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Symptoms of a Cosmic Fluke

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SYMPTOMS OF A COSMIC FLUKE

A Thesis Presented

by

SHANE DUPUY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MAY 2017

ENGLISH

MFA Program for Poets and Writers – Poetry

SYMPTOMS OF A COSMIC FLUKE

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ABSTRACT
SYMPTOMS OF A COSMIC FLUKE
MAY 2017
SHANE DUPUY, B.F.A., EMERSON COLLEGE
M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Directed by: Dara Wier

Symptoms of a Cosmic Fluke is a book of poems.

*...speaking of these
days, he
could
but babble and babble.*

-Paul Celan

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OUBLIETTE

They must also glance over their shoulders
up there as they wander

through the fluorescent veins
of that darkness

because the halls of a space station
are not unlike the torchlight passageways

of Orava Castle
and its empty chambers

that beg to be occupied.
The mind complies.

Tonight we sail
through the thresholds

of rooms peopled by faces
known by sight but not name,

moving quietly
to avoid attention—

the visions here do not ask for permission.
A long, dark braid of hair

coils itself around my neck
and the neck of Takuya Onishi,

crewman of the ISS.
If we are lucky we will remember to open our eyes.

ASSAULTED BY THE CASUAL DAYLIGHT

An unseen force propels me through a threshold.
Inexplicably, people perform their routines.
And still the cows swish their tails beyond understanding.
And they blink at the collie.
Now Matilda glides through a meadow
borne by what,
the air?

HOW THE GREAT ANSWER WAS REVEALED TO ME

As the bees obscenely rubbed pollen all over themselves
Gregory rollerbladed in a highly suspect way.

I watched him from a distance.
Some say the bees are all going to die,

but I'm more concerned with what Gregory is up to.
Where could he be going?

And why does he throw his elbows
so exaggeratedly as if to prove that he is in motion?

There was one bee chewing the corner of the window sill.
I wondered what the sound of a bee chewing was like

and put my ear right next it, but couldn't hear anything.
When I looked up, Gregory was out of sight.

A cold wind blew in from the East, meaning
"your most dire fears are tantamount to certainty."

I cupped the bee in my hands and it did not sting me.
Now I know beyond all doubt

that the wind may lie and I am allied to bees.

NOMAD

all along you've lived in the hope of a mediating animal
a magic rooster
or the abstraction of a buffalo's interior
to nail down your hankering

forever searching for something to cover the white space
left by the way you felt
as it skipped off
to somewhere less convenient

it's too fast to catch up with
you'd better buy a sturdy horse and a good pair of boots

the rainy season's coming
the dirt is itching
to cling to some mean stranger's spurs

BOY SCOUT GUIDE TO SPIRIT TRAUMA

which ad experience do you prefer
we have joint custody of the shrub
or holistic medicine overflow

one has a blue tint and the other makes you forget your mother's voice

in the event of rapture
remember to duck and cover
beneath this pamphlet and/or other sacred text

until someone takes your hand
sop up your eyes with your kerchief

all radiant boys have straight backs
from sitting in church pews
you should have no trouble sleeping

on the floor
while we perform our first ritual
concentrate on pac man
eating the soft white pellets

of fear that fertilize your animal impulses
nutrition is key
the subconscious is a lockbox best left

at the bottom of a subterranean ocean
a cast iron skillet makes an excellent gong
for deprogramming exercises

and a good target for your bb gun
we don't yet know which part of the brain contains
the most protein

but if we did we wouldn't tell you
never leave home without your compass

BY ALL ACCOUNTS IT DIED IN MIDAIR AND LANDED RIGHT THERE ON ITS BACK

Or something to that effect. I really wasn't paying attention.
It felt better to look out the window.
You never know what you'll chance to see.
I've based my whole life on this.
I thought that a cloud looked a whole heck of a lot
like the profile of Henrietta.
Yes, the upper lip jutted perfectly over the bottom lip
giving her an air of snobbery.
And the hair was just right—
like the hair of an old lady in church
whose face you never see because you look away when it's time to shake hands.
Certainly this cloud was she.
She never liked me, I could tell,
from the way she never remembered my name
even though we were cousins once removed.
Once, I saw a photo of her holding me when I was a baby
but from her facial expression you'd guess
she was holding a sack of manure.

