Faith

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
—Emily Dickinson

And when it flits off, as it surely will,
there is, at least, the graceful consolation:
a miracle of needle-fine bone and pinion
that will home in one bright, mocking dawn.

But faith, well, that’s another thing altogether—
no flutter, no chirp, no mighty wheeling
in the sky. Notice that the Apostle, so sure,
said the greatest, the best in this wide world

is love—he shied away from faith; a slippery
fish there in the garden pond and out there,
at the seam of sea and heaven. In Japan,
fishers take cormorants—things with feathers—
on their daily sails. The squawking black birds
drive for the elusive fish. Hope’s sharp beak
trained on faith’s glittery scales. Oh, I’ve seen
this faith take up with the wrong kind: it puffs up

the warlord’s chest as he fires into the market stalls,
I have seen it in the hatred-heated hearts of men
who know they will not be alone when they hurl
flaming rags and angry words—that’s faith for you.

I’ve seen its wild gazelle leaps and its clumsy falls.
And I’ve seen it blaze when nothing else will do.
Faith is the moth-nibbled thing, forgotten;
it is a during the night song. It is the heave
of the limping mother who wheels her child
to a spring of holy water. It is the slave who hears
an absence where there was the clanking
of leg iron and the choral baying of bloodhounds.

Faith is a teeming favela; it is the explorer’s charts.
Faith is the girl-seamstress’ fingers and the innocent’s
packs of two-cent gum. It’s Sunday starch, the curl
of incense smoke; it’s the wedding prayer. Faith
is the bricklayer’s smiling at the French nun’s
dream of books and desks. Faith is also a palm
of crumbled clay and ash a century later. Faith
is your breath on my neck when I return home
empty-souled—when I need to slide my hand
into that wound. Faith is the minutes, the days
and decades after you say Yes, yes, forever
and ever. Here, now, faith is our burning vow.

—Pablo Miguel Martinez

Carriers of the Mission
Maintaining Faith