heading for a well-lit street—and passed
for safe. But the madman with a gun—it's dumb

luck you're not in his sights, that house-thugs pick
your neighbor. Pipe bomb, poisoned aspirin, quick
sand, trick knee, bad genes, random acts of God,

and natural disasters. What you can think
up, you can think past. But what of the wink
of the policeman there? To whom did he nod?

ELEKTRICHKA TO BELOOSTROV

In the gray locomotive's chips and pits you can see layers of earlier
paint, and the grime time leaves, indelible as weather.
It's Saturday morning, everyone heading away from the city for the
small towns, the bay and outings, dachas
and fishing and family. Back from a stroll downtown, I stopped to
speak with a local American yesterday, on stairs
of what may have been a palace once, the lips of the stone steps
rounded by wear, the walls irregular and gritty.
Light streamed through iron-latticed windows. This "new Russia" is a myth,
I said, a thin veneer the old one keeps showing through.
"You're back here again for what? Business? Pleasure?" he asked, tone wry.
The train speeds up, rumbles through a tunnel.

When it exits and rises, you can make out the blackened shells of
cars, crumbling walls and the broken windows of factories—
grass fattening into thatch, thickets, brambles, a pond. In a momentary
clearing, the horizon's the width of the sea.

At the first crossing, stunned-looking people crouch beside shallow
lines of cars, then the first signs of constructions
rushing to succeed each other, trenches of freshly bulldozed earth,
sections of pipe too heavy to be stolen.

There are clusters of single-family houses going up in tandem with
walls to hide them from street and the jealous,
the less successful, who might do more than envy. Who doesn't
know that offers of help in English
are dangerous and Gypsy children only more obvious
than pick-pockets?

Suppose the truth were comfortless by nature, and people shied
from it as from assaults.

Looking might be proof of character. You'd come to places like
this to learn the language,

then come to love how hard it was to live in them, not corrupt
cops, or the cheats and crafty,
but before you crossed the street needing to look behind, hugging
your backpack in the Metro
while relying on friends, treasuring their willingness to take you
on—rewards in place of ease.

The train slows again, and the old men and women tottering along
the platform this express doesn't stop at
back off, regroup, this woman talking to that man turning his back on a drunk
who asked for a light or the time.

Their trains come next or later, if they haven't been cancelled and the person
who might have let them know
let go. Discomfort fits them like uniforms. Schooled in living for the
future, as bridges for others to cross by—who can
remember to where —
they're used to being passed. It would be as impolite to stare as to bring
up betrayal.
It may take less time to learn to keep your thoughts to yourself, than for
trust to fade or rust to form.

The over-dressed teen-aged girls squealing into their cell-phones, the
boys, lit cigarettes dangling,
even the guest, watching and taking notes are only afraid of the failures
each gets to define.
If the landscape's tarnished, the goods shop-worn, there are fixes.
Ask the woman talking to herself. Ask the owner of the dog,
skin rippling,
muzzled for the train, was it worth it? Go tell them how much their
beauty cost.

A WINDOW

I've returned, boarded a tram. Past
the grimy glass I can see time
flow both toward my destination,
where someone waits, and back—a line

that I connect by having lived
here once. The street's familiar. I bought
bread in that store, there tea and fish,
entered the Metro from the hot

street—snow covered before I left.
When I shift my gaze, what comes back
is a strangeness I got used to: music,
“soul,” the rocking buses and lack

of common courtesy. Still nearer
my street, nothing smells more familiar
than desire. Where's home when your past's
no more trustworthy than your future?

IF DESIRE

How odd that a lost book or look
can ravage sleep, that like children we
mumble a promise for a prayer,
then sit by a statue in a public park
gazing ahead patiently,
nothing left to want. If desire

ends either with its fulfillment or
its cooling, maybe the difference
isn't between getting and not
getting, but a temperature

or touch no one, including us,
could count on or do without.

LIVING IN THE FUTURE

If living in the past is looking back,
 reviewing every turn you took
endlessly, scanning entries like a book,
 a mindless keeping track—

then living in the future is the same
 without the book, the dates, the places,
obsessiveness that leaves behind no traces
 and guilt devoid of blame.

