

Still Life with Bird

1. AFTER THE DIVORCE

In 1968,
a gift from father to son:
a songbird, flashes of yellow in folded plumage,
preserved for a science museum
accompanied by a typewritten display card
which I (younger daughter)
couldn't read yet.
Mom slid the bird into
a cloudy plastic bag with its card,
then concealed it
under papers, forms,
letters, certificates
in a drawer, second from the bottom,
in her dresser.
Once I heard my grampy snap:
"What the hell kind of present was that?"

Whenever Mom napped on the couch,
talked on the phone,
ignored,
I'd grunt open that drawer,
pry aside the tomb of paperwork
and lift out the bag, liberate
the bird.
Softer in my hands than I could ever believe
(I'd forget, one time to the next),
stick legs, gnarled feet, stilled beak,
fronds of wings that I ached to spread
(but left them clenched tight).
In the bag was the scholarly description:
mere hieroglyphs, bird footprints.
What more could they tell me
than what I held here?
Dread sound of footsteps, before I was ready.
My heart would beat wildly. I'd
fumble the songbird into its cruel bag,
back into the crevasse of papers,
shove and cram the heavy drawer shut.

2. EVENING GROSBEAK (*COCCOTHRAUSTES VESPERTINUS*)

*An irruptive winter finch
over much of North America,
evening grosbeaks are
gregarious, nomadic,
and travel in raucous flocks.
During the winter, they are
irregularly common,
sometimes appearing—
they devour copious amounts.
Stout-bodied, with a short tail.
Plumage characteristics
make males
virtually unmistakable.
They are an erratic migrant
in winter;
the occurrence of their flocks
is unpredictable.¹*

3. ON THE TELEPHONE

Brother, you remember
the bird. Its actual name.
And where it came from.
“Only thing he ever gave me
except his habits,”
you tell me.
Every night, you say,
as you bring your daughter
to her crib, you pass
a poster of North American songbirds
and glimpse that still-life drawing—
evening grosbeak—
its yellow flashing past.
Thirty-six years it took us
to talk about this bird
that lived in the cages
of our hearts.

In 1967, you say,
Mom, you, and I

¹ Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University

took a black train on a snowy night
from Mattawamkeag, Maine
to Montréal
“to see Dad,” you remind me.
Age three, I did not remember that—
just the alien sleeper car,
curled up in a swaying bunk
hurtling into darkness
while, behind us, worried grandparents
got back into a big Buick
and drifted home.
Next day, the novelty of a different kitchen
(we stayed with friends),
then itchy scarf around my face, against
fierce Canadian chill. Boots crunching snow.
Later, sound sleep in a softer bed than home.

Dad took you to the natural history museum
at McGill. Glass cases. Scores of birds,
small mammals.
The smell of stale survival,
suspended animation.
You gawked and wondered
if this was what you'd been missing:
this father-son outing, stiff as starch.
Dad delivered you back to Mom.
We left Montréal.

Tonight we're left to wonder
was he sober then? or his former barfly self,
smug in semi-dark, befriending barmaids
and running up a tab?

4. ELEGY

Mom and Dad are dead.
The grosbeak's at rest
in its bag in a drawer.
My drawer.
Sometimes I take it out
and show it to my kids.
Usually, they flinch.