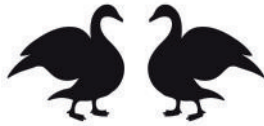


MARK VOGEL

## THEY GATHER IN CROWDS



In dew-covered light I hover over the eggs  
and worry about the evil eye.  
Mama duck, glued to the nest, plucks down for a bed of  
warmth.  
What threat could pierce her ferocious instincts?

For thirty-three egg laying days  
no rats, coons, hawks, minks appear.  
For thirty-six mornings she covers eggs  
with feathers before bathing in the pond and returning  
to meditative sitting.

On the thirty-seventh day each egg cracks within three  
hours  
and fourteen yellow and brown ducklings emerge,  
curious, and kicking under mama's warmth.  
If they survive this first hour, surely they will live  
forever.

"Be prepared for mortality," Lysiak warns.  
Two ducklings push shells aside then crumple  
as siblings walk over stiffening forms.  
Rats steal two in silent dark.  
A brazen black snake four feet long swallows one.  
A possum dissects two one night, then another the next.

Marauders outside the gates thirsting for young life—  
the word is always out.  
Still, six new ducks grow, learning to fly within months.  
Surviving the first season—they are hard to get rid of.  
Outside the window they gather in crowds  
demanding grain.