

The Domestic Bestiary

by Clara Bush Vadala

Here, a dog scrapes paint off the melting door
and my dad, beating the neighbors home, pulls
a black lab from the smoke; tindered by drier lint.

Here, the house is gone, the old wood fort broken
down and hauled away. Next door, ugly new Victorian
looms; juts its mint green walls up out of stonework.

Here, a snake whips through the chain-link, my dad
grabs its tail, pulls it free from the fence. It slides
onto our porch from his hands, we touch its back.

Here, my dad holds it behind the jaw so we won't
be bitten. The snake folds its skull. My dad relocates
her behind the house to eat the mice underneath it.

Here, a dog is buried in the backyard, tombstone:
a stack of bricks to keep the other one from digging
her up. She had been missing for days; we loved her.

Here, down the street, a tarantula waltzes out
from under the church. He lives in the bushes.
He crawls on our hands and arms if we let him.

Here, a toad croaks nearby, close like a gunshot;
We grab him, he pees on my dad's shoe, trying
to wiggle out from between our grasping fingers.

Here, a few lizards live in a fish tank in the bathroom
until we find a female of their kind outside somewhere,
bigger, stronger, and wild, and she leads them all free.

Here, a parakeet flies into a window and starts living
behind it, so we catch him and set him a cage indoors.
Eventually we give him away, he lives a long time, there.

Here, years later, there are no animals for a time,
but a cat who goes in and out, hides outside, up
in the trumpet vines. He is terribly allergic to fleas.

Here, a squirrel ran out of the attic at Christmas,
across the back of the couch, and everyone jumped
up to usher him out the front door and locked it.

Here, geckos and their translucent skins wither
in the sun, overtaken by ants, or they slip between
the doorcracks and up the wall, into the dark.

Here, a snake falls into the bedroom, or comes up
from the floorboards, who knows, but a *thunk*
announced its arrival. My dad saves this one, too.

Here, a neighbor's cat, named Mitch, taunts all
the animals of this street, he is an orange tabby
and nobody owns him, not even the wilderness.

Here, the old white house sinks and creases into itself
like a well-worn shoe, and all of the animals come and go,
each one, like the last of its kind, the house awash in them.

Here, later, I find a snake in a bird net, twisted and cut.
A snake skeleton in the same net last week. I cut him
free, hold him like my dad did, let him slither away.