

The Refuge

The snow geese took off in fours,
sometimes in fives, while the great blue heron,
singular and majestically weird,
complicated a rivulet. An egret,
fishing, did its lascivious Groucho Marx
walk, only slowly, neck and head
in odd accord, and hundreds of black ducks,
driven by memory, readied themselves
in the curious calm of New Jersey
for that long flight beyond winter.

This was the safe place,
famous for these birds and meetings
of adulterous lovers, everything endangered
protected. Turtle Cove was closed
to humans; the dunlin and the swan
acted as if the world weren't harsh, maniacal.
Absecon Bay stretched out toward the Atlantic,
the very ocean Burt Lancaster said—
with the wild accuracy of a saddened heart—
wasn't the same anymore. The horizon graphed
the ziggy, unequal stretch of casino hotels,
and in front of us on the hard, dirt road
gulls dropped clam shells from a height
so perfect they opened.

I had come with my sister-in-law
and my homophobic nephew, my tattletale niece—
a familial gesture, not exactly my style.
My brother was back on the couch
watching football, my wife cooking the dead-bird-
Thanksgiving-dinner that soon would bring us
together. Which one of us didn't need
to be thanked, and eventually forgiven?
A herring gull swallowed an eel.
Walking, the great blue heron

lost all of its grandeur. In a few hours
my brother would say grace at the table,
and we'd bow our heads, almost seriously,
but for now it was red-wing blackbird
and Canada goose, it was marshland and sky,
all the easily praised, the nothing like us.

Stephen Dunn