

Great White Heron

She is a ghost of her former bluegray
self, cautiously feeling
her way through mangrove
roots twisted upon themselves
like watersnakes held motionless in the wood.
I want to say she is a pale
Cleopatra, but then she calls—
scroawk scroawk—and one cry
reminds me she is queen only of marsh.

*

The cut of her eyes
is sharp as her tawny beak, quick
as the speared mullet she brings up
gasping through blood-red gills.
In one swift movement the fish
is flipped and swallowed headfirst—
to the surprise
of a thieving tropicbird
rising abruptly
before facing that spear.

*

When the heat of late summer stales,
she slips deeper into the shade
of a bald cypress stand, and stares me
into submission.

And I step toward her,
lifting my reed-thin legs
through the braided roots.
Now I am spreading my dusty wings, coming
upon her as she raises that sharpened spear.
We twist our smooth necks
like branches beneath the waterline.
We move, eyes motionless
to the slow rhythm of rising waves.
And we dance, wings extended
to the reckless wind...

*

Waking, the great white heron
spreads her elegant wings
across the bay—
in the low cry that stills the air,
we vanish.

Simmons B. Buntin