

THE
UNFLEDGED
DUCKS IN THE
ABANDONED
CLARIFIER

BILLY REYNOLDS

The day is early enough that you can stand at the guardrail and let the light hit you square in the face, let it bronze you with its medallions that come and go as they wish. You can stare down at those two vacuous holes dried up for good, not even a tear in them, like two perfectly round swimming pools so close they touch. The water plant is rank with sulfur and god knows what else, though everywhere I look are birds: on the road, a killdeer stutter-steps, barn swallows cruise so low their wings brush the grass, and Canada geese, near the creek's edge, nest in high grass, and these right here, ten feet below us, dying to fly up and out.

The idea of the water plant is process: first the water must pass through the screen, so the solids are removed, condoms, sticks, tampons, sand and grit, you name it, though something always gets through, as it should, apple and tomato seeds, lucky penny, everlasting pinecone.

But these can't rise, not yet. They stand in the shade of the half-bridge scraper that once pushed the sludge toward the bottom. Then they are all energy, so alive they look forgotten, the trough they run in too much like a bobsled track with sharp turns and steep banks, until you think of the stale, two-week old bread in the break room.

John Fairbank, dead by now, or so I guess,
how we stood there and didn't move for hours. Late August,
and we wanted a pastoral—not these odd ducks shaming us
with their—I don't want to say it—cries for help.
I never saw you broken, never saw you race your heart out,
never saw you plow through that concrete trough that has no end,
never saw you bunched up among so many helpless others.

It is still summer, and you hang on the edge ready to drop down.
I'm on my belly snaked under the guardrail. By now I have my hands
on your wrist, waiting. It looks as if the entire sky is waiting.
If I could chase them, wave my hands in the air, but I can't.
If I could scoop them up one by one and make a nest
out of both hands, but I can't. If I could be a small caught bird. . .

One by one, you caught them all and lifted them up to me.
Unfledged, yellow, damp feathers—they too would fly.
Then my hand was in yours again, pulling you up,
behind us the retention ponds, and out beyond the wheat fields
the Red Cedar River where the potable water returns.
No words passed between us, even as you unlocked the gate
to the creek and the mother showed up, even as they followed her
through the gate and we heard them make their way down the steep
bank, scratching in such high grass, even as we watched them form
separate wakes, even through each head count you made,
each number mouthed without any sound, like a teacher asking
for a show of hands, each hand held higher and higher still.