

*From the Summer Lake Journals*

*—for Sarah*

Arrival

Why worry-up an imagined future—  
one instant cresting a favorite pass  
(snow-patch, bluebird, stunted juniper)  
—or the ones that follow—squall that  
hammers the car with half-inch hail,  
litters the road like shattered glass and  
up ahead a jackknifed truck that  
blew by us miles ago—  
how we slide off onto gravel,  
break the skid and know right off  
one delay (the misplaced key) has  
brought us to a stop just far enough  
back we're not beneath those smoking  
tires but here, *this* life,  
precious seconds—so, does it  
matter if it's been imagined?

Flies

zip in through the screendoor when we  
come and go—maybe the cool and  
dark, trace of too-ripe plums—then  
hurl themselves against invisible  
walls that look like all outdoors.

Must be half a dozen revving,  
green, black, frantic: they bounce  
off the pane, sink to the sill,  
crawl to a corner, swab the face with  
forelegs—fighters toweling off—then  
rocket back into the fray.

Corner them one by one, a plastic  
bag: when each panics up and  
caroms in, pinch the opening,  
crack the door and *pfft!*—it's off.  
Unless it's wedged against the sash:  
should I try again—or smear . . . ?

Chewing on the First Precept.  
By the time the last fly's routed  
new contenders slip inside  
spoiling for what summer brings.  
By the fridge, a frayed swatter . . .  
Flecks of life, each craving more.

Apex Species

Good boots, high meadows,  
August grass. Unlace, slip them  
off in camp: above the ankles,  
socks a bristle of seed pods.

No choice: sit back and  
tweeze them out—burrs, needles,  
tridents, fans, corkscrews, tiny  
lances—all evolved to puncture,  
hang on, work in deep . . .

Ah,  
soft socks again . . . Wait!—  
inside boots, stealth hitchhikers  
grip the walls, wild to travel.

To Call a Blackbird

A few liquid notes  
rise and fall—then a rattle,  
a harsh raspberry.

Dialects vary  
by region, from pond to pond,  
even bird to bird.

You try: *Over here—  
only see her—horde a cheer—  
for a tear. Silence.*

Me: *Woke to play dear—  
smoke-a-day . . . toke away blear—  
poke a jay rear. No.*

So much riding on  
these crude interspecies cries.  
Do the raspberry.



*Ping*

For days the playa's a vast ashtray,  
swirling grit above a lake  
mirage—miles of drying mud.  
Today it's a basin of caramel crystals—  
sun-baked tiles curling from earth,  
shed skin of a stealthy dragon.

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Dusk, an unexpected call—  
grown son with hard questions:  
“How do y' love when it dries up?”  
Hear the thin wire keen . . . until it's  
spent, no words; he's ready for sleep.  
Crickets tune to a common pulse.

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You're dropping flatware into slots,  
singular *ping* for each piece.  
When have I paid you such attention?  
Creases now at the corners of eyes  
that have savored so much of the familiar  
and, turning this way, still do.

Charles Atkinson