

# LIFE LIST

poems

Marc Beaudin



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LIFE LIST

Poetry

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# Birds of the Eastern United States

“... when I breathe with the birds,  
The spirit of wrath becomes the spirit of blessing,  
And the dead begin from their dark to sing in my sleep.”

– Theodore Roethke, “Journey to the Interior”



Great Blue Heron

## Another Blue (*Ardea herodias*)

Voice of the heron carries the  
rasp of pterodactyl & archaeopteryx  
Is an unmarked grave that reaches

suddenly with taloned fingers &  
startles the man swimming alone  
among cattails and mud-sleeping turtles

He once, years before, carried a dead heron close  
to his chest like an infant – this old  
friend & father, teacher in the school of

lake water & moonlight, omen,  
bringer of dreams, found in the reeds  
at lake's edge, waiting

From his canoe, aluminum turned brass in  
evening light, he watches the bird's spirit, or  
something, fly from the willows, bank above

the still water & disappear over the mosaic  
of trees climbing the hillside. Today  
standing thigh-deep in the marsh

he rubs that memory between thumb  
& finger, enjoys the sun sinking into face  
& shoulders & tries to ignore

the insistent buzzing of an airplane  
like some small insect, trapped  
at the kitchen window

**Mortality** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

Scarecrow Island recedes  
as cormorants follow our wake  
cutting leaden waters &  
churning up a feast of fish

Perhaps not a moment passes  
in this world of piercing beauty  
without some little death  
Today the fish, tomorrow you & I

The horizon swallows the island  
& someday my favorite fedora  
will sell for a few dollars  
at a downtown thrift store

# Birds of the Western United States

“I pray to the birds because they remind me of what I love  
rather than what I fear. And at the end of my prayers,  
they teach me how to listen.”

— Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*

## Strangers (*Selasphorus rufus*)

Sudden buzzing & flash  
of red – gone before  
I have a chance to breathe

Hummingbird startles  
stops my pen  
the way a ringing phone

can terrify & seize –  
an ice-cold hand  
plunged heart-deep like a stone

sinking to the bottom  
of a willow-fringed pond  
where we've waited for days

to see our reflection  
finding nothing but strangers  
where our faces should be



Rufous Hummingbird

## 25 Bears (*Empidonax occidentalis*)

The promise of flycatchers  
hidden in the deep wood  
tease of song from the shadows

The diamond light of water  
breaking into river's breath  
against the faces of rock

The caress of cedared wind  
& undulations of fir trees  
standing-room-only on a west-facing slope

The scant clouds pawing their way  
across the sky-blue sky  
that is nothing but sky-blue

The taste of this coffee  
on the cabin's deck high above  
the voicings of the Yaak River

& all the rest of it  
made richer by the fact of those  
remaining 25 grizzlies

somewhere  
out there living  
their perfect ursine lives

Without them, colors fade to sepia  
sounds to a distant tin & we lose  
some part of ourselves impossible

to describe to future generations  
who will grow old believing  
that the natural shape of their soul

is to have a cold dark nothing  
lodged at its center - a hole the size  
of a bear track in the spring mud

## Writing at Grizfork Studio (*Pica hudsonia*)

Each day begins  
with the conversations of magpies  
who never run out of things to talk about

Each morning unfolds  
with the fact of those mountains  
who never feel the need to say a thing

I sit at my desk  
with both & try to grab hold  
of what lies between the two

On a good day  
I come close



Black-billed Magpie

# Birds of Mexico and Central America

*“If the bird is invisible,  
we see the color of its song.”*

—Octavio Paz, *“In Uxmul”*



Brown Pelican

**Sian Ka'an: "Where the Sky is Born"**  
(*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

A string of pelicans  
like a broken rosary  
slipping through the  
blue hands of sky

Their flight echoes  
each wave's advance  
& retreat  
pendulums of the world's clock

The line where sea meets sky  
like the torn edge of a sheet of paper  
must be the precise location  
that the world ends

A barrier crossed only by sun,  
moon & certain birds  
Perhaps also by you & me  
when drunk on madness or love

# Birds of Europe

“In the tunnel of birdsong  
a locked gate opens.”

—Tomas Tranströmer, *The Sorrow Gondola*

## Shadow Wall (*Podiceps cristatus*)

The memorial stretches  
along the *Nieuwe Keizersgracht*  
over 200 Jewish names, or rather  
Dutch names that were still  
a little too Jewish

Engraved plaques set in concrete  
moss-etched bricks & ants  
crawling over the names  
the ages & which death camp  
collected their shoes, took their lives

A Great Crested Grebe  
head & eyes like fire, back like ash  
cuts a V through the reflections  
of houses across the canal  
where the murdered once lived

He dives near #12  
home of Walter & Elizabeth Leib  
killed at Auschwitz  
first him, October 1942, then her  
the following September

along with their children  
Gustave, age 2 & Friede, age 1

*Flying underwater  
the bird catches a glimpse  
of red hats & the tiki torches  
of Charlottesville, gunfire at  
a Walmart in El Paso*

He resurfaces at #20,  
home of Sara & Klara, ages 9 & 5  
who were taken from this world  
on a postcard-perfect day,  
April 1943, at Sobibór

**Chant** (*Columba palumbus*)

Dawn returns  
to our courtyard  
on her way to the sea

Darkness surrenders  
not like an army  
but a lover

& suddenly -  
or perhaps gradually -  
there is no escape

from the relentless  
whoo-oo-ing  
of the wood pigeon

pulling us from sleep  
unready  
bewildered to be alive

& for that small miracle  
I am grateful  
I am grateful

I am grateful