

Marianne Boruch

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—
except 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
phoney, 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.