

The Magical Thinking of Birds

by Kyle Hemmings

My brother, who always gauged the weather by the bulge and sag in his ceiling, said she began losing her hair and that I should come home. I imagined her hair now as something fine, short, almost like vellus. There was something at once absurd and irresistible about returning to the cycle of returning. At her bedside, I smiled and pronounced my name the way she did in the old country, only without the lilt, the soft flight of ending vowel. In the old country, she used to tell me at night, there were rare birds that could work magic, could save a sickly boy such as the one I broke out from. If you utter a secret name, one would come to your window. For that reason, as a child, I never crushed worms in wet soil. She opened her eyes a thread. If only pain originated in the epidermis, it would be so easy to get rid of. Like dandruff. I rubbed her cheek, the skin, dry, almost rubbery. Her eyes grew wide, moist, catching the low light, holding onto it as if an imprisoned lover. "So you come home." I smiled. Was she playing a game? Like the kind we played when I was a kid, hiding behind evergreens, pretending theywere my mysterious and loyal stepfathers. When she discovered me, as she always did, she lifted me with her strong hands, her buttery smiles that promised me the world. But now. Perhaps she sensed my presence all along, even from the other side of the world. Her voice was wispy, a layer of downy. Yes, I said, in my strongest armadillo monotone. "Give me a kiss," she said, "have I not earned it?" I obeyed, forever that stilted child, frozen in conundrums. She began to speak of her childhood, as if I was her priest who would grant absolution. The white pantomime of hills. The stranger's laugh floating over a fjord. Her first sled that flew into the air and curved along the arc of the world. Slowly, she turned towards the bay

window. The rain was streaking it. There was a shadow of some kind. A Rorschach blot of wings. I thought of birds that I read about, ones fleeing extinction: the Gurney's Pitta, the Bachman Warbler, the Ivory Billed Woodpecker. No more names, I thought. It was really the afternoon that died.