The cloud was slow for a cloud.
I didn't make a calculation or anything,
it was just one of those gut feelings.
Henrietta's presence was palpable—
I could almost smell the faintest trace of her rose perfume
as if the cloud was injecting it into the air.
As if it were a Henrietta-shaped zeppelin
there to poison me with her memory.
I recalled that the funeral was poorly attended,
a fact relayed to me by my mother, since I didn't go.
Her face was the pinkish grey of the pad that collects chicken juice
and the few in attendance breathed a sigh of relief when the casket was closed.
I admit, I feel a little bad about that.

I watched her pull apart in strands
as the wind gradually dissipated the cloud.
When it was gone I felt like she had been buried again.
The certainty that follows a karmic shift fell over me.
"How will you come to me next, Henrietta," I thought.
Already I felt her creeping back from somewhere else.

CLASSIC SAUCERS INTERACTING WITH THE SWISS LANDSCAPE

I thought I felt something
like a finger inching its way along the nub of my skull

like a word I heard once
turned into a puppet
built from trash wrapped in duct tape around a wire skeleton
I know it dances when I'm not looking
I'm not so happy

about driving alone on a country road
and being shocked by the moon
blinking behind clouds
a patch of sky stretching like a taffy crucifix
and being a true believer

in some huge mouth somewhere
dictating softly
like the faint rubbing of cells
and I think I can always hear it except I can't remember what it's saying

ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK

Clear thoughts are born

spasmodic
in the dewy morn.

I open the door.
I close the door.

I open the door again.

Who among us knew the destination
of the vaselined bluebird

plunging its way through the mucky
blesséd planet

almost all the way to
Wherever

when its head gasket blew.

*

The floor's been mopped on planet Earth.

But my day is just beginning.
At one time Little Richard

was the most dangerous man in America.
Star-clad kids drove

family Buicks off a cliff.
It was the dream of the world

to walk the avenues
pursued by an unknown master

naked as you came.

*

The door is open.

I am listening
for silver voices

on this shadowy demi-planet.
Why is everyone bad for everyone.

Why me.
Why haven't you called
to remind me of the sea
cloaked and bent over an organ.

*

Number me with the ogglers

telling what they see to the dark.
I believe in everything:

the migration of caribou
people in a snowy village

the Yukon itself
wholly real

to the neon evening.

*

A serviceable moon
occasions the sky.

It was the dream of the world
that made me sit and think

when I should have been
stockpiling canned soup.

Please remember me to the one I loved
whoever it was—

I did a bad job.
I was distracted by the lymphatic system

paradiddles, architeuthis, bad country
bluebirds.

FICTITIOUS ENTRY

Yes disembodied voice. No waft of chicken ferment. Yes moonscar. No rat-faced slip-up. Yes lonesome matinée. No crude spillage. No oath of the sanitized. No not even once. Yes deluxe eyebrow. No lawyer on a collapsible bike. Yes mink occasion. No nude narc. Yes bone diary. Maybe Order of the Crimson Whatever. Yes sax stud. Yes Danish wurdalak. Yes mousse in bed. Probably your second-hand cookware. Epiphany when convenient. No mouse scab. Yes cruise the avenue. No crab dip. Yes Hungarian grey partridge. Yup fallacious barbarian. No arbiter of monotony. Yes q tip. No open position for a disquiet spirit. Yes hot dish in Caracas. To heck with a coiffed sea worm. Yes man hunched in the bushes. Yes that one. No howling shoe. Yes every owl. Never feral uncle. No casserole of misfortune. Yep the Pope's Chamber-Clothes. Nein weeping sore. Yeah dungeon dweller. Yes old friend buried in Winnipeg. Nay pool gazer. June on occasion. Definitely lamprey.

ELF PRESSURE

I suffer from Delighted by Everything.

I KNOW I CAN'T POSSIBLY DO MORE GOOD THAN BAD

Situations with birds
are the least of your worries, my boy.

Nor should you be concerned
with the waters

carrying your soul
beneath the spoiled land.

You are a miss-behaving animal.

You are a mule,
obscure as the unceremonious leg of the anteater.

