

The Scarlet Tanager and the Sparrows

by Daniel Curzon

He followed them here. He followed them there. But they would not speak to him. He tried to join them, but they looked away and muttered about his outrageous appearance. He tried again by making a few sounds like theirs. They stuck together and moved off, irritable. He tried to imitate the way they picked at each other and the way they picked at dirt, stones, and anything else, but he was no good at it. He stood to the side and listened to the way they talked, usually about their young, or food, or the state of their excrement.

“Mine is watery today,” he heard one say.

“Eat more bugs,” said an old one. “My excrement is always white and firm but still slippery.”

He cried because they would not accept him into their midst. But he cried alone. He kept coming back to them, trying to disguise himself, trying to snatch bread crumbs with the rest of them. But they always knew it was him. One day one of them bit him on the tail and said, “Get out! We don't want your kind around here. So go!”

“But why not?” he asked. “I have wings and a short bill and everything else just like all of you.”

“Your wings are scarlet and ours are normal — brown. See Leviticus 22, Verses 18 to 21. ‘For whatsoever bird he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind bird, or a lame, or he that

hath a flat nose, or anything superfluous. Or a bird that is brokenfooted or brokenhanded. Or a crookback, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken. He that hath a blemish, he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God."

"But my stones aren't broken," he said. "Nor do I have anything else such as you describe."

"Scarlet feathers are a blemish. What's the matter with you?" was the answer.

So he drooped away. He moaned his fate and wept many a tear. But one day he caught a glimpse of himself in a clear puddle of water. He had never bothered to look at himself before, so intent on being like the others had he been. What he saw startled him.

Why, he was beautiful! He had brilliant scarlet plumage that looked like a sunset, and there were handsome green streaks on the tops of his wings. He lifted his voice in sheer joy. "What in the world was I thinking by wanting to be like them!" he shouted, his breast alive with the beating of his heart.

And off flew the scarlet tanager into the welcoming sky, where he headed up into the clouds, glancing down at the sparrows on the ground below, eating their crumbs and discussing their shit.

And then he never looked back again as he soared and soared like a very god above them.

