

JIM JOHNSTONE

UNANSWERED GHAZALS (EXCERPTS)

Overtuned, a turkey buzzard
will rest in your hand.

Cut out its beak.
Cut out its circling calm.

The once loved
will run through what's next—

would,
should.

Before they lift the feathers.
Before they go off script.

*

I set out, toe to tail, whistling
into the oncoming crowd.

Not me exactly—
my sense of self.

Black book broken at the spine,
thinning hair.

Shame scavenging
then settling over all—

both whistler and whistled-at,
I solemnly swear.

*

The buzzard clears its throat.
Give pause.

Pause for snow to explode
like a gun-plucked shuttlecock.

Pause to split a wishbone
at the mudroom's groove.

Once there, leather
smoothes every available wing.

Vandalism a letter-
based form of alienation.

FALSE FINISH

A small deer sits at the bottom of the lake.
When it's clear, you can see the fur,
the coltish legs that lowered and kicked
into the water's treadmill. Before
it drown, my brother pulled the thing out
by the neck, steadied and drove
to the beach where it started—a man
with a deer in a boat looking
for an unknown family. They might
have been a painting if I hadn't heard
the animal as it cried and stomped.
Open a window or find a screen
and you'll see the fear, the short story,
the novel where we killed so that nothing
else in the world would suffer.
Only we didn't. We left the deer
and it tried to swim back, kicked up froth
as if it wanted to empty Anstruther
with the exhausted scrape of a glacier.
My brother counts: *one, two, three*,
and the lake clears as we jump out,
twist into a cradle of hot breath,
bicycling legs, a warning
to everything below to stay away
until we've reached the deepest point,
the point at which we exhale and look up—