

1.

When I first flew south
I was brown with white wings
And I lived above the timberline.

In winter, white with black tails,
I frequented the tundra,
Quiet farms, yards, and barren hills
And loved willow scrub the best.

If you'd sat down in a sheltered valley
I might have called to you
As I did in those days.
A deep and raucous holler,
Had I pebbles in my voice box.

Go-out! Go-out!
Go-back!

Go-back!

2.

The first time I pore over *A Field Guide to the Birds*
I obsess over the ptarmigan, willow and rock. Why,
Here's a sort of grouse shaped like a horn of plenty,
Unremarkable; once I was described as a plain Jane;
Stout, brown, pigeon-like, but lacking what it takes to live in density.
And it makes the sound of a soul leading a body toward fire.

3.

Whip-poor-will

Chimney Swift

Bird that looks like a sail when it flies;

Sounds like a harp when it sings.

The myth I've heard is that the Devil is

Where the birds sing through the night,

In winter white, off a quiet hill

Eclipsed by the willow scrub.

I've heard a big, big ghost

Is who shelters the sheltered valleys.

Truthfully, I'm not for superstition

But if you could change colors,

Could leave when it snowed, could

Fly off the moment you were scared,

There would be a name in the ether

For you.

4.

Despite the ways each bird in Heaven is superior to me
Only I step this far back when needing to look.

As for now, we've all gone: shot, caged, or eaten.
We sit around trying to arrive collectively at something real,
Something about what it meant to live as birds.

One bird says *This is what the wind felt like,*
One says *This is what it felt like for the wind to blow,*
One even says *Here's a sensation similar to the wind.*

But the ptarmigan, the under-bird, the ground-feeder,
The last one being carried off in the teeth of a fox,
Says *Me, I can still feel the wind.*
I can go-back and feel it.

5.

Some nights this winter a great-horned owl was wont to perch outside my bedroom window.
I'd never once see him. But his call, working like boiling water over the ice-thick air,
Caused me several times to think he was right beside me in bed.

The Great-Horned Owl: As large as our largest hawks, and fierce-looking.
So much fiercer than my ptarmigan bird, nights he hooted to me through the glass,
I imagined him sky-stalking, with preternatural foresight, so that the motion of the stars
To him, was as jewels scattering across a floor.

Untrue, but the image struck me nevertheless, because I was smaller than he was.
Because he could see me through the dark, and often told me so.