I'M WALKING ALONE ON AN UNFAMILIAR STREET

There are dark trees and unlit buildings,
insect sounds and a vague electric humming.

I get a text alert about a kidnapping.
BLUE DODGE NEON.

I don't know what a neon looks like
and I don't know if I could tell a kidnapped child
from a safe one.

Blame refuses to settle but instead
blows over the whole valley and hovers
like crazed pollen.

blue dodge neon
Listen, I couldn't stop it.

PROBLEM NUMBER ZILLION

I was in the wrong room.

The walls were painted a slack cousin of white.

The windows looked out to a garish fountain.

I could place no trust in the door.

Even worse, there was nowhere to sit

but the floor, there only out of obligation.

Growing desperate, I looked around

for a sign.

You might expect that I found a mouse hole.

There was no such thing.

SYMPTOMS OF A COSMIC FLUKE

I rolled up my newspaper
and finished the last swig of cold coffee.
It was a joy to move about the house

in silence, felt by no one.
A lone sunbeam pierced the crypt.
But you can't get there from here.

The rolodex is full of people who tried.
Marge was sleeping.
She is dangerous to take to the bar.

Maybe the beach.
The cajuns are known good fighters.
But are pursued by the echoes of their own

footsteps on the empty train platform.
A kid entered.
Have you seen the witch's face

behind her spiked mask?
Some girl laughed at the stranger.
I was still holding out for a nice breakfast.

A pilot hale washed up dead on Nantucket.
All the heat was sucked out at once.
I couldn't help but notice things

have been sliding backwards.
This territory belongs to the Capuchin Monkeys.
In the gift shop you can buy scorpions, tarantulas,

and palmetto bugs encased in plastic.
Soviet balloons meander around Venus.
And Marge is still sleeping in the next room.

A missile fell on some people who were reading.
There's nothing doing in Holland, Massachusetts.
Nearby my father was checking his pulse over and over.

This neck of the woods is where the lunatics are allowed to roam.
Once a boy shot through his friend's temple with an over-pumped Daisy.
Nobody trick-or-treats alone anymore.

SILVER

If happy is what you'd call ten robins
in a tree against the snow,
I could be that.

But maybe there's a different word,
meaning to break
from a shadow.

If I count from the moment I wake
I think I can go an hour
at least without conjuring

some being of ill-will.
If I wake up tomorrow,
I'll still be a skeptic

of spirit photography.
Sure, sometimes the flock scatters
to reconstitute elsewhere—

in an alpine village or sun-filled cave.
As long as I don't know what I don't know,
I'll have to keep wandering.

THE ARBITRARY INCLUSION OF A QUADRUPED

Some people are picking fruit
while others stroke the horses
or play chess with father,
whose beard probes the air
after love.

It's the kind of thing that must exist
to remind you
that the world has fallen in on itself.

POPULAR CHILDREN'S TALE

You'd be surprised how many ways there are to address a handful of wild grapes.
The most obvious is to eat them.

But there's at least as much pleasure in hurling them at a woodchuck.
Once, a girl went into the forest in search of them.

Deep inside a tree
the popular anxieties interwove themselves with a hidden trauma.

Foolishly she wore a hat and was unafraid.
There is nothing sudden about this kind of catastrophe—

the surmounted belief crawls
behind you for eons,

until one day it tears you with its claw.
They don't make a grape that can save you.

LAMENT OF THE ORPHAN PEACOCK

alone on this mountain with only
the rare bird song
of the wind humming in the bell of the abandoned chapel
to remind me of kin
I suffer
and though the sun prisms my tail
I am the subject
of no happy tourist's photograph

NESTS

The dog is barking at an airplane.

I have trained myself to look up.

When the leaves go I can see what is ordinarily unseen.

Squirrel, sparrow, oriole—
from a distance they are hard to tell apart.

There is probably a book for this.

I wonder how often creatures look down on me
without my knowing.

Some are completely filled with the husks of berries eaten
so that no bird could fit inside.

When I take one I hope it's abandoned.

Can forgiveness arrive in pieces over time?

It's good not to know.

NEWS FROM DADDY

I was looking at the coatrack but suddenly it was canaries and I blinked and said of course it is canaries — I am a fool for trusting these ping pong balls.

