

William Wenthe

Phalarope and Carp

At just this time of year, phalaropes
can be found, swimming above the dam.
Dainty, crisply patterned birds, they pirouette
on the water, stirring up minutiae to eat.
A seasonal delicacy, to watch them.
But no phalaropes today. Yesterday's stormwater
spills over the dam, swelling the catchbasin,
slicking across the paved road below.

I'm looking down on all this, musing
on what I might choose to do instead,
when a blue pickup rumbles up, measled
with rust and Bondo, raises a spray
of water, skids and stops. What a dumbass,
I'm thinking. And then the doors open,
and gushing out like circus clowns —
three kids, two women, one man; all in
flipflops, constituting one family,
or many, or none, it's hard to guess.
A woman rolls up her jeans, steps off the road
into a frothy runnel cut by the overflow.
She stoops, plunges her hands to the wrist, gropes . . .
and in one motion, clutches & scoops and flips
a fat bronze carp onto the road.

As it slithers on wet pavement, frantic
to swim, the boy chases it, flailing
with the net — and another scoop and fling
and flopping carp — another and another and now
they're all scrambling and shouting and tossing
fish into the truckbed but the littlest girl
screams at this sudden hail of monsters —
so the man scoops her up and hoists her
into the truckbed but *that's* where the others
are lobbing the fish so she amps up her noise,
prancing and flapping her arms, till again
he grabs hold of her and this time slips

and falls on his ass but no harm —
still holding her he rises and installs her at last
in the cab of the truck where now, like royalty
in an opera box, she gazes upon the show.

Me, I think I'm horrified, but can't really tell:
on one hand, this Three Stooges brutalization
of carp, this carnage; and on the other, such fine-
tuned knowledge that read so closely
this weather, and returned them to just
this place, at just this time; and then the skill
in this woman's hands, the success.
Maybe that's what moves me down
to have a closer look. And most obligingly,
the second woman's happy to grapple
from the mess in the truckbed a thick,
armor-scaled loaf of carp to show me.
We're going to eat them, she grins. I notice —
and at once try not to notice — her teeth.

So this is one family's bounty (or maybe two) —
this rainfall windfall of fish flushed down
the dam. One could think of the gospels,
and for a moment I do, but soon wince at the thought
that every storm sewer and gutter, every dubious spot
in every gasoline-rainbow stained parking lot
on the East side of town drains down to this lake,
and into the flesh of these bottom-feeding fish
this gathering sees as opportunity.

So much, so fast — as if my car spun out
but didn't crash; and the weird quiet that follows,
a coming-to. And I'm about ready to leave,
when the first woman, the fish-catcher, walks up
with the net in her hand, and shows us
a crayfish, found in the catchbasin pool.
I'd no idea. Nor any idea this family, too,
would be pleased just to stop

and quietly study a crayfish. Okay,
my turn to be the dumbass, who judged them
by their frenzy. But I can only give

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the merest formality of a glance. I've seen enough.
I'm not ready for beauty, however small,
even if beauty's what I'd come here
hoping for. Not now for beauty,
unless it includes those carp
we still hear, flopping in the truckbed,
beaten and beating like a heart.

Reading in Bed

A body beneath a sheet, I open a mystery:
lying down to wait for the MacGuffin
to initiate the tantalizing foreplay
of clues: a scent, a whisper, a stocking, silken.
Easing me in, the long plot thickens.
Lips loosen, the trail gets hot, a flurry
of moves and counter-moves incites confusion:
hard indeed, to tell the hunter from the quarry.

The best is when it's all about to come
together, and still the story line delays
a little more, before the big reveal.
Then to lie at ease, within the breathing space
of a cigarette, where all the past is solved,
all the future evils unbegun.