AT PIONEERSKAYA

At Pioneerskaya metro stop, the drunks, their faces dented and bloodied from falling down, are wedged into corners and the marchroute taxi drivers skirt the crashes and thread stalled vehicles at high speeds and blocks of prefabricated apartment houses that began falling apart while they were being built. But Lev's apartment is clean and tidy, the table laid—pickled fish, a bottle of sweet Asian wine, two of water... He's preparing salads as guests arrive. After the cold dishes, the fish, the cheese and cold-cuts and the first toasts, I'm weaving in and out of the conversation, a loose connection. More toasts, hot dishes, meat, boiled potatoes with

mushroom sauce, tea and dessert. Everyone's talking politics, living conditions, cracking jokes. I leave with the others, tell them in the minibus of the driver who asked permission to take a short cut. The passengers said yes, and the next thing we knew, we were cutting through a field littered with weeds, wrecks, bounding across ruts to emerge, safe and sound, on the road again. Amazing, I said to Grisha and Marsha, who nodded in agreement: imagine the driver asking permission.

WHAT MY FATHER LEFT

My father left his image as a gymnast chinning in the doorway, making his biceps jump, but no wise saying, no injunctions, and mentioned casually that he'd slept on kitchens benches, worked his way up to tool-and-die maker, how when that didn't work out, he began again. He never said starting a family at forty-five

was a stroke of good fortune. My father left little behind: ashes to scatter over the smooth Inland Waterway, a few hand tools stamped with his name, a Lermontov in Russian, a rose-gold watch, Basque beret, envelopes crammed with photographs of people I didn't know. I was young when he was middle-aged; we hardly spoke.

COLD WATER

When I arrive in Moscow the pipes are being cleaned: no hot water. Taking my cold shower, I recall recording my mother's reminiscences, I taped, but couldn't bear to hear even now,

years later. In her late seventies, she tells me about the brownstone she lived in, the maid who said if she washed her breasts with cold water every morning they would stay firm. And they did, she says, to shock me, still competitive. Always small, she has shrunk, thickened a little. Telling the story perks her up. Jetlagged, I splash myself with cold water. What idea “deemed silly or ill-advised” am I deprecating now?

CUBAN RESTAURANT

We crowd the table in a Cuban restaurant
where my mother and her sister, twins
in their seventies, have brought us all, my cousin
Michael, sister Diane, but not their current
wife and husband—with my wife, six
in all. The children drink beer, but what
we eat I’ve long forgotten. Esther’s not
a widow yet, Mother is. The tricks
time plays with memory have just begun
their mischief, and it’s not dark yet, the horizon,

smear'd with crimson, because in Florida
that’s near and salty. It comes back on an icy,
January day, not far from the birthday
they shared like fingerprints, Mother and Esther,
both of them dead. I can almost smell the beans
we must have had, hear our laughter, the din
of plates and silver, smooth the heavy napkin,
almost, but not quite. Maybe that means
background eventually dominates foreground,

as the sea does or that squeezed around

that table we're happier than I know how
to convey. Cousin David is missing like a hole
in the picture I would be struggling to fill
with conjectures if the owner didn't turn up now
to thank "his twins" and walk us part way out.
It can't be any other night, as the past,
just by being past, insists we ask
for a reflection of our dreams. I've no doubt
my mother drives. The streets are slick, each window
as we pass, momentarily aglow.

NIGHT WATCH

Two men, both young, enter the room at the end of the first floor promenade of the Rijksmuseum. One sets up his tripod and camera a dozen feet or so from Rembrandt's "Night Watch." The other, dark hair in ringlets, darts forward, pulls his pants down, bowing to Rembrandt, while the first snaps the photo. In the few seconds it takes, old and young, native and tourist, even the guards talking in a corner, seem to turn so as not to intrude. Then both men are gone, the guards milling. You can hear the distant ring of the gift-shop cash registers in tolerant-famous Amsterdam.

IMAGINING OTHERS

If the way we imagine others
think of us keeps changing, then
when the lover, that model of
utter candor innocently
opens up and is surprised by
misunderstanding, any attempt
to slip into role is bound to fail.

It's another sign of the self's
fragility. And if a woman's
hips can skew in a manner more
provocative than any indiscretion
you can dream up, then indeed
the shaded door you stand before,
can, as she says, engulf you forever.

SALMON IN THE RIVER

Midstream you can think you've seen
a torpedo-shaped rock or slowly waving
length of cloth, gray and sodden,
tumbling only stalled, a swaying pink,
and mottled green inching forward, afraid

of nothing, then know it has to be
still barely alive, an agent, still not moved,
but moving, acting. Whereas meat
can only ripple, its unfilmed eyes will lose
light all at once. The skin's dark, in blotches,

the holes in its metallic sides not from
shotgun blasts, but lampreys. The torn
fins, the shred of skin still holding on
are bound to the skeleton. When flesh's given
what it can, it sinks back where it came from.

