

MARK D. HART

Timber Rattlers

--along the Appalachian Trail

He wants to know if we have ever seen one,
and we reverse our downward path to track
his burst of bare legs, knapsack, and information
back up the ridge-path through the scrub.
A sudden fraternity of three afoot
far above bucolic farms and fields,
we seek a thing of rumor, capable
of dealing death, which bounty hunters once
had beat, shot, bludgeoned, and beheaded
to rid the land of its elusive, penile threat.
He points out south-facing ledges, fractured cliffs
where they will overwinter for eight months,
one hibernaculum housing a clan
returning to the same dark dormitory
for countless generations, until they groove
the stone hallways of those caves
with the winding rivers of their scales.
How eager, how evangelical he is
to share with us the secret of this ridge,
his love, returning yearly to this spot.
I warm to these cold-blooded creatures
knowing they have a sense of home and kin,
but grow chill again to learn of how they hunt—
bloodhounds of heat, who glide free of foot-fall
on the infra-red trails of their warm-blooded prey,
whose heat-sensitive facial pits can aim
their strike with accuracy, though blind,
with a venom that not only kills but starts to digest,

turning insides soupy, the color of bricks.
We come to a cairn erected at a fork—
the very spot where earlier we'd rested—
and he goes down prostrate at this pillar
like a pagan worshiping some phallic god,
puts chin to dust, and, peering long into
the dark crevasses of the stacked stone,
searches its cold heart for a revelation.
He pokes it with a stick, exclaims, and I
drop down to take his place. Something tightens
in the black coil of myself, and then I see
a pencil-sized tail sharpened to a rattle
slip deeper, disappear. Another prod, and there's
the head, the lidless gaze of fear, the face.

Wild Turkeys in Town

The hesitant gait,
the starts, then pauses
to reconsider the tack,

makes this fowl
all the more anomalous
if it makes a dash.

Who expects decisiveness
from a messy queue of them
bobble-heading along?

(I'll resist the temptation
to compare them to
a town committee.)

Yet I sense a keen wit
among that congregation,
so gingerly attuned.

And that great miracle—
they can transport those
ample tushes skyward.

At dusk,
swarthy angels ascend,
dark globes

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above the neighborhood
as they roost in treetops,
thinking they belong.

The sight stops me short.
I lift up my eyes,
a believer.

Their cult of repose
free of threat
says a blessing over us.