

SÍLE ENGLERT

ON BECOMING A VEGETARIAN AT EASTER DINNER

It was a rabbit that finally did it—or not a rabbit but you, standing in the driveway. With the knife and the rabbit in your two hands. You didn't know about years ago—the other boy with the other knife, the one who said you'd better not tell anyone and held it cold sharp to my throat—I didn't tell anyone, so how could you know? You wanted to hurt or at least to terrify. To threaten. You'd given up on jokes about bare feet and kitchens, beatings and sandwiches. Maybe I pretended to laugh too many times. Or I didn't laugh loudly enough. Your rough hands twisting easy flesh behind the rabbit's head. Its fur a colour I'd never seen—pale rust. Your knife pressed at its neck, and I don't remember what you said because the other boy with the other knife said I could kill you if I wanted to and people were watching this time. Husband, grandmother, family, his—all of them laughing because weren't you funny? Boys will be boys, and a boy will drive miles to a farm and pay for a rabbit just to dangle the terrified animal and the knife and the knife until I pay you twenty dollars to let me have it. The driveway still pristine gravel and grey, not a drop of rust. The rabbit in my arms all wide-eyed fear soft trembling. Whole. Safe in a box with a blanket. Inside, the table set for Easter dinner. The turkey brown and dead. Wings. Legs. Bones. Its juice pooling on the plate. It was still too much a body, and you coming with the carving knife. That was it—the moment. A rust-coloured rabbit lived in my apartment for months. I ate salad, potatoes, your laughter, and I was full.

MOUTHBROODER

We were not afraid of birth. Until
we were creatures who had birthed.
Our bodies should have understood
how to expand,
hold,
contract.
Hold.

In the belly is a womb, a tiny mother
with tooth buds pressing under her gums,
and in another womb her own eggs,
waiting. This is our infinity.

The naked mole rat queen is capacity
incarnate. Hairless goddess of vessels,
growing the space between her vertebrae
to carry more pups with each gestation.

Our birthing is an endless process—a body
enlarges to accommodate another body,
but two hearts can't occupy the same space
for long; one or the other will be rejected.

Mothering begins with pain and is never not
pain, even when it ebbs, when there is smiling.
This tearing of our bodies will continue
because creation is a life-threatening act.

Hyena mothers flood their unborn cubs
with hormones, ensuring aggression, hopefully
survival. Warriors birthing litters of little
warriors born through a narrow clitoris.

Eight hundred thirty mothers dead
of birthing every twenty-four hours.
Almost one every other minute.
And listen—another, now.

Tell us it must have been less fatal, once.
Before bipedal steps, narrowed pelvis,
elongated birth canal. Before skulls enlarged
to heft the weight of these thoughts.

The black lace-weaver sends vibrations
through the web she built alone, drumming.
Her last movements calling her hundred
babies to come and eat her alive.

We pull mothers apart with our arrival, don't we?
Widen the wound with our mouths and each hour,
loving them to pieces. Grow strong
on their substance before we become

the mothers dreaming of Darwin's frog,
budding its young inside the mouth
of a male; another host to bear, to carry,
to open and never quite close.

ANY GIVEN FEATHER

A loft of pigeons is an analogy for language
and Darwin is a fancier, bootlegging birds

in his backyard. Builds them a house
from wood, wire, and his longing to trace

the fossil maps giant sloth and archaeopteryx
left behind. A dovecote is a kind of carapace—

body and home synthesized to hold birdflesh
until its secrets can be reproduced on paper.

Darwin's claw-scratch drawings illustrate a plague
of pigeons in soot-black. If you turn the pages

carefully, let the ink trap light, you can hear them
rustling through paperback copies of his book.

The sound of leaves, feathers, and typeset letters
are all synonymous with each other. And breathing.

But forget about breathing: see the pigeon
as illuminated manuscript, the beauty as an aside.

A way to pass on information by catching the eye.
A group of pigeons is an experiment. Watch him

shape it with meticulous selection of phrase,
twisted to form a double-helix—like keel

means a ship's spine and a bird's breastbone,
enabling both to glide. Five years on the ocean

with journal and quill teaches him this also means
to capsize or overturn. Pitchpole. Artificial selection

is a flighted bird that tumbles, sometimes hits
the ground. A dropping of pigeons and Darwin's

handwriting scrawling their skeletons with numbers,
which species, in which cage their clutch was hatched.

Picture him folding a passel of origami pigeons
in indigo, eggplant, and ash—the colours of tissue

damage, but iridescent. He might have tethered
these with strings, let only the wind move them.

Or the bin full of bones he collects, passed
from one museum to another. If you remove

the muscle, immerse a pigeon's tibia in vinegar
for several days, you will see the lethargy in bone.

Its droop and hopelessness. Sometimes you are
Darwin and sometimes you are just a bird.

Given long enough, a school of pigeons wandering
through spilled ink will write *On the Origin of Species*.