

Waiting for Cranes

You'll sit and watch for hours,
days, before you see them.
You've been known to turn

to oracles to help you read the sky,
like Jean, a docent at the Sacramento
preserve, who's set up tripods

on its mud divides, and promises
the sandhill cranes will come by sunset,
though she can't say

where. You've walked all day
around the delta, plumbing its archival
depths, through places

where Chinese laborers lived
separately, working
the agricultural miracle, in wooden towns

they built but weren't allowed to own.
Years of stooping waist-deep
in the wetland in the heat

moving mud for levees to turn flood plains
into plenty. In the old saloon, displayed
above a dusty abacus:

a painting of two cranes,
arched necks encircling
the ideographs for *luck*.

Some folks believed
the cranes were harbingers
of fortune, their huge flocks

reinventing hope
as the valley slowly wrung out
into fruit trees, rice, asparagus,

the native oaks parched
and probing downward. Some
turn or wish has led you

to this point--alone
on a park bench,
waiting. You squint

into the rusting sun, at trees
shabby from years of drought,
reclaimed ponds boiling with tadpoles.

At last, a thin *scree* in the distance.
They pop through the near dark:
the cranes float in by hundreds

as you watch each bird turn flame—
slim wick swiped by red
and bottomed by a burst

of brightness--flicker
of the day that's gone,
light for those approaching.
