

Bird Watching

See, I want to tell you
about the crumbs on the windowsill—
or are they coffee grounds,
dark and small,
smearing against the fake wood?--

--well, it doesn't matter.
(You will say it
never matters,
before you sigh,
tap one long finger against your glasses.)

I only want to explain:
our window isn't
clean anymore.

But this is where we saw the birds
suddenly burst together from that tree,
the one with all the red berries,
flinging themselves into the air

as if driven by some foe I could not see
as if the ground would melt their talons
or as if the dirt would cling to their feathers,
pull them beneath the grass.

I said *I would*
never want to be a bird
and you asked
why I wanted to live with my feet on the ground.

One bird fell from the group,
dropped straight down
onto the grass.

I said something about always wanting
a door to close.
You put your hand on my shoulder,
tangled cold fingers into my hair.

The fallen bird's wing

was bent behind her back.
I turned to answer you,
lost her in the grass.

Do you sit here on Sundays now,
while I am away
trying to remember how to love?
Do you eat your pancakes
and watch for her?

I had forgotten her slow hop,
the way she stayed behind.
Or perhaps they left her,
brown feathers half-hidden in green grass.

Last Night

Maybe the world began like this:
a hand,
palm up in the bottom of a basement
a quick gesture to the open window,

where arborvitae roots crawl through the screen
as if we have been hiding
better ground inside,
as if we know how to help them grow.

Three of us, awake,
and someone says something about isolation,
something about surviving the apocalypse
or roaming the stars.

Either way, all of us separated
from the world by that screen,
set apart from everyone sleeping above,
those left outside.

I lean back on the couch--
purple, overstuffed.
Gilded graduation announcements on the table,
gold against the dark wood.

Say I think it's all because we want to be alone--

us and the quiet of the basement:
the muted television,
the roots just tapping,
that vein of water creeping down the wall.

And Julie waves her hand again,
says if we're pretending
let's imagine it's only space.

(We want our families to be alive,
staring up at the sky, imagining
we are that light *no that one*
waiting--we might return.)

Ellie maps out our ship,
blue ink on notebook paper,
five buildings united in air, five people in each.
Tell me who you would take.

Who do you take
when the universe is sprawled at your feet,
when launching means
everyone else will just keep living,
lives spreading out below like roots in good dirt.

Ellie's pen hovers over pale blue lines;
a breeze brushes my neck.
The roots in the window tremble.

Botany Lessons

On the radio, the man who can hold a note
longer than I can hold a breath
sings about fields in Indiana
and hickory trees.

His voice wobbles.

I have lived by his fields
and never seen a hickory.

Unless I did--
unless I, careless,
saw one, all rough bark
(complicated leaves)
and called it an ash,
wondered how it survived those bugs.

My mother's grandmother would have known.

See, once she took the shotgun
from the closet in the laundry room,
propped it on her shoulder,
tried to kill a vulture
sitting on the fence in the shade.

See, *he was looking*
like he knew something
and goddamn
those were her trees,
her nuts rotting in the grass,
her birds hiding in the leaves.

Older

When I get my letter from the graduate school,
my mother tells me about ink on her fingers
and typewriter tape,
stacks of papers crammed into corners,
retreats under golden sycamore leaves.
Whispering dreams to almost-brown grass:
The Star. The Post!

She puts her hands on my arm,
says, *but I got all of you.*
Her cold fingers--
how's that for an inheritance?--
tighten, then release,
move up to stroke my hair.

A callus catches;
I wait for her to untangle the strands.
I'd never give you up.
She frees them without looking,
her eyes on the letter in my hands.
My hair falls against my neck.

Revelation

There is no carpet in the office,
just cool, green tile
so she slips off her shoes,
presses her toes against the ground,
lets the heat from her body slip
into fading linoleum.

She reads the financial report to me,
shakes her hair--
curls bounce in the air

and I look at her shoes--
black leather, shiny,
but worn by the heel.
She has discarded them
like we would discard water bottles at the beach:
empty for a moment
until you need it again.

And for a moment I want to say
I just finally understood prayer--
but that's another lie.

Maybe it's only the kind of prayer
I knew when I was a girl--
hands clasped
like I was holding on to something,
reciting the names of the people I loved
until my father turned out my light

and I, left in the dark,
let the words stop dripping off my lips.
I left them lying there,
a pile by my side,
waiting until morning.