

THE NATURE OF THINGS

*I do not know which to prefer, the beauty of inflections or the beauty
of innuendoes, the blackbird whistling or just after.*
Wallace Stevens

She said, *Sit down.*

She said, *We need to talk.*

She said, *There's things I've been meaning to tell you.*

She said, *There's been things.*

She said, *Female infidelity occurs in songbirds.*

She said, *In every songbird.*

She went on, *Female infidelity occurs in thrushes and Western sandpipers.*

Her voice grew excited, *In rockfowls, brown creepers, and house wrens.*

She voice was cracking, *In tanagers, American dippers, and horned larks.*

She hushed, *In every songbird.*

Barely a whisper, *Every one.*

Once she had stopped talking, after she stepped outside to smoke, I rifled through her books.

Her books were piled on our bedroom floor and atop our coffee tables.

Her books laid under the kitchen table where we ate silent meals.

Books hid in her closet beneath hanging red dresses she hadn't worn for me in years.

She had started to wear those dresses again.

There were books about the evolution of birds, books about their classifications.

Books about bird calls and coffee table books filled with paintings of birds.

Books and books about checking off every species.

I read each book because I needed to know what she wouldn't tell me of songbirds.

I read each book to understand what she mumbled about songbirds as she fell asleep.

I read each book though she whispered of songbirds during our morning lovemakings.

The next day she hemmed me between the table and the dishwasher and said, *We need to talk.*

I latched onto the refrigerator.

She said, *There's more.*

She jumped back into it, *Cheating occurs in starlings and tits.*

She said, *Cheating occurs in berrypeckers and sunbirds and honeycreepers.*

She grew angry, *Even in flowerpeckers.*

She was enraged and pointing at me, *They're your favorites.*

She said *Favorites* again, letting it hover like a hummingbird over a flower.

She had watched me in the mornings as I watched flowerpeckers feed from her tulips.

She would be behind me, naked but for a robe—undone—watching me watching them.

I loved the way flowerpeckers flew, and I loved the way flowerpeckers landed.

I loved the way flowerpeckers reminded me of her and the way they reminded me of me.

She repeated, softer, like a pitying parent, *Even in flowerpeckers.*

I felt incriminated as if I had eaten from the wrong bud.

After she finished speaking, after she let me flitter away, I flew back roads to the library.

I parked the car on the edge of town to avoid the traffic, the city noises.

I walked tree lined streets and stared up at sycamores—their branches bare.

Not a single bird fluttered to or fluttered fro.

At the library I searched back sections I had never visited before.

I had never needed those sections.

Before, she had taught me everything I needed to know about birds.

But not now—not now.

In the back sections, I found dusty books that hadn't been checked out since 1986.

I found books with perfect spines and books with cryptic marginalia.

I found books with glossy photos and books with pen-and-ink drawings.

From these books, I learned a million things.
I learned that songbirds give off the appearance of monogamy.
The appearance of fatherbirds and motherbirds together raising bald and helpless chicks.
The appearance of familial love.
Appearance and reality differ as much as arms and wings.
Red lips and curved beaks.

The next day I sat on the porch.
By noon she found me staring at scythed fields and leafless sycamores.
She said, *There's more.*
I wanted to hear nothing of songbirds but she spoke of DNA.
I wanted to hear nothing but she spoke of freshening the familial line.
I wanted to hear nothing but she spoke of genetic variability.
I stood up from my chair, ready to leave.
I threw my hands into the air, almost into the branches of the trees.
Only then did she talk of *It* (*All of it*, she said) being *The nature of things*.
I stopped listening, tired of her flitteringly mad ideas.
Tired of her books piled like walls across our carpets.
Tired to her books piled like nests that I never landed in.
Or if I did land in, she'd fly off, leaving me to tend the nest.
She repeated, emphatically, *It is the nature of things*.
I was tired of the paintings of ducks crooked on the hallway walls.
Tired of the spoons with quails on the end clanging against dirty mugs.
Tired of the way she pecked at her food.
Tired of her chirping whistles as she showered.
Tired of sitting in our living room, staring at the out of doors while she showered.
Watching birds (calm and unaware) crash into our living room window.
Watching those birds fly all the way over the rainbow.
Watching those birds fly all the way to kingdom come.
Tired of telling her about kingdom come after her showers.
Showing her the marks on the glass, *Here*.

Hearing her say, *Please, for me.*
I would pick up those birds.
Cradle them in my cupped palms like the littlest things of love.

After a week of silence, she whispered, *Female infidelity is an insurance policy.*
She added, *For songbirds, it's about finding the strongest sperm.*
She grew louder, *It's about protecting the species.*

She yelled, *The species.*
She kept singing this song, *It's about finding the best mate.*
I was crying, sobbing, couldn't stop, could not stop.
As quiet as the chirp of a newborn, she repeated, *Finding the best mate.*
She never said what I knew she meant, *It's about all the nectar the female can taste.*

What is there to do as she speaks about the infidelity of female songbirds?
What is there to do besides walk away?

What is there to do but head toward fields that have lain fallow all year?
These feet muddy, these legs yearning to fly.

I walk—I walk.
As I walk, I search the sky for harriers and falcons searching for field mice.
I search cottonwoods for gray jays and ravens searching for things to steal.
I search rough and untended brush for grouse and quail too stupid to search for a thing.
While I walk, I can't help but think about monogamy.
How monogamy is simply—and beautifully—one female (her) and one male (me?).
How monogamy is those two reproducing exclusively with the other.
But maybe monogamy is a love that can settle on a branch.

She never said anything like that.
Her birds, they never sang this song.