

BRUCE BOND

Audubon

1

The night my father died I buried myself
in a little language, a testament of will,
measured out the way the stonecutter

measures out our names to make them fit,
and as I leaned beneath the bell of light
to the cursor where it pulsed, I placed there

neither man nor the shape of his absence,
not grief as I knew it, but the tiny bones
of ink that grief made, rising to the surface.

I have met with those who disapprove
of passing through too quickly into song,
as if, with death, we give to it the first

word which is none at all. Anything more
is to make light of suffering: mine, yours.
Or worse, to make far too much of it,

to lose oneself in the futures market
that seeks to clear a profit on misfortune.
They have a point. That is, some songs need

a certain hesitation to break the ice
and move more deeply into winter's current.
Then again, tending to a song's needs

gives loss a vocation, and who is to say
what will come of it, any more
than what comes of music while it lasts.

2

Audubon loved the creatures that he killed.
That is part of the story. He loved the music
he silenced, gutted, stuffed with clouds of cotton,

the bodies he cleansed with a surgeon's care
then mended with needle, a stitched seam
tucked beneath the feathers where they shone.

He loved the eyes that gave way to seeds
of glass, the small black blisters gleaming
with light that went just so far, so deep.

Somewhere in that region of inquiry,
in what he could not paint, the illusion
of life took, and fluttered to the surface,

informing the angle of the head, the beak,
the bright rustle of wings as the ivory-
billed woodpecker turns away from us

to make out some motion in the distance.
Movement is danger. Or so the heartbeat
says at first, until it settles back

onto its perch, its branch of understanding.
What you see within the sure lines and blush
of these renditions is an artist's gaze,

so steady, cautious as it crosses the lip
of stillness, our open coffin, careful not
to break the perfect silence where it breathes.

3

Suppose all the world is a house lit up
against the night, and the eye of the bird
our only window. If you look through

the black air, you just might see a man,
a father, say, who takes his broken sleep
down the hall to a desk in the distance.

He is peering over his heavy glasses
to the near at hand, papers that await
his signature to put his affairs in order.

When he writes, his pen bleeds a little
ink over the line, real or imagined,
to lay a name against the emptiness.

Birds slip into the flowered portraits
of his study, silent, and yet made flesh
by the hand that murdered to create them.

The Carolina pigeon dips the nib
of his beak into the mouth he feeds.
If he spreads his colors, ribbed in black,

it is one more song that calls the thing
unseen. The man closes up his desk,
and with it a passage in his testament,

the part where he asks to be scattered,
remembered the way a body remembers to breathe.
A ghost thread pulls outward, like a word.