CHILEAN WILD BABY PEARS

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I used to play a game at the end of print viewings where I asked the class what they would take home from the museum. I varied the scenario. Maybe it was a reward for having been such a great group. Maybe everything suddenly needed to be saved from a fire. Or maybe, for reasons of my own, I was just going to look the other way. Sometimes, often, there was no explanation at all. What I kept constant was the constraint: *Just one thing*, I would say. *Don't be greedy*, I would add. And then twenty or thirty individuals would look over the long running easels at the twenty or thirty photographs I had spent an hour pulling from the vault.

It did not matter who wanted the series of New Mexico lowriders in the red, velvet, portfolio box and who wanted the big, grainy, black-and-white print of a tree on a bank shot from underwater. What caught my attention was the young man who asked which one was the most expensive. Or the kid who made her choice based on which would be the easiest to carry away. I liked these answers, these moments when someone remembered out loud that the images were objects, that however they moved in the life of the mind, they were also, always, things in the world. And things, so very many things, can be taken home.

The point of asking was that there is a difference between things you visit and things you live with. What you love in a museum you could hate at home. What is striking in a tasting can fall short as a meal. Some of the best movies I have ever seen, I never want to sit through again. But of course, it can also go the other way; some things, some precious few things, will nourish and feed you forever.

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In the mid-1970s, when the Federal Reserve was issuing bicentennial quarters and railroads were painting train cars red, white, and blue and everyone with a match was shooting off fireworks, the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History chose to honor the bicentennial with an exhibition of American species endangered and extinct. This was the same cultural moment in which the Smithsonian opened the National Air and Space Museum, the United Kingdom loaned us one of the four known copies of the Magna Carta, and the Musée du Louvre lent an exhibition of 149 liberty-related works to tour to the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

That the Iowans thought of loss when they thought about their country strikes me as strangely touching. What could be more patriotic than an informed critique, a call to activism and reform? What is more American than innovation and consumption and their twin wakes of unintended tragedy? What does the patriot do but grieve? Whatever their motives, what is clear is that they chose to exhibit extinction, focusing on historical factors for extinction, and as they endeavored in this manner to talk about loss, they filled a room full of stuff.

Stuff, in this instance, meant exhibition cases and wall text and so on, but most importantly it meant mounts: the taxidermied specimens of so very many species going, going, gone. Gone, except they weren't. Not entirely, not if you count their skins.

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Exactly one species is known to have gone extinct in the whole history of Iceland—one thousand years. That species is the Great Auk, and we know exactly the day it happened. We know the names of the two men who strangled the breeding pair on July 3, 1844, and we know the name of the third man who crushed their solitary egg with the heel of his boot. We know the end of the Great Auk line because the very scarcity of them spurred on a frenzy of collecting. Collectors, eager to complete their collections before supply ran out, pushed prices up and up. And so birds that had been hunted for food were hunted as specimens. And if the specimen of a rare creature is valuable, the specimen of an extinct one is priceless.

We say extinct when the last living member of a species dies, but their properly preserved skins will last for centuries, never mind their bones. These species don't live on, by any means, and yet a tangible part of them remains with us. More than a sesquicentennial since their extinction, we still have Great Auks, at least to the degree that we still know the whereabouts of 78 skins, 75 eggs, and 24 complete skeletons still in existence around the world. We don't know where the skins of those last two Great Auks ended up, but we know the address in Copenhagen to visit their internal organs and their eyes. What we don't have is a word for after extinction, for when we lose whatever's left.

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The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker was generally believed to be extinct back in 1924 when, glory of glories, a Cornell ornithologist and his wife found a nesting pair in Florida. Then, even before the scientists decamped, two local taxidermists took out a permit and quite legally shot both birds.

The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker was listed as endangered in 1967, even though the only suggestion it was still in existence at all was an East Texas field recording of what might have been its call, or might have been something else. Indeed, a confirmed sighting of the Ivory-Billed hadn't been made in years when the University of Iowa chose to include it in their bicentennial exhibition. It was simple enough to curate: the museum staff looked over the three Ivory-Billed specimens in the collection, picked the best one for exhibition—good size, feathers in good shape—and left the other two skins in their gray cardboard storage box.

