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## A Problem of Taxonomy

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## Greenberg: A Problem of Taxonomy

### A PROBLEM OF TAXONOMY

Miriam Bird Greenberg

In the low dusk  
swallows swoop from their bearded  
    nests in the eaves. The evening  
primroses are in bloom,  
    fragile vining flowers, and with them  
the children have given themselves Hitler  
    mustaches yellow with pollen,  
are out by the mailbox  
    doubled over in laughter at the goodness  
of their good idea. Soon everyone  
    will be indoors, scratching at chigger bites and elbowing  
each other out of the way  
    for the bathroom. Here we have a little problem  
with taxonomy, I tell the kids. Only postmen  
    can have facial hair like that anymore, I tell them. Credulous,  
I take them for a walk. I point out  
    the swaybacked barn where a mountain lion hissed at me  
from the hayloft, the farm where a certain 4-Her  
    had a sheep which gave  
birth to two-headed progeny. Like the forked tongue  
    of the snake, the split body of  
a bifurcated carrot, all classed together  
    in the 19th century *wunderkammer*,  
again we encounter problems  
    of taxonomy.

The next night  
everyone is setting off Black Cats  
    in the abandoned motorhome,  
dislodging the night-roosting  
    chickens perched low and fat  
in the branches of a nearby tree. Towards

home I lure them, tell them the one  
about my grandmother with the armful of sparklers  
back before fire had been discovered,  
and this was also when there wasn't a Fourth of July  
and we all used the irregular Gregorian calendar  
which skipped days.

She lit a green genie sparkler which flared  
up lucent, only out flew an emerald  
spark that caught the corner  
of one bedsheet snapping in the breeze  
inched, ignited, outwards  
like a map of westward expansion and ran, clothesline  
twine its fuse, till the whole line was eaten up with flames  
smoldering into the dusk. Out howled the volunteer  
fire department and pumped  
water from the pond, but  
too late:

Our clothes were burned  
up, ashes, char, and sack cloth,  
and our bedsheets too. That winter we slept inside  
a cougar to stay warm, or sometimes just a goat  
though cougars were warmer. A cougar, the kids wanted  
to know, disbelieving the whole  
thing. Behind me the old motorhome is engulfed  
in flame, and here the children mutter among themselves  
twirling the tips of their moustaches  
which have grown verdant and luxurious  
over time.