Then dark clouds spread over the continent and the newspaper headlines grew pregnant with disaster: stock market collapse, congressional sex scandals, missing jewels.

But I don't read newspapers. I get my news from DADDY and he told me that his outboard motor was still running strong after thirty years and that even though he snapped a cotter pin in the middle of the Sound, he found another in the bottom of his tackle box.

As he told me this he was covered with canaries.
Then he said, "Where is the coatrack."

THE GOOD KIND

Known regionally as the cornhole champion
of East Lansing, MI,
my uncle is known best to me
by a photo of him scrubbing the floor
with a yellow sponge
and a band around his long hair.
This was taken before he saw
the face of Jesus in the sky from the cab
of his semi.

My uncle most closely resembles
a cigar store indian—
his features comically sculptural
hacked in wood
and painted by the long years.

And they were long—
each longer than the last
making him an overstepped man desperate for a hoot
in the age of rationality.

But no prize was in the mail.
There was not a registered pony in sight.
No barnyards to pilfer, even.
My uncle, plagued by some cold
Lucifer of the Heart
and still young enough to try,
took his CDL test, paid for with money borrowed from friends,
and passed.

Soon there it was:
the face of delicious Agony
from a painting hung in the childhood home
tearing up the sky outside Kansas City.
He was possessed by the motion of aspen
thereafter.

I INSIST ON THIS

I insist on the bushes and a screaming loon.
I insist on ambergris crisped in the toaster oven.
I insist on these cola freaks
and their eye makeup — I insist
on cheetah print, and just as all that is real
insists on itself, so do I insist on all of it
and all that isn't it
(which also insists if you let it).
On that I insist.
On that I insist.
Insist, I insist.
Oh, I insist on you too.

HIGH NOON

It's funny that the car
Had a dream about
Driving across the desert
And we didn't care
For the bleating children nor
Even any kind of love
And would've dropped
Before clutching your
Armadillo reduced
To the shadow of someone
Killed by an atomic bomb
And the wet space
Between my skull
And brain which I require to cushion it
From a cop who decided busting
Me would suffice and pulled
Us over here by the cactus with the folded arms
Felt like it had fire ants.

HONEST QUESTION

a boy in blue wool
steps out of the shadows
to present a broken stopwatch the hands have stopped
reaching have given up counting
as an occupation
we label broken things
for their inability to fulfill our small uses
a worthless hammer
fails to drive nails
an honest compass points
North, only North

FLYING FOXES IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION

I

They are thought of as the most affectionate and practical animal companions as their kisses have been shown to heal wounds as deep as three inches.

II

It is commonly believed that Phil Spector's famed "wall of sound" was achieved by projecting music into a chamber filled with flying foxes.

III

For centuries, the coat of arms of Grand Master William de Sonnac of the Knights Templar was thought not to be a lion surrounded by red rhombi, but instead a colony of flying foxes.

IV

An old wives' tale states that one should never pass by a graveyard without uttering the phrase "Lord, let a flying fox carry me home". The origin of this is unknown.

V

In medieval bestiaries the flying fox was said to be the foil beast and arch-nemesis to the acid-spitting tortoise of Cologne.

VI

The travel diary of Dutch navigator Willem Janszoon, kept during his voyage to Australia, contains the sentence "I should love to live here forever among these wonderful winged mongrels."

GUERRILLA

I stood between the pizza parlor and the beauty salon reading silently. People passed by without even glancing. They thought of me as much as they might a lamppost or mailbox. I kept reading. It was a really good book about a boy who farmed palm trees. I was smiling like crazy. And still no one noticed what I was up to. I kept it up for hours. At last my performance was nearing its crescendo — the final pages of the book. The boy grew up. There was a lesson about kindness. I shut the book and nodded to display my approval. The light from the pizza parlor shone on the empty sidewalk.

HAPHAZARD SKETCH OF CLEM

in the deepest trench I wait
like a panther for
 you of all my aches you
please me best
 yet no pelican
 flies
 in a sandstorm I must stay put
I say could you put that
 star elsewhere I don't want it
all that white light
 a pinprick
 in the iris is all I need
 all I need
 is what I don't have and the living
hope for your arrival
 like heartcanker I am alone
 in my lonely trench don't you know that I am
 shaky for you?