A skin, in this context, is just what it suggests: the skin of the bird, plus all the feathers in the skin and usually the bony bits like legs and beaks, and part or all of the skull. All the wet parts, the organs and the tissue and the fat, have been removed and replaced with enough cotton to restore the skin to its approximate volume in life. Until you look too closely, the bird seems whole. Limp, maybe, drowsy even, but whole. As if the body could still startle awake at any moment. And the skin can be stored like that for ages, with the right dimensions but the wrong viscera, cotton tufting from the sockets where eyes should be.

Only when fit over an armature, given glass eyes and sewn up does the skin become a mount, and it is the mount that one sees on public display. It was the mount, not even the bird, that in 1979 entranced one Iowa visitor in particular. The mount sang like a siren—until the visitor could no longer keep his hands to himself.

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There is hardly a museum I visit where I don't want to touch things. Never in a museum where I've worked, as it happens, but forever where all things textured and dimensional are put on display. Shells and ceramics and chrome. And not just touch. There are things in the world so glorious, so appealing, so bright or smooth or splendid, I want to put them in my mouth.

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The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker is also called the Lord God Bird, or the Good God Bird. Unlike a Whippoorwill, named from its own song, this bird is nicknamed for the utterance it inspires in the person who sees it, the sound it draws from another mouth. True, they are big, but not so much bigger than the more common Pileated Woodpecker. With only a few skins and a few black and white pictures to work from, I cannot tell what made them so exclamation-worthy. Yet still I begin to wonder if it is their rarity, or their divinity, that makes them known also as the Holy Grail Bird.

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The visitor has no name. No description. So I will call this visitor: Visitor X. I assume Visitor X was already familiar with the Iowa museum. I assume Visitor X had seen this very display more than once, had come back again and again. I assume he did not mean to take the Ivory-Billed, not at first. No, I assume there was no premeditation, that Visitor X did not case the joint, that Visitor X had made no special note of the lack of cameras, the lack of guards. I assume Visitor X was alone.

In pictures the Ivory-Billed is directly over a bleached bovine skull, halfway up the right end of a shared case. Why this specimen and not the passenger pigeon or the Heath Hen or the Eskimo Curlew? Why not the pair of Carolina Parakeets at the far end of the case; why not the shotgun and the shells and the powder horn alongside them?

I assume the Ivory-Billed was glorious, was lit just so. And I assume Visitor X was overwhelmed, was intoxicated with awe and longing and grief. I imagine there was a moment, just a moment, a flash as Visitor X realized this idol was an object and, feeling only devotion, without thinking anything else, reached out.

He would have used two hands to take it. He would have put the first hand on the prow of the bird, cradling its jutting chest, and he would have cupped the other hand around its base, lifting it up and out of the case. There

would have been no violence in its capture, every moment quiet and clean, the bird tucked gently under one arm and walked out of the museum as if nothing could be more natural. As if this happened every day.

It was reported on a Thursday morning. It would have required twisting out three Phillips-type screws from the display case and moving the glass.

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A collector I know has a painting I adore. As the collector explained it to me, the painter had a beach house in the family. The painter sent Pantone books to half a dozen family members and asked each of them to identify, among the sea of color swatches, just which pink the old family beach house had been painted. On the canvas, each stacking horizontal stripe records the reported memory, and of course none of them are the same. I love the painting for its story, for what it suggests about a group of people all right and all disagreeing. But the collector doesn't smile until he asks me, "You know why I bought this?"

He finishes the answer himself. "There is a saying in the gallery world that no one buys a pink painting. Whatever you think of it in the gallery, you can't imagine it at home and nobody buys. Well," and here his eyes sparkled, "*I* bought a pink painting."

I don't ask what it's like now that he has it at home, hanging in the bedroom. I don't ask because the point he's trying to make is that he is a collector, not a decorator, and a collector ignores convention. It is, in fact, a point of pride: the collector obeys his own muse.

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What Visitor X has now is an Ivory-Billed mount attached to a cork base cut to resemble bark. What the museum has now, instead of the Ivory-Billed specimen they'd had since 1894, is a thin manila folder of documents related to the disappearance. There are memos about the need to increase security, appraisals for the insurance company, notes from other institutions with similar specimens expressing their sympathy and confirming how rarely such specimens become available these days. There is no evidence in the file of any correspondence from Visitor X, but a *Des Moines Register* clipping from 1980, fifteen months after the Ivory-Billed disappeared, references a letter—and a photograph.

