

TUNNEL

I lost the magician in a bowl of
potato cheese soup.

He would capture my attention
by sculpting tiny faces in my
terrycloth bath towel,
or the knotted pile of the carpet.

I liked the machine.

It made my ears bigger.
Sometimes the size of oceans.

I could hear a child's heartbeat
in a stick of cotton candy.

It turned my skin into margarine.
I was spread on the sandwiches of dead people.
(Before they died, of course.)

I listened to their conversations over lunch.
When they swallowed me,
I could hear their thoughts.

Matisse.
Magritte.
My grandmother.

She had a tiny steel temple in her chest
where fireflies went to pray.
My father had one too.
So do I.

My hand was once half an exploding star,
my lover's back the other.

After all that time,
drifting in space
they were reunited.

Briefly.

Sometimes it was too much.
Words on bumper stickers became
wild dogs. They would leap from the vinyl
to the hood of my car.

Radio molested my ears.
Smell was the night sky on July 4th.

But I could fly.
Like a pipe bomb.
I was holy.
Like a voodoo doll.

I'm going to stare at my carpet now.

IN A BLACK SKY

There's no relaxing here. The one they call Van Gogh empties the salt shaker for the second time today. Small white planets are counted, then arranged in miniature orbit around a Medjool date.

Marie hasn't seen her son in twelve years. Or maybe it's twenty. Marie talks about him all the time, but I don't believe her. I think she doesn't have a son. She is a rotten liar.

I don't believe anyone. Sometimes I sit on the wall in the lunch room, camouflaged as dust.

One day I'll get out of here. The first thing I'm going to do is think the world out of existence. I'll start with the trees, then move on to animals. Maybe ducks first then zebras and so on.

Water can stay until I swim to Africa. When I get there I'll dig a hole in the ground until I find the bones of my ancestors, then I'll make them disappear too. I'll keep going until there's nothing left but orange swirls in a black sky.

THE WEIGHT OF THE BIRDS

for James Tate

I have a friend named Harry who decided to kill himself. “I’ve decided to kill myself,” he said. “You did?” I said, “That’s a big decision.” “Not really,” he said, “when you know, you just know.” So I asked Harry if he had settled on how he was going to do it. “I’m going with old faithful,” he said, “gun to the head.” “That certainly is effective Harry,” I said. “Yes, I agree,” he said. So I asked him when he was planning on doing it and if he’d like me to come along for support. The thing about my friend Harry is he’s a real loner and I didn’t think he’d want me there for something so personal, but I offered anyway out of respect. I was surprised when he accepted, and quite honored. So that evening over dinner we made plans for when and where his suicide would take place. It was clear that Harry didn’t want to wait much longer, so we settled on first thing the next morning near the lake behind my house. There was a buzz of electricity in the air and we both had great difficulty falling asleep that night. When I did sleep, I had a dream that I was Major Tom from the Bowie song and I was floating above the Earth, raising my fists to the heavens. We woke early and headed out to the lake. Harry brought along the weapon. I can’t say what it was specifically, because I have never been a gun person, but it was silver with a wooden handle. “This is it,” Harry said when we approached the lake. “Yes, Harry I suppose it is,” I said. I leaned in and gave him a big hug and thanked him for being such a good friend all these years. There were no tears because of the new law about that, and you never knew when they might be watching. He lifted the gun and positioned the end of the barrel just above his left ear. I took a few steps back and smiled encouragingly, then he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. When the shot rang out, hundreds of birds perched in the Poplars around the lake bolted to the sky, and the trees took a deep breath, relieved of the weight of all those birds.