

Sandhill Cranes

Out of the overcast sandhill cranes

fall to the river in their grey

And irreverent music. I'd seen them in the cornfields

As I drove—ghosts in remission, slow food scavengers,

Part-time monogamists—making the most of it in the rain.

Now at dusk, the Platte hustles east, cashed up

with Wyoming

Snowmelt, and I stand on the bridge

and watch them,

In their even-numbered ensembles, arrive [make land]. They carry their legs

Behind them like music stands they never learned

To fold, and they slash a loose graffiti

on the cloudbank as they come.

They circle the river as if it were *not* their stage

and nightfall were not their moment:

Their descent an audition,

half diffidence, half desire. Blue

Notes clatter down in five-four time,

And the birds splash down between the bars,

Throwing the baritone sax of their voices

in oblique arcs across the waters—grey sinkers

At the end of long grey lines, cast to hook the twilight and release it

In the dawn. And everywhere,

the spastic eloquence of their dance.

The wind dies and the light dies, too, and two hundred thousand birds

Disappear inside their own erratic lullabies,

and if you were here, I'd kiss you now;

But there are only the birds, trying, and trying again,

their perfect pitch in the pure atonality of the night,

And a small breeze shivering the Indian grasses along the shore.