The Economy of Sparrows

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Press

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PART I

We inflict our rage for immortality on things, marooning them on static islands.

Don McKay, “Baler Twine”

Carpodacus

> **Purple Finch. *Carpodacus purpureus.*** One of our finest songsters and occasionally caged for that purpose. **Economic Status:** The Purple Finch eats largely of buds and fruit. The fruit eaten is generally trifling, as the bird retires from the borders to less cultivated sections in the breeding season and is not numerous in summer in fruit-growing sections. The fruit it takes are, therefore, mostly waste winter left-overs or wild forms, and it is especially fond of mountain-ash or rowan berries. The charge that it eats buds is more serious, but so far has been based upon general assumptions not substantiated by results of stomach examinations.
>
> *Taverner's Birds of Western Canada*

On the morning after the first rain of spring, Nell Rowan stood in her kitchen to listen. The notes were sweet, rollicking, almost hurried. She knew the bird, but the name did not come until a piece of Latin from taxonomy class, forty years behind her, sprang forward: *Carpodacus*. The first purple finch of the year, right on schedule, and she knew where it would be.

She walked to the north window, past a framed photo of Queen Elizabeth, and looked out at the shelterbelt trees. Bright as a Christmas tree bulb, the finch was nipping winter-parched berries on the far side of the lone mountain ash tree. Scruffy, the copper bark peeling from

a trunk twisting to make the best of poor soil and scant rain, it was the tree Nell watered in with some care every fall.

The finch released another rapid set of notes that seemed to come from above the tree and not from within its branches. Nell took that as the invitation she needed to call Lily, her border collie, and step out the door, through the porch, and into the damp grass.

The rinsed air had the earthy scent that Nell knew came from soil bacteria. An ecologist had once mentioned it on an undergrad field trip forty years past. The name was gone now, but she reminded herself that she did not need to know the names of everything around her. Just birds, and even that was not so much a need as an impulse.

Sneaking around the corner of the east-facing porch, Nell eased herself onto a stump she kept there. Lily settled at her feet, tail twitching. Not really purple at all, the finch was more a raspberry shade of red. It stayed for a few seconds, shifting to the far side of the mountain ash before deciding it might be best to leave. Nell watched it disappear into willows down by the lake.

“Down to the lake.” Lily shifted at the sound of Nell’s voice. “Makes sense. That’s where I’d go.”

Nell turned her gaze from the lake to fields of mostly tame grass running to the eastern horizon. These days, for reasons she had yet to sort out, she was given to pondering the pathways that had brought her home two years earlier. And the paths, two generations before, that had led her mother’s family to such a boulder-strewn plain two miles away from the soil that had made other families rich.

Lily was pacing, letting Nell know it was time for a walk, but Nell turned around for one more look at the mountain

ash. Her mother never used that name. She preferred the folk name *rowan* because it was also her surname. And Nell's middle name at birth.

It was in honour of her mother that she had applied for a name change, taking Rowan in place of her father's surname. The day she filled out the forms, she went out to the porch to steel her courage with a memory: the two of them sitting on its deck stringing a necklace of the tree's blossoms to put around the neck of their Holstein. And her mother's voice, "To protect her."

"From what?" Nell asked.

"Enchantment. Things that might sour her milk. You are a Rowan too, Nell. You are both rock and tree, Petronella Rowan."

As a girl, Nell winced at the prissiness of her first name, the frippery of it mocking the plainness of their lives on a small prairie farm. By the age of ten, she would only answer to Nell. That was when she learned she had been named for a great-grandfather on her mother's side whose life and death was summarized in a sad piece of unelaborated family lore: "Terrible. Grandpa Peter came here to look for a homestead, but he died in a hunting accident." Peter's widow, her great-grandmother Charlotte, was hardly mentioned. All Nell knew about her was that she was deaf. When Peter and Charlotte's oldest boy, Tom, came west looking for land near where his father had died, he settled on this sandy soil east of Deep Lake.

With Lily at her heels, Nell headed into the weedy pasture that ran down to the lake. She put her fingers into the curls, frizzier than usual with the sudden humidity, escaping from her ball cap.

