

Poems by Corey Marks from *The Rock That Is Not a Rabbit* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2023)

**Lark**

A stone lodged in the boy's throat.  
Why had he even taken it in his mouth?  
Hard to remember now—something

about its smell, like rain. Something  
about the open field, a distant song,  
a sense of the day's never-endingness.

*On a lark*, his mother would say.  
He'd moved the stone inside his cheek,  
along his teeth, pressed it against

the roof of his mouth like candy,  
though it tasted of dirt and ozone.  
It was hard to imagine being *on* a lark—

such a small thing. The size of his fist,  
though finer boned. In the story his mother  
read when she used to read to him,

birds were caught in branches painted  
with glue. The birds would settle  
and then exhaust themselves battering

against the air that wouldn't open  
to them anymore. He imagined  
plastic bags snapping in wind.

And now he felt like a tree filled  
with larks, his whole body branched  
with panic, lashing and lashing.

Meadowlarks lived in the field, he'd  
seen them skitter in low arcs away.  
Not true larks at all, though

it was hard to think of them as a kind  
of blackbird with their yellow chests  
and brown-stippled backs.

Still, that's what his book said  
when it mattered to him once.  
Who named these things? How

did they mistake so much?  
He didn't like his own name—  
something an old man would be called.

His parents were old. The day  
felt old. His mouth tasted  
like the ringing inside a bell.

And how little he filled his name,  
the only one he'd ever own—  
it strained away from him. Beyond,

names drifted the field, billowing,  
unattached, catching briefly on shocks  
of broken grass, a raised lip of stone.

### **The Rock that Is Not a Rabbit**

The rock that is not a rabbit suns itself  
in the field, its brown coat that isn't fur  
furred with light. The rock that isn't a rabbit  
would be warm to a palm but wouldn't  
quicken or strain from touch. It doesn't ache  
with hunger or pine with rabbit-lust,  
doesn't breathe the world in, translating  
scent into some rabbit understanding.  
The world is beyond its understanding.  
And yet the rock that is not a rabbit will  
outlast the hawk banking above, the fox  
sloughing free of its den, the wheel nicking  
off the road to disturb the gravel berm,  
the mower coughing up the neighbor's yard.  
Even so, its ears fold back against its body  
as if to make itself small, a secret,  
though when a breeze disorders the grass,  
the rock's stillness appears like wild motion.

## **Broken Music**

Every turn I took in the city  
pressed me deeper into the warren

of what I hadn't said, the words  
thickening, constricting like a throat

as I moved through the streets,  
oblivious to traffic and high walls,

the rain gutters' crooked mouths  
staining the pavement, human faces

moonling past me, indifferent,  
eclipsing my silence

with their phones, their apparitions  
floating—where?—and everyone,

everyone talking to the air.  
Until around a new corner

on a narrow street I'd never seen,  
a piano began to play from above

a window-muffled music  
at odds with itself, the rush of notes

splintering like glass across a floor  
then picked back up, piece

by piece—first one hand sorting  
along the keys, then the other

joining, out of step, irreconcilable,  
unpunctuated by frustration,

or shame, but stung with the urgency  
to make what couldn't yet

be made. How could anyone learn  
their way out of such blunder,

how could any song be gathered  
from those shards grating

like something lodged in a shoe.  
My ear cocked into the air,

I thought of floating up, balloon-like,  
to look. I felt cartoonish,

a marvel of the last century's  
animation already out of date.

I could have gone on like that,  
listening, loosening into the song,

but then the piano stopped.  
My ears filled with waiting—

car horns and chatter, the wheeze  
of a stopping bus, the city going

about its filthy exclamations,  
its abandon. The window

darkened as the player shut  
the light over the sheet music,

and it reflected another window  
across the street that in turn

reflected a bit of sky, a plane's  
bright sideways thought

trolling across the pane  
music once broke through—

delirious and awful and unabashed,  
and so unlike what I'd wanted to say

swollen now, a contrail  
coming extravagantly undone,

or a balloon full of glass.

