

Self-Portrait with Magpie
By Matthew Wimberley

—after Phil Levine

1.

Already having stolen
the eye, the quick burst
from the juniper, I listen
as you call out
against the empty sky.
Conventicle of thieves—
sometimes I say
a line of poetry to myself
I know I've heard before
& make it mine. At least
at twenty-three that
was the game—living
on kindness and dust
and an income like wind,
which came and went
as I'd walk the way
from West Fourth
up through Washington
Square, past hustlers
touching the black manes
of knights, and I'd sit
just beyond the edge
of the sycamores'
shadows, and watch even
my life go by. *Go*
West, Whitman wrote,
& out near Taos, twelve years ago,
I saw my first magpie
who also saw his or her
first me. It was
Levine who said someone
told him magpies could talk—
that they'd steal
a ring left out
on a Formica table.
By then, my father's rings
were gas money
and it would be years
before I was married
and rose in the early light
for the first time
as a father, and so

there was nothing more
the bird could take—
though I must
have offered ash,
the glint of a corkscrew,
sweat on a flat palm.

2.

I breathe in the thick perfume
of pinyon this morning
until the last of winter
burns on my tongue,
looking for
a white and blue
flash of wings,
and hear you
cry over the wind,
the light
scintillating through the reeds
on the lake's surface.
Southern Colorado
Four Two Three Two Four
the palindrome days
and the road to Cortez.
Unlike before, my offerings
are lined up
on the table before me—
this pen and all the ink
darkening time
so I might write
my daughter's name
and get down the boat
she drew last week,
the smudge of blue
for waves it cut through,
a white surf,
and the wave like
the curve of Sally's
stomach, growing
towards late summer
and the sound
unlike any voice
before, a heartbeat
like a deep space
object but also the dark
of space, the sky last night—
if you could see it
like I did—dust

rising against
the moon
one way
and the red
glow of Betelgeuse
the other, over the mesa's
silhouette, and the man
who pointed
his headlights right at me,
asked me to leave—
& I've taken the snap
of it and the idle
of his black Ford,
the crunch
of gravel
on the unlit road
which could take me
anywhere and make me
whole or ragged—like you
or like sorrow or laughter
waiting when I turn
over the cracked earth
where I've gone ahead
without anyone's permission
& done what I had to do—
somewhere barbed wire
rattling on a worn fence
in a field I wanted
to walk through, something
you'd admire and want
all for yourself. Juniper
rustling when I look
the other way