

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 beautifull 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: light 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—*