According to Robert Hullihan's article, Visitor X had written to console the museum and its visitors. The bird was fine, Visitor X explained, well-treated and well-loved. To prove it, the letter contained a picture of Visitor X, face obscured, holding the Ivory-billed, which does indeed appear to be in prime condition. The writer says the photograph is too dark to reproduce in the paper, but I imagine it. I imagine it is a black-and-white picture. I imagine it looks like something from a kidnapping case, the proof of life before a list of demands. But Visitor X asks no ransom.

Visitor X does not make the argument that the museum started it, that a proxy of the museum took this bird from nature, from *life*, and that Visitor X only took the skin from the museum. He does not indict museums, as many have, as storehouses of stolen goods. He raises no objection to the institution at all, does not charge the caretakers with negligence or malfeasance. The taking of the Ivory-Billed is not framed as a liberation or a protest. It has nothing to do with anyone else, in fact. No, Visitor X explains the event as something personal, almost wholesome. He felt such a remarkable affinity with the Ivory-Billed on display, a communion really, that there was nothing else for it: he had to have it.

Visitor X admits the bird must have had other admirers, but surely none so ardent—obviously none so committed; in short, none who would benefit so much from its permanent acquisition. It's an interesting notion, the museum as auction, every last item parceled out to the bidder who *needs* it most.

It's also interesting that despite having become a specimen's long-term caretaker, Visitor X still identifies with the museum visitor and not the museum. It's the sacrifice of fellow visitors he acknowledges, their loss. To that point, I can't help but notice that if he'd waited until the end of the exhibition, walked out with the specimen near closing on the very last day, no one but the staff and the occasional researcher would have felt the disappearance any differently than if it went back in storage.

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An underemployed friend remarks to me that lately she's been finding her entertainment at an upscale supermarket. It's not just the *mise-en-scène* of privileged American life that's worth watching, it's the stuff on the shelves. She can't believe there's a product labeled "Chilean Wild Baby Pears." How superlatively exotic. She can't believe how tender and naked and raw the little pear bodies seem. She can't believe there are so many jars—rows and rows of jars, their storage the same as their display. How museum-like it seems: each jar a group of individuals dated and labeled as one type, then preserved in fluid.

I ask her what Chilean Wild Baby Pears taste like. She doesn't know. She only visits. She can't afford to take them home.

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I wonder sometimes if Visitor X appreciates the irony of disappearing an endangered bird from an extinction exhibition; one minute there's a mount on display and the next it is wholly inaccessible to the rest of the world. I suspect not. I expect he does not think of loss at all when he thinks of the bird. Rather, I imagine he feels only its presence, the way it fills a place that had been empty.

In the letter, above all, Visitor X is at pains to assure the museum the bird will never be sold. This was not an act for monetary gain. No profit will be made. Indeed, Visitor X seems to have a rather low opinion of such motives. Yet while his own motivation is offered as assurance that the bird was taken for the purest of reasons, the fact that it will never appear on the market also suggests something that sounds rather sinister: it may never be seen again.

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In all the years I worked at the photo museum, there were of course many photos I loved, and I loved them for many reasons. There was only one, however, that I ever wanted to own. I knew it the first time I saw it. *Field Museum, Trumpeter Swan, North Dakota, 1891* is an early digital print by Terry Evans. It's part of a series of pictures from the natural history collection at Chicago's Field Museum, and in this picture a swan's

neck bends back across its body so that its black beak rests near its daintily crossed black webbed-feet. A gauzy shroud wrapped around the middle third of the body holds the neck in place. The light is, this will sound excessive, but I swear the light is quietly transcendent, and the twisted dead bird looks serene. It is printed at roughly life-size, and except for an orange specimen tag and the edge of the table, it is almost entirely white. White in different textures: the light shadows of feathers, the ripples in the shroud, the lift of a corner where one sheet of the paper beneath the swan overlaps with a second smooth sheet.

I saw it first at the art fair on Navy Pier. I was there as a museum employee, sitting with the little row of nonprofit tables outside the main hall, but on breaks I tipped my badge to the guards and browsed the fair booths inside. It wasn't just an aesthetic affinity that made me want to have this picture, nor the particular thrill I got every time I thought about this beautiful creature being, miraculously, a beautiful creature *from 1891*.

Maybe moving among things that could be sold planted the idea that this was a thing to own, but more importantly, it was a thing to live with. This was a photograph I could not help but envision already on the wall, not a wall from the place where I currently lived, but a place where I would ideally live, hung over my writing desk like a window, as if its glow and its glory were physical, as if it would flood the room with light.

