

It was never death that scared me, not really.
It was eternity. Taken either by sin or by savior,
would mean living forever, trapped with no end.
Everyone around me knew it was the truth. They knew,
and nobody could think too hard about it.
Didn't the hellfire ever stop feeling hot?
Didn't the angel's voices ever tire?
Why did everyone at church stop singing,
and file out when the sermon was done,
but the idea of standing, forever, in worship,
didn't strike a dissonant chord in their hearts?
How did they know?

When I was too old to be seen crying,
my brother shot his first finch in the garden.
"It was eating all the sunflower seeds."
Like we were going to use them anyways.
The whole family was there, some holiday,
I was almost caught up in the excitement,
all of us crowding around the broken thing,
while our big cousin patted him on the back,
and my brother looked so proud he might cry.
And I saw the bird, with its chest folded in like paper,
and less than a rivulet of bright blood leaking from it.

I cried. I knew that I shouldn't have,
it would never earn me sympathy, not in that house.
I saw the bird and my chest stung, the pain of eternity,
and I couldn't stop the tears.
Winnie didn't know what happened,
but she saw a boy who was too old to be crying,
and a family too hardened to care.
She took me by the shoulder and I cried on hers,
We were both too old for me to sit on her lap,
so I just leaned while she sat rooted in the kitchen,
and we were both in everyone's way.

She was from the dust of Oklahoma,
and the wild foothills of the Sierras.

She had wrung the neck of a thousand chickens,
and she would have shot a finch if it needed doing.

She frowned at me, "Sometimes those things happen."
No criticism, no babying, just the truth for a boy old enough to hear it.
"But why?" I cried into her neck.

"Everything dies, honey."

I had to ask, I had to know. "Will the finch go to heaven?"
And she knew what I was really asking, why I was really crying.

And while the kitchen was scowling around us,
and my uncles were laughing on the couch,
and my brother and my cousin tried to shoot another bird,
She hugged me tighter and she whispered in my ear,
so only I could hear her,
so only we could have the truth,
the one nobody else could handle, or think too hard about.

"I don't know, honey, I just don't know."
And she held me tighter than I thought she had the muscles for,
And I was never afraid of eternity again.