I IMAGINE A WORLD IN WHICH EVERYBODY'S ROCKIN

I've been having difficulty with myself
and animals who are unceasingly willful
in their determination to be hooved, winged, fanged, etc.
much like how I'm loathe to change anything
except when I least expect it and am afraid.

The world too is still the world though
I tell myself it will be a flaming ball of tar in my lifetime.

Also,
my suspicions tell me that it is a time-eaten bug
made a nest in the corner above my bed.

The word for that is
lord jesus in heaven

I forgot.

MENTAL SCHEME OF SOMETHING

The rustling was most likely some kind of animal behaving in a way predetermined by its genetic background. Above, the good kind of clouds populated a sky that felt open but also sheltering. I was picking at a piece of deck railing that had cracked and was sticking up when it broke off in my fingers. The wood beneath was lighter in color. I wondered if on the inside I was also lighter in color. I looked for another splinter to break off. I tore off several more and then my fingers felt sore. I started to pull the railing off entirely from the posts. I had to break it in two. From the basement I retrieved the saw and spent the remainder of the afternoon demolishing the entire deck. When I looked at the pile that used to be my deck and then at the house, I knew I was in disagreement with some force capable of rending me into pieces smaller than nothing.

INFANT

Daughter of all seeming

I grip an echo

in the absence of a neutral arbiter

and trip on the terrestrial reference point piled with the debris of the sapien occasion

a commonly delayed birth reaction

I have only ten fingers to count with

ten toes

two arms

two legs

but there's so much to allow inside too much even for one being

who knows what the sum of waves

that crisscross

my inside is

what does knowing have to do with anything

when some fresh grass smell

can thrill this vessel

there's no star called Mister Every Feeling

VARMINTS

The rider on the Tennessee Stud asked me what I thought
about Foucault's conception of free will.
Looking over my shoulder, I wondered
if they were heat waves I saw
on the horizon, or the white brims of lawmen.

"That saloon had better sarsaparilla than the last one,"
said the rider on the Tennessee Stud.
We had just robbed the aforementioned saloon.
Three days' ride from our camp in the mountains,
haloed by vultures, I felt certain
we were headed to the last roundup.

The sound of hoofbeats caught up to us
and the rider on the Tennessee stud fell silent.
Then we both thought "dangit!"

"What makes men do bad?" asked my companion,
but I couldn't answer.
I kept thinking about an armadillo
blown around by a lap steel wind.

STORY ABOUT ME

I felt like spending money.
People were standing in the rain.
I walked to the bookstore and chose
several books about egrets,
one about Tut,
and a history of steam.

Then I decided not to buy them
and left them in a bathroom.
The rain was falling harder.
Rain and I are acquainted,
but we don't really understand each other.

NOT DOWN THIS LOW

The yard is laced with rabbits.
My life's work is in ruin.
Somewhere, I'm told,
someone's looking after me.

In bed at night I feel bodies closing in around the house.
My eyes are open but I can't see shit.
I hear a fly buzzing against the window
And think "at least I'm not alone."

If you find me dead could you wash my hair,
take the garbage out,
and help yourself to whatever's in the fridge.

Give Sam my guitars.
Stiff the funeral parlor.
If I could be buried beneath a twenty foot tall cactus
it would be much appreciated.

But I don't really want to be gone forever.
The rabbits are gathering at the dark end of the street.
I think somebody put something
like a pack of starved dogs in me when I wasn't looking.

NO DAD IS CHILD PROOF

some dads are filled with drano that sloshes
over their lashes
when they're jostled
this is why they hate to cry

never stick a fork in a dad
or you may get zapped—
flash your bones like a strobe light

also don't crawl into a dad
you could drown
then the drano would break you down
like the acid in a bathtub

most dads are slick
and rubbery like porpoises
this makes for a quick escape
in the event of a flood

noah was the first dad of this rendition
of people
he had a groovy boat bachelor dad pad
and partied with the animals

shit shouldn't we just kill them
you may ask
but we can't
no one really wants to be a dad
better to learn the rules

never tell a dad about your credit score
never ask a dad to hold you
especially if you're a baby
and easily broken

FUNHOUSE

Here there is only one true window
to look through
whichever room you're in.
You may see a bird driven
by some mechanism outside the visible
light spectrum.

