Bird Passing

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Bird Passing

My ears hurt. And I read a book
about the passenger pigeon, thousands in a single tree
and the tiny man in the engraving, outstretched
as a beggar or a saint looking up—
extcept his rifle and his leer and his 50 lb. net.

_The turn of the century_: a massive
groan, years on years rolling over like some
sleepy drunk. The dream of the past
is addictive. My grandparents
down there in their 20s, late teens, thrilled
as anyone to write _three_
new digits. . . . I’m sick

about the passenger pigeon. Once, in the Field Museum
I stopped before a few last
real ones stuffed high and low in their
phony, life-sized tree
behind the glass. Late eighteen hundred
and something. Not long. Maybe
20 years in the countdown, the museum bag slipping
over their heads, not
some kid fooling around
with a blanket. I tried to believe
in their sweetness, lovely anything
doomed. I can’t lie. That red eye could
pierce an eye. It was glass, sure. But even
books make that stare famous, the sleaziest

trapper, the sort who’d crush each
head by hand under the net, hundreds—even he
would turn away. Clearly these
were stragglers. No longer monstrous clouds, thick strata
upon strata of them passing overhead—8 or 9 or 14 hours' dark, horses trembling in harness, guns raised to quell whatever astonishment. One shot, it's said 300 would fall, stunned as stone in planted fields or open meadow. And mostly left. That's the blistering fact—left there, bone and feather and failing muscle, thousands and thousands of others airborne, for the moment. Eventually hundreds of others. Then tens. Then the ones in the glass case I stared at, who stared back. Cotton batting in there, and dust. I keep rubbing my ears at night, like the baby books all say is a sign of an infant's infection. Because, poor things, they can't tell you. But past the faint, witless buzzing I make out dark's quiet, open window, rustling of leaves. Another turn is coming up. I can hear the roar of years falling, a crushing, hopeless momentum about to slip into whatever's next. I had a dream one night. The passenger pigeon's loves were vast and particular—the great beech forests of the middle west; the endless stands of white oak and black oak, chestnut, river birch and elm—nearly all of it gone. The scent of cumin called them down, roses, coriander, caraway, anise. And the salty snails, the perfect barely visible workaday ant. A litany of things sweet and small—huckleberry and gooseberry, crowberry, elderberry, the cranberry, the currant, myrtle with its tiny bloom. This
I didn’t dream but drifted toward, the way
a room dims in twilight and the eyes
give up and turn
backward toward the brain. Most
marked bird, shimmer of feather, red there,
pale blue. I tried

its original names, half-whispering o-mi-mi, the way
the Algonquian did. Then me-me, for all
the lost Chippewa. O-me-me-oo, for the Potawatomi.
Omimiw, for the Cree. Jah’oow’san’on,
for the Seneca, who sang the bird in dance,
in gesture. Ka-ko-ee, said the Blackfoot.
Ori’te, the Mohawk. Pachi, the Choctaw.
Poweatha, the Shawnee
repeated through dry woods or dank. It was
a kind of dove I saw
as my ears throbbed on distantly,
thin, colliding music. Not the dove who mourns
every dawn in the grass, whose black spot
accuses us. But the cousin who
stayed behind, and in the old engravings still
darkens whole slow pages
with its flight.