The storm was far off on the eastern horizon as the two of them made their way across the pasture. Another day of cloudless skies. If she had been paying closer attention, or knew her plants better, she might have taken solace from some of the hardy natives, the sages and asters, fighting their way back into the mix of thistle, sweet clover, and bromegrass her ancestors had carried with them to the prairie a century and some ago.

Instead, she was distracted for a moment, calculating how to stretch her pension cheque for two more weeks. Lily stopped to give some attention to a gopher hole, the kind with no dirt next to it, just a neat hole cut into the turf.

Nell pointed: "That has to be a striped gopher." Lily pretended to appreciate the identification help and moved on. Along with two ponies in the south quarter, Lily provided most of Nell's social life, the Wyandotte laying hens and Embden geese to a lesser degree. Nell would never have called it animal therapy. The mindfulness course on YouTube was helpful, but Lily's expressive face was what got her out of bed each morning and let her settle into her pillow most nights. Days could pass without her seeing another person unless she went into town for supplies.

Might be a good time to give Wendy a call, Nell thought. See what they've been up to in Calgary. The farm where Wendy grew up was three farmsteads closer to town along the school bus line. Nell's best memories of high school were from sitting next to Wendy on the bench during basketball games, the two of them talking about anything other than the action in front of them. When Nell got the scholarship to attend Carleton in Ottawa, Wendy begged her parents to let her follow. They roomed together there until they graduated with their undergrad biology degrees.

Their last phone conversation was mostly about renaming the town. Wendy couldn't believe that Indian Head, the town where they both went to school, was finally having a discussion about its offensive name.

Nell changed her mind about calling. Wendy listened well, but her life in Calgary had a different pace. If she wasn't volunteering at the homeless shelter or sorting clothes in the church basement, she was full-on engaged in the business of getting her husband and adult children to grow up.

Crossing the saddle of a ravine where it met the road, Nell felt a warm flush in her cheeks. Warmth she used to enjoy had become a mixed blessing: good for sixty-year-old knees and hips, but trouble for her estrogen-deprived thermostat. Every spring now it seemed hotter and drier than she remembered from childhood. But there was that drought that ended her father's farming days back in the eighties. Strange how vivid that memory was, while her more recent life in Ottawa, where the green of summer seldom fades to yellow, was blurred like scenes happening behind a muslin curtain, all of it—the museum, the archives, her apartment, and Étienne—behind her now, resting somewhere between memory and dream.

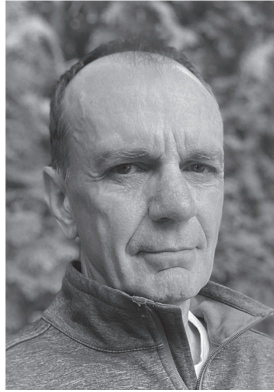
Memory was something Nell consciously made bargains with, sometimes aloud, sometimes melodramatic, and, since returning home, increasingly sentimental. "I want to remember this," she said to Lily as they reached the road and turned back toward the house. "When the time comes, I want this in my heart in place of all the resentments, all the regrets."

She lifted her gaze to the mile-high swells of grey cumulus retreating like ships after a battle. A calm had settled

over the fields. Aspen bluffs and the old grain bins gone. Everything different now. Not what it was when she was a girl, but still beautiful, she told herself. A good deal of that beauty, at least for Nell, came from birdsong—a chorus offered with fresh vigour in the wake of the storm: Savannah and vesper sparrows first, then robins, and an eastern phoebe giving voice to the ravine where it wandered down to the lake.

As the phoebe sang a second time, she thought of her collection of Red Rose bird cards tucked away in the cellar. It was spring. Might be time to find those old cards and set them out again.

She waited for the familiar lift from birdsong, but it never came. This must be what happens for all aging naturalists. The retreat from reality doesn't work as well any more. One day you realize you're unable to take much consolation where you used to. You try to dwell in your memories, to return to a time when you did not know how bad things were for the birds and bugs, how inept governments would become in the face of climate change and biodiversity collapse. But looking back at your own life soon wears thin. Lately, Nell found herself going further back, before her own time, not to be consoled by former abundance, but to look for the moment when naturalists began to let the birds and themselves become instruments of westering empire.



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