

## **The Wet Collection** (published, *Bellingham Review*)

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The bellies of the birds—phoebe, grackle, red-wing blackbird—have been stitched in neat zigzags from crop to throat. Someone’s patient hand pinched the lips of the emptied breast. Someone pushed insecticide-laced batting into the cavity. Someone tied the knot.

Here, in the basement of the natural history museum, they understand the virtues of careful storage. The vaults hold hundreds of birds, shelved and stuffed for study. People bring what they find: sparrows, mourning doves, the common birds of the city. And someone eviscerates the dead thing, sprinkles cornmeal to soak the blood, glues cabochons of glass for the eyes. But this is work that few people see. We are here only because this quiet curator took an hour from her afternoon’s work to show us around. Handwritten notes line a drawer full of eggs, part of a donated private collection. One note, written in a deliberate script in faded brown ink, reads: “Collected under a clump of grass approximately 3 feet from a pasture road. A.S. Wilson, 1919.” This in a curving, fountain-pen handwriting nobody has any more. What now of the pasture road? Is it there still; is it a superhighway? The egg, so fragile, and its clump of grass remain after the man and the world he noted so carefully have vanished.

The wet collection is a well-stocked pantry, its shelves full of ranked bottles and jars. There are capped plastic drums full of paper-wrapped voles, evidence of a research paper (now abandoned) on the boom and crash of vole populations. From vole tails, the trained scientist can determine body fat

percentage and other useful statistics. As the vole goes, so go the vole's predators: owl, badger, fox. One jar is jammed full of skinless, headless, eyeless carcasses. Someone cut out corneas, but we don't know why. A vole's eyes are small and black, stubby as pencil points.

Jars of dried tongues line one shelf: in a Tropicana bottle, flamingo, great blue heron, crowned and sandhill crane, American bittern, and roseate spoonbill; in another, woodcock and woodpecker, desiccated, labels tied to each with pieces of thread (collected 1952, 1961). They should be packed in salt, these tiny scraps of dried flesh, like capers or artichoke hearts. A moose's wide tongue floats in alcohol.

An old pickle jar holds the face and long, bent ears of a jackrabbit. Where its eyes should be there are only bits of skin, blank and white. The stuff of nightmares. When we walk past, dark-tipped guard hairs wave in the jar's yellowish fluid. The curator locks the door to the wet collection behind us.

There is something repulsive in this, these parts taken without a whole. We have tongues but no cranes, tails without voles and caches of grain, a tattered seagull but no sand or waves or thermal air current, and without these things, the jars are full of creatures eminently dead, cut loose from context, mere fragments enshrined. The snapping turtle with two heads is misplaced no matter where it sits.

And yet. The curator lifts the dead grebe carefully from its place, reads the label she wrote long ago. Fingers the down. She slides the drawer shut and

opens another, this one full of cedar waxwings. *You can see some of them still have the red tips on the wings*, she says, and picks up one after the other until she finds one that does. *Like flecks of house paint*. Spatters so small you'd never see them in the field. Pilgrims with their relics are not more respectful. Long years of handling fragile things have given her a light touch; things are secure in her hands. She collects data one piece at a time, her eyes gleaming with facts. The kiwi, whose egg is a third as large as its body, breathes through the end of its beak. The star-nosed mole has 27 tentacles tipped with electrical sensors that help it find earthworms, its favorite food. See and touch the ostrich egg, pocked and dimpled like grapefruit skin; see the praying mantis, also called the devil's rearhorse, or soothsayer, or mulekiller, pinned to balsa wood. Careful study is a holy work.

Before we leave, the curator tells us about her first job at the museum, transferring to tiny labels field notes someone else had taken. She wrote the genus and species, collection date, location, in miniscule handwriting with a fine-pointed pen. Someone else matched specimen with label. *The hours I spent*, she says, *keeping records on animals I would never see*. It has been a long time since I've seen such faith. Wishing us well, she turns back to her work, and we show ourselves out and up to street level, leaving the collections behind.

Today I'm thinking of the quiet curator, secular mystic, care her creed and discipline. In her basement room she records the mysteries we'd miss otherwise. Sometimes I'm stopped cold by dragonflies—devil's darning-needles, snake

doctors—rising in glittering clouds to scatter, sun flashing from taut wings, over streets littered with God's dropped playing cards.