PLURALS

JAR OF PENS

Sometimes the sight of them
Huddled in their cylindrical formation
Repels me; humble, erect,
Mute and expectant in their
Rinsed-out honey crock, my quiver
Of detached stingers. (Or, a bouquet
Of lies and intentions unspent.)

Pilots, drones, workers—the Queen is
Cross, Upright Lodge
Of the toilworthy—gathered
At attention as though they knew
All the ink in the world couldn't
Cover the first syllable
Of a heart's confusion.

This fat fountain pen wishes
In its elastic heart
That I were the farm boy
Whose illiterate father
Rescued it out of the privy
After it fell from the boy’s pants:
The man digging in boots
By lanternlight, down in the pit.

Another is straining to call back
The characters of the five thousand
World languages dead since 1900,
Cardicues, fiddleheads, brushstroke
Splashes and arabesques,
Footprints of extinct species.

The father hosed down his boots
And leaving them in the barn
With his pants and shirt
Came into the kitchen,
Holding the little retrieved
Symbol of symbol-making.

O brood of line-scratchers, plastic
Scabbards of the soul, you have
Outlived the sword—talons and
Wingfeathers for the hand.

—ROBERT Pinsky

A BEARD OF BEES
at the farmers’ market

The arbor of his chin
Bedangled with a cluster
Of yellow grapes that buzz
Like an electric razor,
This raiser of honeybees
With face in half-eclipse
Coaxes some hairs aside
To clear space for his lips.

He's a master of close shaves.
How well he does one thing.
With what abandon braves
Disaster's sting,
Quite unlike refugees
Crossing a perilous sector.
A whirl—his moustache flies
Away in search of nectar.

—X. J. Kennedy

TO MY TEETH

So the companions
of Ulysses those that were
still with him after
the nights in the horse the sea lanes
the other islands the friends
lost one by one in pain
and the coming home one
bare day to a later
age that was their own
but with their scars now upon them
and now darkened and worn and some
broken beyond recognition
and still missing the ones
taken away from beside them
who had grown up with them
and served long without question
wanting nothing else
sat around in the old places
across from the hollows
reminding themselves
that they were the lucky ones
together where they belonged
but would he stay there

—W. S. Merwin

HERONS

The fishermen who scale and gut their catch
find a river in the bellies of the fish.

In the river shines a beach where some boys play soccer.

Some herons come to the beach to take off their feathers and go for a swim.

The fishermen wink at the boys,
urging them to bathe with the herons.

But the boys prefer to hide the herons' clothes.

Then those who scale and gut their fish
laugh so hard they fall down, choking.

The herons dress themselves in the scales of the fish and dive into the river.

—JUAN CARLOS GALEANO, translated by Angela Ball