FISHING IN OCTOBER

The light of autumn, thick
as amber, stretches out
then seeps through aspen leaves that tick
yellow on the current, while I
cast tiny flies to hidden trout.

Over the ridge's whiteness,
the blue of the noon sky glows like ice.

Though I can't look down, I feel
my slipping, the hesitant take
and shock of frigid water. My reel
spins; I strike too late. Flashes,
mirror glints from the twisting shake
of its huge head—and the fish is
one more spangle in the light's wash.

NOT CATCHING FISH

Not catching fish is almost the same
as catching fish. You prepare the same

way: don waders, lace boots, match
the guides, aligning the rod. Dry flies?

A steamer? Canadian Geese fly by,
climb as you scramble down the bank,

scanning the shallows, the opposite bank—
nothing. You cast, mend, recover—

over the same water, inch
by inch, these flies, others. You use

other strike indicators and pinch

on lead. A hawk. A breeze scores
the surface with fine lines. No rises,
no heart-stopping rush when the fish sucks
in the fly or sips it from the surface or hits it
from ambush below, no trying to keep it
from fast water, no need to spare the tippet
by feeding line, letting him run a bit,
only fatigue—your casting arm—someone
passing and calling out as you start home.

READING

You nod to him and wander off. Later
you'll talk, only later he's gone—
less than an insult, more
than a brush-off, as if for every action
there's a cause that lies
beyond the casual which the eye is
required to catch. You read events as texts:
suggestions, innuendoes, hints—
deciphering "a next"
to join "a last" as in a sentence.
Nothing's impersonal

after gesture becomes symbol

and dress, statement. You can't turn sideways
or forward, pretend to disregard
a snub. Your fixed gaze
focuses in. Conflict's part
is done. If you could put down
the book now, and insight for description.

DRINKER

The drinker wakes up in the middle
of the night, a thin film of
sweat on his forehead. He can recall
dimly the party's last half,
but little of what he said or did.

He worries about slurred words—as if
his blood pressure and liver
were more likely to forgive him than
any friend. He'll remember
later and wonder how he can turn

into a joke something he can't ask
the details of. His regrets
only tie more knots in the bed-clothes,
using his twisting. It's light, time
to give up, get up and start to climb

into the day. Instead of trying
to weave, he'd rather unthink,
unremember, simplify or shed
guilt, control and its loss like
close relatives you don't resemble.

BODHISATTVA

I couldn't understand why Porkchop Hill was crucial while other battles,
in which even more people were lost, were not,
and Mi Lai and Lt. Calley stick in our collective craw while Croatia
or starvation in Ukraine as an engine of policy or Casement
and the Congolese were matters for research projects,
that time flowed around me
and my notion of how it folded on itself accounted for a fascination
with Generals MacArthur and Franco and the false messiah
Sabbatai Zevi.

How could fractals map coasts, which are unique, or "Zen and the Art
of Motorcycle Maintenance," which requires familiarity
with the traditions of European philosophy, become a best seller?
I could solve simple equations, play the handyman and hold a job,
ripe for a fling with Buddhism, the "rational religion," and the wheel
of law that returns us to the earth until we've achieved
enlightenment.
Metempsychosis seemed an instance of perpetual motion,
the exception that proves the rule.

Couldn't I hear the echoes of my relatives' footsteps sounding their renunciations, their
refusals to leave me behind?

Didn't I know that joy diminishes with no one beside you in the museum, the garden, at the
look-out,

sex—with another— our model of pleasure,
spurned passion our paradigm of sorrow?

We reach out willingly
to give away the self.

It seems a burden we don't know how or what to call,
even as it becomes precious.

QUAIL IN DECEMBER

Scampering under the birdfeeder
they can't fly up to, pecking at, picking up seeds
the sloppy house sparrows and chickadees--
intent on getting it all and scatter
half of in their frenzied digging. Each quail
sports a question-mark, an ebony curl

that juts up from its forehead and bobs,
waggles and wiggles as it does, off at a sound
or shadowy sign of danger. Rotund,
as if puffed-out and stuffed, they're gobs
of freckles with slate-gray backs, as single
as slippery drops of mercury that re-pool

again. The one that slammed into
the guest room window—with such force,
it broke the outer thermopane-glass
and its neck, —left a double halo
of feathers and slivers. Whatever directed it
it escaped with its typical quick exit.