

## Audubon Diptych

### I. *Wherein the Swallows Instruct Us on Pleasure*

Because they daubed with poppy sap the stricken eyes of their young  
& because each thin body, it was believed, contained a bright red stone  
that could honey the word-addled tongue, balm the frenzied brain,

they were restorers, the ancients taught.

And were the restored, too,  
since year after year farmers observed them, just after the autumn frosts,  
plummet single-file, like a bead of pearls, into lakes where they remained

submerged until spring when they'd wing back in dripping columns.  
All of which is no less improbable than Audubon's account  
of the slate-green birds pouring into a sycamore trunk *like bees*

*hurrying into their hive.* The thunder of wings in this slow inhalation –  
for the tree seemed to breathe in bird upon bird – was first matched  
by thunder building behind the Silver Hills, & then was paired, once

he pressed his ear to the bark, with the delicate clamor & scratch  
of each one inching through the hollow. *Those wings,* he imagined,  
*by my lantern's light,* & until his light possessed them, what use

to see them merely thread the air? What use were the half-done sketches  
of his flycatcher, grouse, that for-now unworkable clapper rail beak  
& hearing, instead of their ravishing wing-frenzied stream, jam jars rattling

in a boil? Thus a hired woodsman pries back the bark & allows him  
one night to burrow in.

Who wouldn't want this too? To stand within  
the tree's eight-foot trunk & gaze upon them teeming in rows?

To reach into, as he did, the crushed-quill mat & pluck them from sleep  
& kill – soundlessly, with a kind of care – as many as he could carry?  
*Closing the entrance,* Audubon concludes, *we marched towards Louisville,*

*perfectly elated.*

And despite where his story is hard to believe, no one doubts this joy. For what could have been lacking, that journey home? There was the road's moonlit, moss-webbed oak, seen as if for the first time

& here in his pockets filled-to-bursting, the slender, still-warm forms.

## *II. Resurrection & the Common Merganser*

Before he could restore even one part – tail-plunge, talon-tips sunk into catfish flesh & whatever it is that makes his warbler weightless on the azalea stem – Audubon invariably failed. To make,

as was always his plan, the watercolors' stippled touch return the quick breaths

of each bird. He tried first with a pigeon slung against a barn door, but even if he managed its burnt-orange throat,

he could only render it as it was before him: gangly in a one-legged splay. And before he pummeled it to pieces – humbled, irate – he tried to build a Universal Bird, a manikin of cork & narrow wooden stumps

barely reminiscent of wings, let alone a kind of flight. But life, he believed, could be brushstroked back & he blundered towards nimbler forms.

Aesacus, hidden within another story, can no longer watch

river-water pearl on Hesperia's skin, & so pursues her, lust-driven, through the fields & woods until death reaches for her ankle in the slender form of a snake. Only then do his desires change

& when he flings himself, guilt-stricken, headlong from the cliff, a god, as the gods will rarely do, denies him the privilege of death. This time, Ovid tell us, the body doesn't change in a whirlwind fit

but rather, as Aesacus plunges down towards the waves, feathers  
pierce his skin. Before long he'll become the first merganser,  
the same crested fish-diving duck

Audubon clips almost daily

from the Mississippi's iced-over banks. Of one he notes  
its triangular tongue, the nine-inch bottom-feeder lodged in its gut,  
that its legs were, as usual, the color of sealing wax, & then begins

to rekindle its life through the method by then he'd learned: first, impale  
with wire the sun-dried wings, its mandible & mottled breast; attach it  
to a plank with a backdrop grid & mold it to a lifelike pose. Odd,

how in the watercolors for *The Birds of America*, we're missing  
the engraver's final work: the river is just a few light-blue strokes  
& instead of an intricate tangle of grass, a merganser soars

through an empty page. Aesacus,

for a while, isn't finished either,  
though he will be soon. Even as he thrashes in his rage & grief,  
not quite bird or man, he can feel it, the lure of it beginning

in his beginning-to-be-hollow bones. What else can he do  
but unburden himself, give himself over to the body's suppleness,  
its impossible glistening, the grace afforded after all?