1999

Birds of America

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Sandra Meek

BIRDS OF AMERICA

Audubon obviously had to kill in order to paint accurately, and the missionary urge itself to collect and preserve was a form of homage to the mysterious world that man did not create.
—Ben Forkner, Selected Journals and Other Writings: John James Audubon

The storm’s milk spine steadily ratcheting downwards through pines’ splayed fists, last year’s failed nests, the static of rain off

and on all evening. How fluent landscape becomes certain weathers: Winter no longer a northern abstraction, foreground

empty, the past bristles mythic hedges, gleaming clippers; all dreams move south between surge and making distance count. The ocean unspools.

Not the speck made the pearl but orbiting obsession; not philanthropy that parcelled continents to aquariums of two-dimensional fish, exotic blue cells of the original lake. Another typology of cryogenics, science of partial preservation in double-elephant folio stacked in doctors’ offices

We shot thirty Partridges—1 Wood Cock—27 Grey Squirrels—a Barn Owl—a Young Turkey Buzzard
Why would the future want to reclaim us? Flying, the heron was a blue-grey smudge. Death supplied the details—dark eyebrow streak, red eye—
(Fastforward to cameras snaring whole
stanzas of starlings, bald eagles in end-rhyme majesty,
a lake’s canvas of sacred ibis. Whole flights of taxonomy
freed of stalled bodies, the third
dimension of regret.

Let’s start a collection. Dismantle a migration.
Pin butterflies to a velvet cave in parallel
brilliance, orange-black alphabet mimicking
evolution, a dimming of lights.
Let’s talk about romance. Candles, flowers, pressed
duck for dinner. A flutter of fairy wings before the book
snaps shut. The head on ice. Let’s unload the souvenirs—coins,
buttons, the frozen section: The microscope sliding living
fragments to focus

and an Autumnal Warbler as Mr. A. Willson as being pleased to denominate the
Young of the Yellow Rump Warbler—this was a Young Male in beautiful plumage
for the season and I Drew it . . . its Stomach was filled with the remaines of Small
Winged Insects and 3 Seeds of Some Berries, the names of which I could not determine—

In the dictionary, a maple leaf thins with weight, with years, autumn
pressed on pause while the planetary spit turns seasons
out the window. A paper towel to keep language
from migrating to color, from interpreting the leaf’s
hold to rain to particular etymologies.

The broken mirror catches

snatches of a face, moon-manipulation of light coaxing
moth wings to smoke: flight evaporated to a silver pin.
This party’s for the aesthetics of extinction, phonetic capture
of the partial. The word *silence*: Killing to preserve.
And the body: stacked chalk. Winter rain
stranding pearls of ice in the trees Audubon tipped coffins from

_When I Saw these Birds the Weather was Boisterous since fair
have not seen one—_