Three Poems by Myrna Stone

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*The Relationship Poems II*

John James Audubon Describes His Childhood to His Sons, Victor and Johnnie

*Henderson, Kentucky, Summer, 1819*

In Saint-Domingue there was sun and sun and the incessant chatter of sugar stalks just beyond the verandah’s view. Crimson the sun set and crimson it rose while talk burbled from Martine’s kitchen like Latin from Fr. Giles’s tongue during daily mass in the plantation chapel, his silver paten mirroring his black hand as he passed a host into each gaping mouth. Outside the doors was a greensward and a border of pines darkening a ridgeline, a wild divide where once, I am convinced, I heard ardor wax in a Vervain Hummingbird’s delirium of song. Though I was but six, I remember well the whirring machinelike thrum of his wings as he flew by, the somber gray of his throat and chest. A sly Puritan he was, with only a glint of metallic green visible, then fugitive, a hue whose origin is light and the bird’s own preen-oil sheen.

Barely larger than a hawkmoth, a Vervain is often taken at a blossom’s end for a Bee Hummingbird, which is smaller yet. I claim, in truth, to have drawn one of each, and see no good cause to kill another. When Father returned to his villa in Nantes, France with us, his bastard son and daughter, our stepmother kissed us both at the door and pronounced us
home at last. We bless her, and her exemplary virtue still—Anne Moynet, of the ardent heart and barren womb, whose l’orangerie in winter and garden in summer were parent to the two most credulous of the villa’s naïf dwellers: Rosie and I, afoot among the furred and the winged, each mouse and bird a waif whose name we printed in a book of words.
Joseph Mason, Audubon’s Former Background Artist,
Speaks to Their Mutual Friends on Loyalty

Philadelphia, Spring, 1832

Some prefer to label him a braggart
for calling himself the American Woodsman
while visiting London. And perhaps his heart
and his ego were inflated by women

fawning over his long hair and homey
fur-trimmed buckskin, or by the daily rags
that reported his gaze as direct, intensely wild, and dark as Satan’s. He crabs

now about the folly of that last bit,
though I quite suspect, boys, that flattered
by its reference to power, he secretly likes it.
Even dear Lucy, bless her soul, battered

by life with or without him, continues
to describe him as a genius, and charismatic—
and who are we to dispute her? Our sinews,
muscles, minds, our local and domestic

lives, shall never rise to John James’s
level of drama in excellence. I’ve seen him
lure birds with seeds and silence, dazed
at how quickly he rose and shot them

with his fine-pellet gun. His subscribers
ask him how he transfuses the breath of life
into such creatures. I can tell them: he scribes
a board with a grid, and before the bright

colors of the bird’s wings dull, pins
its body to the wood in an approximation
of flight or stance, after which he outlines
on a corresponding graph its simulation.

He has a gift that will not be outdone
he will make a fortune—mark my words—
thus we, as his friends, must seek to caution
him against overweening pride. In thirds
his heart is divided—by birds, by Lucy,
by his sons—and though he merits our affection
whether woodsman or artist, stable or swoony,
he may yet have need of our correction.
Upon Taking Delivery of Audubon’s First Published Bird Prints, Joseph Mason Sees, Then Shares With His Son, a Bitter Truth

*Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January, 1835*

I was but thirteen—clearly more boy than man despite the confidence I affected—when Audubon and I left for New Orleans to implement his plan of recording undocumented birds, all drawn to scale, while I, sketching beside him, rendered their usual haunts: Blue Yellow-Backed Warblers on a Coppery Iris, Painted Finches on a tender Chickasaw Plum, a lone male Thrush attwitter on an Indian Turnip. Come sunset, we slept where we fell, exhausted, into beds of thigh-high prairie grass or the piney earth beyond, kept until birdsong woke us and a new day’s supply of specimens required our attention: wire inserted into their wings, dousings in clear water to deepen their colors, and later, of course, fire to cook them over. . . . Even acts of slaughter, boy, should occasion no waste. Yes, I prized that life, for in it I found not merely my calling but a man whose heart pumped the same blood. Yet, how misplaced my trust, and how galling his betrayal. Look at these prints. Do you see anywhere at all, in any corner, *J. Mason*? Here, and here, and here, this flora, these bees, are mine in stroke after stroke, line after line!

Audubon denies, and falsifies, to fatten his ego. His famed night in a cabin with Daniel Boone on the edge of the wilderness is simply a blow-hard’s story, as is the tale of his father’s spoon-fed wealth. Why write, or call upon, or trace him, or seek to cross paths with any of his kin? Let us erase him with silence, just as he erased my name from these works again and again.