

River Atwood Tabor

Ornithology 101

In art the concept of the gaze is of paramount importance, and when my mother and I go sit down by the creek to watch birds, I think more about how they watch us. These bird watching trips have become less frequent since my mother started constantly traveling to take care of her dying mother. Now the birds notice how sad she is.

This process of taking care of her mother has taken the shimmer out of my mother's eyes. She goes down to visit at least once a week—my aunt moved in with my grandmother—and a nurse visits her every day, she is well taken care of. My uncles, on the other hand, are on full time bar duty: they go downtown to Mexicali's on 4th Street, and let everyone know the end is nigh, and score free drinks.

In the small crook of a willow tree an adolescent Steller's Jay watches us watch it. When two gazes meet that's a point of entrance into the soul, a point of connection. In a painting when you lock eyes with a painted figure, when they gaze out at you, you receive an invitation to view the world through their perspective. Through the eyes of the Steller's Jay I now view the world.

From the willow tree's crook our bodies look like ants, and I realize the flatness of our human perspective. It was in the eyes of the Jay that I could see the curvature of the earth, and the motion of the wind currents. Suddenly I knew we could fly, or at least that's

what I thought. It seemed to me all that was left in this world were willow trees and bird calls. What was grass or earth when you had trees or sky, and what was music or conversation when you had birdsong and wind sounds? In the eyes of the Jay there is just being in all its moments. I stared deeper into the eyes of the Steller's Jay, and tried to reach its soul, but there was nothing there.

Having a soul implies a false permanence. Human beings like to trick themselves into the illusion of permanence, the illusion of a continuity moving on behind and before them, the delusion of an afterlife. In the eyes of a Jay there is just becoming. This one time—that moment of being a bird—is something that haunts my dreams. I look at my mom, she has flown somewhere far away, and I don't know when she'll fly back down.

The Steller's Jay has left and the trees are empty. The birds, it seems, have moved on. I hate silence, but I know that is what my mother needs right now. Why? I could never answer. In the now insipid silence of a bird-less sky the street noises take up the space of bird calls.

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