I did the calculations. Despite a recent promotion from 20 hours a week to 30 and a one-dollar raise, there was no question this photograph was out of my reach. If I stopped eating, if I stopped paying rent and taxes, if I lived on air and never needed to take a bus it would still be two months' salary to buy it. Sure, I could save a little here and there, but by time I could afford the price I saw, the photograph would have had years to appreciate, and I could see the graph in my mind, how my earnings would never intersect with its appraisal. This seemed familiar enough. I'd spent enough time at galleries with art school kids and museum colleagues to know the people who loved the work and the people who took it home were not necessarily the same.

So it was kismet, a few years and a few more promotions later, to realize the museum I was working for had at some point purchased the very picture that had so captivated me. We were, for a time, and in a fashion, to live together after all. Not infrequently did I lift it with white gloves off its storage rack in the vault and escort it out for a print viewing. I remember the weight of the wood and the glass, the pose and posture of the carry. With one hand on each far edge, I had to hold my arms chest-height, wide as the frame and stiff as a waltz. Like that, with nothing touching but glove to frame, I held it close as a partner in a formal dance. And two hours later I'd retrace the steps, glide it back into the vault and close the door.

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The Ivory-Billed is thought to pair for life. Or, should I say *was* thought to? It's hard to pick a tense for something so almost certainly lost, but maybe only slipped beyond the pale of our accounting. It is, however, a simple present tense to say that at the Iowa museum, the Ivory-Billed are paired, too, in death.

The loss of the Ivory-Billed mount on exhibition means there are just two Ivory-Billed specimens left at the museum, one male and one female. The ones that remain are fine specimens, but a decision has been made for their protection never to have them on display. You can make an appointment, if you like; someone will show them to you. But the possibility of a chance encounter is all but extinguished.

There's still plenty to see, mind you, if only you knew to ask. Museums are mostly storage, after all, warehouses of a kind. There are vaults and cold rooms and freezers and all sorts of special rooms your admission won't admit you to. But even in the exhibition hall, what's in the display cases is the tip of the iceberg. The bases of those glass boxes are cabinets fit with drawers, fit with locks you would never notice if you didn't already have the key, the whole structure teeming with more than you see. Some of it is just odd space, filled with folding chairs or shipping boxes or tablecloths. But some of them are specimen drawers, like a dresser drawer in your bedroom, but instead of sweaters filled with skins, piled up on each other like ears of corn, a bushel of one bird species, heads all in one direction.

In some ways, the two Ivory-Billed skins benefit from their seclusion. There is no light, for instance, to fade their black, black feathers. Both sexes have the long, hard ivory bill, but only the male has the signature red crest, the red feathers the first thing to fade. The individuals in this collection were taken seven years apart, in 1885 and 1892, from Sanford and Old Town, Florida, where and when they may have had their own mates, long since lost and forgotten to us now. It is also possible this is their only pairing: lying on their sides in an acid-free box, the female on her left wing, the male on his right, a sympathetic symmetry, facing each other forever in the dark.

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I assume one more thing about Visitor X. I assume the Ivory-Billed was the only thing he ever took. This distinction is important. To take one thing is, perhaps, inspiration. To make a habit of it smacks of nothing more than pathology.

Consider, for a moment, the Blumberg collection. As of 1990, the Iowa bibliomane Stephen Blumberg had liberated—his word—23,600 rare books from at least 268 museums and libraries before a friend sold him out for a $56,000 bounty and the FBI took Blumberg into custody. By any measure, it's the largest book theft in U.S. history. The sheer feat of it is fascinating, the complicated motivations are curious, the fact that the collector became the collected is even a delicious bit of irony, but still none of it is awesome.

When I say awesome, I mean sublime. I mean ecstatic. I mean I ache to believe there are things in the world that have the power to transform us, and I'm sure at least some of them are housed in museums. Let's be clear: I am not advocating theft. I don't believe one needs to possess a thing in order to be illuminated by it. But I revel in the mere possibility that at any turn we might stumble on something so stunning it takes us out of ourselves for a moment, *compels* us in some manner, and leaves us changed—leaves us better, I hope—leaves us whole. I assume that whatever it was that inspired Visitor X, that magnificent intangible thing is perpetual. I assume Visitor X still relishes the bird. I assume that even now the Ivory-Billed is lit just so, that the skin itself seems to light the room.