

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 know  
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,  
Curlicues, 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*