Mother

Holly Zehnder

The Bee

Bees adore any sweet thing, just as humans do. Sweet things are rare in the world for a creature unable to tear a wrapper, and so a bee will leap upon a melting piece of candy or a glass of juice or an open watermelon with a great crazy love and gorge itself. By the standards of a bee, humans exist in a syrupy orgy of bliss.

A bee once loved my uncle in this way, and came to him as he was drinking orange juice in the summertime. It circled him, desperate with need to wade in the juice and wash its head in it and be purely delighted by it, and as my uncle raised the glass for a drink it dove forward to love the juice.

Something happened. Perhaps the bee wondered if there might be more sweetness inside a human than out. It must have been strange, suddenly, to be inside a mouth. Humans have no reference for such a thing, so we are forced to imagine the heat and confinement and muscular churning of it, the overwhelming force surrounding on all sides. It seems that there would be a powerful need to get out, and on the other hand, the need to remain immersed in such a marvelous sweetness. It is hard to say.

Somehow it stung his tongue, and in surprise at the sudden sharp pain my uncle swallowed the bee. Saved from its need, it dissolved cell by cell in the dark warmth of his belly and came back to nothing.

The Duck

Upon finding a clutch of eggs near a stream in the woods, I stole one and dropped it—to see what was inside—from the height of the low plank bridge. The bed of the stream was rocky and the stream itself shallow, enough so that the egg slapped down through the water and broke against the bottom. The white of the egg washed away at once. More durable, the yolk bumbled along the gravel. It swam next to a fragment of broken brown shell for some distance, until the shell caught an eddy and skidded into the twiggy reeds at the stream’s side.
I followed the yolk downstream for a time, walking along as it walked along, noting with some pride the deft way it avoided the reeds and the rocks and the sticks in the flow that might tear its fragile skin. What would it grow into, I wondered, when it reached the sea?

The Whale

It was fifty-six feet long and sixty tons in weight, the largest whale ever recorded in Taiwan. A truck ferried the carcass through the busy downtown streets of Tainan City toward its dissection and eventual disposal. In photographs, the dead whale strapped with thin ropes to its trailer seems to swim through and above the press of cars around it, mottled and immense and kingly in death—majestically crude, wet and rounded in a sea of electric yellow and red shop signs. People line the street in awe.

In later photographs, the whale remains strapped to its trailer, surrounded by a great swath of blood that covers the street from curb to curb and laps up onto the sidewalks. A drift of soft black intestines cuddles up around the rear wheel of a scooter, burying it to the axle. A child stares at the whale, dwarfed by it, holding an ice cream bar in one hand and with the other covering his nose and mouth.

The eruption of the whale is no mystery. Gases began to form in its body upon the moment of its death. Vapor grew in its great stomach, swelling the soft belly-fat outward. It is not a rapid process; someone must have noticed the changes. Someone could have said something. Surely someone could have done something. It could have been helped, certainly.

Perhaps it was simply too awkward to mention. Admitting the weakness of human judgment is not an easy thing. But however it came to be, it came to be, and there was nothing for it when finally, unavoidably, a great rush of fluids sluiced the soft flesh out and toward those unprepared to meet it so soon.