

The Goldfish

I

The seven goldfish came as a surprise.
When, the spring before, mosquito larvae
had colonized our rocky backyard pool,
we'd brought in feeder fish. I could not look.
My history with fish was long and sad;
I'd agonized for years over the fragile,
translucent denizens of four or more
aquariums we'd set up for the children
—those creatures who, despite our every care
(the beautiful, clean tanks with water plants,
good filters, pumps, and coral hidey-holes),
inevitably listed, gasped, and died.

When Daniel spilled the fish into the pond,
the inch-long, dozen-for-a dollar goldfish,
I could not bear to count them or to know them,
to mark their differences, much less to name
or even feed them. I must think of them
as wild things, who came and went unseen
and foraged for their food, who answered to
a sterner harmony. And so I tried
to keep my heart from grieving for those few
whose tiny forms I netted from the pool
within just days. I tried not to imagine
the lives, the fates of those who still remained.

But late that summer, it was time to drain
and clean the pool, so Daniel caught the fish.
I could not help admiring them as they
flashed circles in their tub. These were survivors,
doubled now in size and gleaming, thriving.
I could not keep myself from counting them,
the five as bright as California poppies,
the one as pale as buttermilk. I knew
that we must feed them now, because the larvae,
those active, inky threads that once had signed
in shifting semaphore upon the surface
of the water, were all gone, had been devoured.

So began my unwilling love affair.
Twice each day I scattered algae flakes,
which bloomed like mute, slow-motion fireworks,
chrysanthemums on the still face of the pond,
and watched the goldfish come to feed. The first
was always the intrepid creamy one,
who darted from the shadow of the stones,
took measure of the manna as it spread,
and then sped back to tell his friends, who soon
rose stealthily beneath the drifting flakes
to seize them as they would quick, living prey,
to suck them down and swiftly slip away.

I had been watching them for days when I
first noticed a disturbance in the water,
mercurial turbulence where no fish swam,
perhaps a shade across a golden back,
and so I wondered, and I watched more closely.
Then, at the center of concentric ripples
ringing a disappearing flake of food,
I saw him—yes, I saw him, a black goldfish,
as big as all the rest! He must have been
among them all along, unseen for all
these many months, a mystery of a fish,
a being materialized of light and shadow.

A new observance now reshaped my ritual.
After counting all five orange fish
(and it's a trick to count a school in motion:
two move to join another, making three;
a fourth appears, or maybe that's the first
returned—the three have moved; I start again,
till, for one grateful heartbeat, all stay still)
and then the ivory one, I watched for hints
of motion, reflex and opacity
to manifest as my mysterious guest,
all sable velvet, brushed to smoky cloud
around his mouth and fins—the seventh fish.

And so it went through fall and most of winter,
five golden fish, one pale one, and one dark,
until one night my neighbors knocked. Mariah
came in with one fish in a plastic bag.
He was the last remaining from a pond
whose owner tried three times to introduce
new little fish but always found them gone
by morning. He had thought this older fish
was eating them. So would I take him in?
He looked to be the same size as my seven,
so I said yes, believing he would not dare
to eat a fish his size. His name was Harold.

To give him time to tune to this strange world,
the cold, the waterfall, the other fish,
I let his bag float near the edge and then
untied the end to let the waters slowly
commingle and to let him make his way
into his new home at his chosen pace.
When I came back again an hour later,
my flashlight found him butting up against
the closed end of his little bathysphere.
I gently shook the open end, and he
turned swiftly and, as swiftly, freed himself.
I left the pool with no regrets or fears.

But late that night, in that unanchored time
between two sleeps, I found a way to worry
about the murder and mayhem I might have wrought,
releasing the unknown, cannibalistic Harold
among my peaceful, unsuspecting friends.
Morning was very cold. The fish were huddled
for warmth beneath the cover of the pump.
I only saw a gleam of nose or tail
and had no way to know if all survived
their hours with this new fish. The cold continued.
For two more days the fish stayed out of sight,
suspended, waiting to be warmed—or . . . ?

Then finally the sun broke through the haze.
The fish emerged, pure dancing sun, to savor
the life and freedom of the warmer days.
And still they numbered eight. They'd found new balance,
the old accepting, welcoming the new.
I count them now, I feed them, I admire them.
I do not name them, but I let them in,
their golden light and their compelling darkness,
their coalescing and dispersing patterns,
the music of their motion in the pool,
now teleporting, now suspending time
—and so they teach me to disarm my heart.

II (A Lapse of Faith)

I'm so afraid the goldfish all are gone,
Morning after morning, I have waited
on the cold, flat stone beside the quiet pool
while the algae flakes have spread and sifted down,
have waited while my eyes have learned to read,
through fallen leaves and petals, layered light,
and still reflections from the climbing rose,
the inner world of the clearing pond.
It must have happened while we were not here.
The water in the pond had fallen low.
It was a short trip, but we took the dog,
who keeps the would-be predators at bay.

It must have been raccoons. Yet still, yet still
I cannot shake the dread that I'm the one
who brought this all about—because I'd come
to take the fish for granted. I had failed
to bring regard to their unconscious gift
of beauty. So intent on this or that,
I'd leave their food and hurry back inside,
where all the daily tasks called out to me.
I ache to think of them in all their splendor,
just waiting there with no one to take joy
in them and slowly losing all their light
—like fairies when there's no one who believes.

III

The pond did not stay empty very long.
My mate, undaunted, came home from the store
with a trio of new goldfish, tiny, pale,
not feeder fish this time but proper pets
who thrived, all three, and soon began to grow
and deepen to a brilliant sunset hue,
the color of our California poppies.
I have learned to see the goldfish not
as individuals but as incarnations
of some eternal and essential spirit,
life flowing irrepressibly against
the odds—the way we see returning flocks
of sparrows, salmon runs, monarch migrations—
a bright flame passed between the generations.

IV

For two cold, sunless days I was afraid
the goldfish were all gone again. Perhaps
they'd grown so plump (the biggest was as round
as a clementine) that they'd become a meal,
an easy catch for some marauding raccoon.
I scanned the pond, murky now with tannins
from a recent drift of windblown leaves,
searching in the shelter of the filter,
near the shadowed warmth around the pump,
and in the bubbly swirl of turbulence
beneath the waterfall. I scattered food,
flakes of algae, called them silently,
and waited—waited, but they did not come.

For some few hopeful breaths I thought I'd found one,
but it was just a vivid flame of sunshine
flickering through the overhanging roses
and trembling on the bottom of the pool.

The morning of the third day, there they were,
as if they'd never vanished, hovering
below the falling stream, the ripples dancing
and reflecting over them, three rays
of saturated color, as if they gathered
all the light into their orange hearts,
multiplied it, and cast it back to us
with infinite, unmeasured caritas.