

CHARLIE CLARK

Poem with No Moral at Its End

It is in the way the boy helped bury
what his friend said was a box
of newborn vipers, the box, taped

around the lid, held in his hands
as his friend spaded up a hole
in the corner of a field, the box

held only in the slightest tips
of his fingers for fear of venomous razors
piercing through and killing him.

It is in what the boy imagined within,
the way he wanted to loose the tape
and see the lives tumbling, *blind*,

he thinks, if they're really so young,
to see the fangs that would gleam
were they not in the perfect dark

of the box. It is in the way he thinks
his friend came to have this box of snakes,
that he found the mother's secret spot

at just the moment they broke up
out of the ground, and gathered them
to thrust them back into the earth,

so no other child might be bit.
Riki Tikki Tavi, he thinks,
the serpent insidious. Yet aching

to think of them, children
in their own right, laid down now
in the hole, covered, left to die,

his friend and he hurrying away
into the end of the day.
It is in the way all through

his family's dinner the boy thinks
only of the bodies curled like
the knots of pasta upon his plate,

slow, cool, and dying, that he helped
put them there, buried alive,
so when the meal is over,

he rushes back and in the darkness
scoops through the loose dirt
until his knuckles tap the wet

bands of tape that hold the lid,
the ends of tape flopping,
unbound by the wet of the earth,

and as he pulls the whole package
back into the night, the lid comes off,
and he drops the box and steps back

to see, what, three small rabbits all dead,
one with a tongue slid odd
from its mouth, no fangs or venom,

just a tongue. It is in the way
he repeats the story now,
saying that as he opened up the grave

he was sure the snakes would flay
him to death or else something like
a gang of spirits would fly out of the box,

that when he saw the rabbits,
he only wished they would disappear,
leave the box empty, untransformed.