

A LABRADOR DUCK

'Not seen since 1875. Presumed to be extinct.'
– handwritten label in the Redpath Museum, Montreal

Presumed, indeed! It's time you changed the label—
year upon year, I watch it fading and withering,
a peculiar relic in your eyes
just as I am, posing in a glass box beside
a brace of passenger pigeons, each of us
a curiosity, a brief distraction
as you trudge from dinosaur to mummy.
Sixty of my kind, I hear, were spared
the usual fate of the dead. But I imagine
their feathers too are starting to disintegrate,
the cells in their bills dissolving despite
all your efforts to render us immortal.
It doesn't work; it never works; one happy day
I expect to crumble. As for my previous life
there are many things I'm glad to say
you'll never know—our habits of courtship,
our flyways and byways, why we had so little
chance against you—and I'm not telling.

Stop. Look me over, and please let me
indulge my only pleasure: looking back at you.
Now that feeding, flying, mating and diving
are impossible, the chance to ponder you
is all I've got. Call me an anthropologist,
alert to the coded meanings in your plumage,
the significance of tiny frowns. In yarmulkes
and bobby socks, Bermudas and chadors,
Paisley shirts and dresses that glide across the floor,
you come and go, dying slowly on the stairs.

So here I stand: preserved and catalogued and webbed,
a trophy of your deadly skill, while you—

still free to taste the wind and weather,
peering in at me as though I had the answer
to some query on the tip of your tongue—
recede into the growing past.

- Mark Abley, 2001. *Dissolving Bedrock*. OVER THE MOON,
Outremont, QC

ONE MORE MAY SURPRISE

Outside our window in full sunlight
the greening grass gleams while
we sit watching warblers foraging
amidst catkins and fattening buds
delighted to see brilliant close-ups
of Magnolia, Cape May and Yellow-rumps
when suddenly there appeared before us
a startling flash of black, white and orange
a new warbler dangling upside down
on the end of a spruce bough...
“I know it,” I said, “wait, darn...
the bird book, flipping, yes: Blackburnian!”
“Fiery-orange throat” exactly!
Marveling as it peered and fluttered
gleaning minute prey amongst the needles
an astonishing view for us both
of Mrs. Blackburn’s bird, we learned,
Audubon’s English lady friend—
another shared moment in
our lifetime of memories.
- Bob Nero

APRIL TWILIGHT

An old farm trail
worn deep into the greening sod
divides
last fall’s trim stubble field
from wild abandoned pasture

A grayish-brown ruffed grouse
cock of the spring woods
patrols the severed stalks
with bobbing head
a solitary reaper out of place
in alien grain

Half in darkness now
he steps with mincing care
back to the road
each foot precisely set before the other
then
explodes in pelting flight
into the screen of budding trees
plumps down amid the brush and prickly briar
safe

- Victor C. Friesen

MANNERS

Flurries of homely brown sparrows
drop from a tree
for frenzied ground-feeding
surrounding a
finch
brown too
but tinted with purple and wine
The sparrows wheel round
the center finch
in a mechanic dance
tilting-pecking-seeking-hopping
until startled
then swirl in one fluidity of wings
into the sheltering tree

Plain sparrows are alert survivors
who eat and run (or fly)
the tinted bird's a temporizer
resuming hardly interrupted eating

- Victor C. Friesen

FACE-OFF

All that happened, really, was that
two birds of different species,
a Purple Finch and a White-breasted Nuthatch,
had a momentary confrontation at our oak tree feeder
the finch standing upright on the platform
looking up at the nuthatch which hung downwards
as their kind often do, but then, suddenly
the nuthatch spread its wings, fanned out its tail
and slowly swivelled its whole body from side to side
just as some petulant mistress might moodily flourish
her fan in the face of an annoying suitor.
Three times the nuthatch closed and then again
flared out its wings and tail as the finch
stood stalwartly over the sunflower seeds
a spectral performance of implied aggression
a curious and beautiful display.

- Bob Nero

FOOTPRINTS

My feverish mind, all awry over
our oh so sick dog in his pain, and
weary of worldwide calamities,
suddenly gains reassuring relief
and even a pleasurable small thrill
in finding tiny precise footprints
in the thin layer of new snow on the stoop
where a house sparrow hopped

- Bob Nero

