FLAG OF POLAND

1

We enter

or have always been

in this room

whose corners congeal

only when we look for them.

An experiment is in progress,

but it is uncertain

if we are in control

or just observers.

A woman stands quietly with me.

Before us

spotlit on a platform of gray stone,

with fossils in it,

the soft cream coil of a ptarmigan or swan.

It can barely lift its head.

From the dark rises the taut and killing

head of a red snake,

but it's also weak

and falls back on the bird's contour feathers.

I see the snake's tongue flicker

and we sense

its intent

to strike

and sink fangs into the bird's neck.

It would do so instantly,

except that both are cold. But we

do not feel the cold.

And now we remember,

or always knew,

that we

or others behind some partition

can tune this cold.

There is ice under the platform.

The snake changes to a lizard,

rears up, falls back

closer to the snow goose's neck.

The bird only swivels its head,

eyes on the red.

the lizard is now a lion totem

jammed into the slim snake skin.

Its claws are pressing out.

There will be blood.

The reds will clash.

I can't stop it.

The snake-lion pounces.

2

Men caught me in the rushes

and cut my wings. They think

innocence into my whiteness.

I must play their role. But

oh this quiet radiating cold

penetrates the down, my skin,

worse than the blizzards I

hid through on my island. This

cold, it is his way of making

me weak and submissive. And

the danger of that red weaving

sting, too close to my warmth.

Why do they want me killed?

Let me move. It is his dream,

but she looks at me. They can

turn the cold off, and the snake

of their Garden of Eden will

kill me.

I was a red wave over roots

and stones, and I took the scuttling

brown vermin of the forest floor.

When I had need of them. Not

in fear, like men with boots

and sticks beating the bushes

for me, afraid of my image

within them, afraid of themselves.

But now they have forced me through

some crack of time, willed me

next to this life in white feathers.

Whose life — hers, theirs together?

I must reach the bird's head — the man wants

me to, even if I feel no hunger.

But then he sends me the essence

of winter, to pull me back

the vaguely remembered

creeping in under rocks, to curl

on dry leaves in my own circle

of near sleep. And when I

cannot resist the cold, he changes

me, as he cannot change himself.

A snake-lizard-lion pupa

I rise to strike.

I am the silent watcher,

the woman moving in and out

of the shadow he creates. He

makes me the perfect bystander,

with the semblance of control.

He doesn't let me cry,

or say this experiment

must end. I look good

in white. I am afraid.

3

The cold slows but cannot stop

the final weave and snap.

Blood drops down the feathers,

as little absorbed as water would be.

And the bird's circle unfolds

to show its feathered feet.

I half wake, toss

to redream that ending.

4

The snow goose wakes,

it is not her dream.

She rises, fluffs herself.

There is a smell not of the tundra,

which makes her move out of the light.

But the snake follows,

quick, ready to jump...

5

The lion metamorphoses again, moves in.

I call to the engineers in the booth

to turn on more cold, to stop him.

They are slow,

talk of response time.

There is no time.

There is too much time.

The snake-lion kills

me, alone, into the morning.