

TOD MARSHALL

*The Book of Failed Descriptions*

—Close your eyes and count to ten.

I.

“In language, there are always two.”

*The Iliad*

stolen from Thoreau’s cabin,  
the only thing taken  
during those years.

Remember, too, *The Aeneid*

(we all have lived  
through times of war)

and that passage

a friend said to know well,

“Learn fortitude and toil from me, my son,

Ache of true toil. Good fortune learn from others.”

II.

Ultrasound images of my heart.

That it moves and moves

and then moves again,

plump muscle

shuddering, laboring

to make up for one bad valve.

Spots in the ocean

where nothing lives

and yet there is movement,

water moving.

I stand in the river

watching an osprey

slide through the air

ten feet above the water.

I hear those wings.

III.

Eleven years of loving  
can't just vanish. I have photographs.  
I have facts. "Happy Birthday  
Dady" scribbled on a card.

How easy to sit at a desk  
and not see the full moon  
through the window.

IV.

Trout with a slashed back,  
slipped from the osprey's talon  
and fell to that lucky landing  
in the creek's waiting water  
where it thrashed about,  
calmed, lingered beneath  
the deep cut bank,  
and rose for the evening hatches  
a few days after,  
and weeks later,  
took my orange woolly bugger  
and leaped  
completely out of the water.

On the far bank, a muskrat  
struggles and does a forties-flick-gangster's fall,  
some Bogart  
pirouette into the creek where it splashes  
and sinks. "Rattlesnake,"

my friend says, and I nod  
and stare at where the ripple  
swirls into the current

and think about sinking bones.

v.

The court acknowledges the petitioner's long involvement with \_\_\_\_\_'s life and sincerely hopes that the parties involved will have the generosity and wisdom to honor that relationship.

Do not blame the wind  
that scatters apple blossoms  
ruthlessly. Allow that flowers  
desire farewell blessings  
before their time has come.

vi.

The children in the bouncy castle  
fly through the air  
when I throw them  
and don't get hurt  
because they do not fear  
their landing.

vii.

I carry a lock of his hair for months,  
a scrap of T-shirt, a baby tooth,  
the tiny cushioned spoon he ate from,  
a diaper pin with a blue plastic stork,  
the quilted blanket he slept with, his first steps,  
hands clutching my fingers, the long hours  
when his fever spiked through the night,

the first shoe he ever wore, a locket with a toddler photo,  
his first day of school, his first baseball game,  
his first broken bone, his dreams.

VIII.

“There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear.”

There is no bell  
to end the hours  
when cedars and peaks  
scratch the sky's belly.  
No garden,  
but sometimes, wildflowers.  
Sometimes, fish holding against  
the river's current.  
Sometimes, deer  
on the other shore  
stand still  
for a moment,  
then hunch to their grazing.

IX.

Fishing in the desert creek,  
a few days after the hearing,  
I find bones, steer skulls  
with round sockets for horns,  
and step on three rattlesnakes,  
nearly grab a fourth  
when climbing a steep bank.  
The snakes were sluggish, though,  
late spring when the temperatures  
in the desert dipped into the thirties  
at night. Only one rattled,  
and the rain of the previous days

made the fishing terrible, water brown  
and swift. I didn't get a bite  
and drove to the empty house,  
his clothes still hanging in a closet.

x.

*Ready or not*

*here I come—*

There was a boy there was a father

There is a rib cage

There is a heart

There is a boy

There is

an afternoon in Memphis, playing chase, a tag-like game where I  
growl and laugh and run around the playground, his giggling, then  
both of us giggling and roaring, and I catch him and then he gets  
away and climbs to the top of the jungle gym where he looks at me  
with worry, and I know that the game is on break, that this is real,  
and I walk beneath him and he doesn't pause: he jumps into my  
arms, did you hear me, he jumps, and I catch him—