## **The Bird and the Statue**

Lanchkhuti, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic & Dallas, USA

Away and back, away and back, the bird  
spent its hours fluttering from the statue's  
high collar, then settling again, preferring,  
it seemed, one shoulder to the other.  
Or it bobbed its head with each strut  
beneath the oversize ear, cooing,  
conspiratorial in its devotion.

Gray and brown, a broken black ring  
draped around its neck, a white ring  
closed around its eye, the bird purred  
its ugly song to the great head,  
the deaf ear full of one gray thought.  
And so, one of the statue's shoulders  
was more streaked with white

like milk carelessly spilled, detailing  
the folds of a coat open across a chest full  
and impervious as—we're meant to see—  
the state. But people in the square  
rarely looked up heading home, or to work,  
or to wait in the lines. Seasons shifted,  
shortages with them—milk, bread,

patience. Maybe it wasn't always the same bird.  
Who would study a pigeon ruffling itself  
beside Lenin's overblown face stark as a bulb  
with its filament burnt out? Who could  
even recognize the bird, hour after hour,  
day after day? A pigeon will live five years.  
A state will live until, well, it falls. One day

a crowd came to wrench the statue down,  
unbuckle it from the square. The statue  
wobbled, teetered like a drunk as the crowd  
(no break)

rocked against it, and the bird stayed away,  
settling for a bare tree, a branch stripped  
of leaves. Was it winter? Or late fall, the hint  
of another season leaning in like gossip?

What mattered was that something was over—  
a regime, a cold war, a century, or most of one.  
Onlookers thronged the square, scarves  
pulled tight, lips prized open a crack.  
Someone's tooth hurt with the cold,  
with something gone rotten in his mouth.  
A mother lifted her child to look on what at last

came down. Even the thief whose hand  
brushed like snow through a forest of thighs  
turned when the statue grated and groaned  
from its perch. So. Where the great shoulder  
had stood, a sharp breeze. Where the great ear  
had curled in, the white chalk of daylight  
passed through to scratch off the hours.

Where the song had burbled, where habit  
marked its devotions . . . Perhaps  
a new statue will rise in its place.  
Perhaps the bird will find a new shoulder,  
a new ear, a new song with which to profess  
its diligence. But my thoughts are elsewhere,  
with Lenin strapped to a flatbed truck,

grit flushing his nostrils as he crosses borders  
changed again, yet to be mapped, on to the sea,  
to the swaying dark of a ship's hold mumbling  
for undifferentiated days and nights toward  
a far port, then American highways,  
lit billboards flitting like pages in the hands  
of someone too distracted to read.

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In a Dallas backyard, he rises again  
on a shaded path among an assembled crowd—  
Ceașescu and his wife Elena, Stalin and Mao,  
even his own double at the far end, though  
smaller, more human in scale, one arm  
thrust toward some other future than this.  
A collection. I can't take you there—

the statues are private now. "Our petting zoo,"  
the owner might quip if you met him,  
though it's unlikely you will, or that he'd speak  
to someone like you. But if you did go  
to see the statues basking in afternoon light,  
you might wonder what's been transposed  
to another key, translated into the lush drawl

of late spring. Not nostalgia, but power.  
Not preservation, but a kind of forgetting.  
Perhaps you'd notice the birds clustered  
in the pruned trees, on the statues—starlings,  
mostly. The gardener chases them off at dusk  
with noisemakers that pop like guns,  
a minor uprising in the grass below the trees,

not the end of an era but a moment of rest.  
But birds are simple, they return, they return  
to the crepe myrtle lolling its miniature tongues,  
the lavish pink almost too much, and to  
the shoulders and foreheads, the locks of hair,  
anything still enough to hold them  
above the ground pooling with dark.

Today there will be a party, people will  
trail across the lawn, drinks in hand,  
to see the stone and metal faces  
that came down in anger, or shame, or joy—  
smaller and larger than life, arranged  
as curiosities. Laughable, even. For now,  
the gardener climbs a ladder to scrub shit

from one great shoulder and sings, below  
the giant ear, a song in his own tongue  
he heard burbled by the radio this morning  
as his wife swabbed a new mess his daughter  
had tipped across the table, as he poured  
the last of the milk into the recovered cup,  
as the baby laughed and spilled her milk again.