I strain possibility through my mind
and sort it into piles by color.
Flood water goes with the silver of cabbage.
Orioles with dusk and inferno.

Though we're short on brimstone
paradise is perhaps too strong a word.
People wake up early
to put themselves to tasks prescribed by
the gaps between what is seen
which the window obfuscates.
You can do only one job
though it will feel like many—
one of the better things about living in this town.
The right angles here are a necessary mutation
caused by the light the brain casts.

I am not here
in the backyard of every home.
The window tells the eyes
what they already know.
When the black center absorbs
the same
enough it will stop asking
for anything new.
A covenant keeps itself
in the dark annals of the DNA
only mathematics can dessicate.

CONFESSION

for months someone has been rearranging
my face while I sleep

which is to say that all my closet contains
is twenty black carpenter ants

that have hollowed me
and I wish someone would make me into a canoe

birch bark peels away easy
you're hallowed

but I'm sick of you
and maybe also stuck on some approximation I imagined

in the shower
my body is small and soft

to me but not to anyone else
let me clarify

the last coin I need to make a call
is the moon

once my mom made me cry
when the gravity of my words was lost to her

and you've made me
a few times

by being you somewhere
I can't help that

now returning from my solitary orbit
I just don't know you people

but as a test to see if we're anything alike
let's weigh our motives

still equally heavy
ok I confess that I am a plume of smoke

A KEYHOLE TO THE DOOR OF A ROOM YOU'D NEVER WANT TO ENTER

What it was came by wind down the chimney singing. The oven sang a not quite nameable note. Birds gathered by the windows to watch the newcomer. It hid in the morning bread. Grammy bit off a chunk and choked. Grampa, returning from errands, wandered past the house. He didn't know where he was. She flew out after him screaming. No one noticed the eyeball perched on the candelabra.

ENRICHMENT OBJECT

Unauthorized trousers drown zoo otter.
Birds fall to pieces everywhere
Manhole cover brains Billy.
Cancer grows in all kinds of tissue.
Lamb born with eight legs, dies soon,
Genocide only occurs on habitable planets.
Gorilla acquires knife, can't wield.
Wind narrates whole life.

WARTIME

The outside dogs us through the windows
we have tarred.

We know the movements of strangers
by their passing in the streaks.

At night an unknown siren
bleats over the hills, which, the radio tells us, are ulcerous

with mortar wounds.
We are starving.

Sue is sick.
We hate the enemy.

I am told that my strong back
and rage are the pride of the race,

but Mother says I'm too young to go.
We dine on smoke, we dine on fog

in surplus, despite the scarcity of everything else.
We forked over our shoes

so the eyelets could be melted
into bullets—

the radio tells us not even to spare joy.

WINTERIZING

All night I listened to the cows bellowing
and hoped that they would not be iced over
by morning. When I woke

the apartment was fifty degrees.
To live is to fly and all that.
I anointed my boots with beeswax

and drank black coffee.
Even the grit at the bottom
I drank, because what is bitter

makes you strong — so I tell myself.
I went out in the car.
In the pooled sleet I saw reflected

the pilot lights of Elsewhere.
A half hour before close
I wandered inside without knowing

what it was I wanted—
a condition of winter
I'm used to.

UNDISCOVERED ENORMOUS ARACHNIDS

dumb old dad says never ever will you lay claim to truth

the stipulation spiders over my ceiling
and my eyeballs calcify

while a fugitive family hoots
from a stagecoach in my cortex

they say there are swarms
of german shepherds
on a pea-sized neptune

out! out!

some poem has to get you out of here

BLOOD BELIEF

The begonia is covered in silver spores.
Woe unto the begonia.
The Russian kids are peeing

in the parking lot
and fleeing from their mother into the woods.
What's good is good until it's not.

A wave smashes a cormorant
against the cliff face.
It is assumed that you know

already.
I feel nothing for the cormorant—
not even love.

In Finland, once,
a boy crouched in a tree with a rifle for three days and three nights,
waiting for Red soldiers,

and I can't even remember to call home.
Surely, some tributary of the heart
has gone dry or been dammed

by the beavers of Saturn,
those rodents admired
for their insisting

even when you shoot them,
even when you break up their homes.