

Celia Carlson

Lake Merritt

Lake Merritt is a dirty plate still sitting
on a counter where someone has gotten sick
or died—or forgotten how to care.

Sweetish strings of yellow scum ride
the water's rim, and the smell of rot
comes off it. Pelicans hoist their bodies
from the water and drift like abandoned rowboats
overhead, then suddenly lose desire
and splash back like old driftwood to bob up
again, beak flaps slack, unfilled.

There's something dead there, bumping belly
up against the rocks, some large pink bag
with white beads that must be teeth gleaming
down a muzzle, and soft protrusions that once
were legs. Someone's pet perhaps, ill
cared for, now an inflatable pillow in a cold bath.

In a pile on the professor's desk were the student
evaluations. On the very top he'd left:
"Morgan is the worst TA I ever
had. She has no soul." The comments for him:
"Nice Italian suits. Nice shoes. The most
brilliant lectures I have ever heard."

Styrofoam cups, tennis balls soaked
to soft green eyeballs, and dead birds,
their eyes sealed in tiny purple rinds.

The black men come and set up weight-lifting benches. They lay out their weights in graduated rows, strip down, oil up, and put on their leather belts. And then their friends come, and they stand around and talk. And talk. Teeth gleam and the sun goes down. The last rays appear gold on all those slick pecs.

A small white egret steps carefully among the bottles, cans, and bloated diapers, peering intently into the murky water, patiently picking its way among the rocks with a discerning eye and ah! bright feet.

