

The Infidelity of Songbirds

Sean Prentiss

I.

She said, / *Female infidelity occurs in Western sandpipers and in / thrushes, /
in rockfowls and Kentish plovers, / in tanagers and shorebirds— / in all of them.*
She spoke as if the science of mating made her words / easier.

II.

She went on (counting on her fingers): / *Female infidelity occurs /
in starlings and tits, / in berrypeckers and sunbirds, / in honeycreepers /
and flowerpeckers. / Your favorites. / Even in flowerpeckers.*

III.

With songbirds, there is an appearance of monogamy— /
of fatherbirds / and motherbirds / together / raising helpless chicks. /
But appearance and reality differ / as much as arms and wings, / lips and beaks.

IV.

She went on: / *There's more about songbirds.* / She talked something /
about genetic variability, DNA, / freshening / the familial line, /
about "it" / (*All of it*, she said) / being the nature of things.

V.

When pressed, she said, *It's an insurance policy, / it's about finding the strongest /
sperm, / protecting the species.* / Then quieter, / whispered, / *Finding /
the best mate.* / She never said, / *It's about all they can taste. / That nectar.*

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VI.

What is monogamy / but one female (her) / and one male (you?) / reproducing /
exclusively with the other. / Or maybe monogamy / is a love that settles /
on a branch. / She never spoke anything like that. / Her birds, they never sang / that song.



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