

## Early Warning Systems

*I fell in with the snakes and the poison ranks of strangers. Please send me more yellow birds for the dim interior.*

– Mark Linkous

### **Eight years ago ...**

I remember reading a poem in which the character of Death, after a hiatus, returned, at their request, to his people. Without him (I seem to recall Death as a blond-haired boy), their lives lacked momentum, and the People had nothing to do but follow stray dogs and stare at grass. When he came back to work, the happiness of the People rose up "like a net to catch the delicate and plummeting bodies" of birds, which were the first visible creatures to go. (Microscopic things and bugs, and maybe even frogs had already started dying again, but nobody noticed.) It is a vivid and wonderful poem, and I apologize to you and to Stephen Dobyns for lancing it with plot summary, always the unwieldy weapon.

Two notions of this poem have lingered with me for almost a decade – that a bird might die in midflight, like we might in midstride, or midsummer or midsandwich. (I suppose, if I had ever given thought to it, I might have imagined the birds feeling ill and landing like retired golfers near a soft patch of moss. Or perhaps toppling gingerly out of a dogwood tree. Once, on a Florida sidewalk, I found a dead bird so brilliant in its chartreuse, it seemed unthinkable and maybe even unjust that its vitality had flown off without it.) And secondly, that birds are indicators of fragility (not of their own, of course; if you have ever seen a rush of chimney swifts storm their dwelling at dusk like so much smoke in reverse, you will know that they are not fainthearted creatures) – not indicators of their own fragility, but of ours.

### **Eight months ago. . .**

Although I wasn't thinking about this then, after the Eleventh (remember when eleven felt like one of the lucky numbers?) I drew birds – pastel colored, cartoon birds, but delicate and lifeless. Superheroes in full uniform would be carefully lifting little yellow wings to look for lesions. I have no particular interest in morbidity; I just knew that if I could draw what I was afraid of seeing, I could give it some manageable size and shape, and then I could name it and hold it and put it to the side of my desk in order to move on to other things. Without this activity, there was

only an enormous Unnamed Sinking Feeling and an edgy pit of sleeplessness.

### **Eight days ago ...**

Last week I was in a bookstore a few blocks from my house. A disheveled and slightly drunken man shoved his arm in the partially opened door, and emerging from his tightly clenched and cruddy fist was the yellow head of a bird. He had just "caught" this apparently feral parakeet on the sidewalk, after it had been crashing frantically into walls, and was asking five dollars for it. The bird did not stop biting the fleshy inside of the man's index finger the entire time we stood there. The storeowner gave us a box, addressed to "Clovis Books," and the box of bird and its new name were placed in my hands. All her textures were wrong then. Her squawking was deeply panicked and constant, her feathers too downy, her droppings too liquid; it had been a dismally dark day for old Clovis. Each day since, though, she has gotten a little more "right." She is certainly still nervous, but less nervous than she was before. She doesn't fly up in a flutter whenever I walk into the room anymore, but in general she would prefer that no one ever, for any reason, move abruptly. She seems to be living normally, or at least according to the expected standards one might have for a formerly feral parakeet; but she definitely pecks at her food staccato-style, always keeping herself well apprised of the potential proximity of hawks and drunks.

I apply my earlier ideas about birds as gauges of our own fragile state and concede that her condition is not so unlike ours, at this moment in time – the diminishing anxiety, the desire for cautious pacing, the urgent need for updated information. In light of these parallels, it seems a great argument for optimism that Clovis manages to lose herself so completely in salsa music, chirping on cue and sidestepping on her dowel with weekend attitude – the marvel of her resilience rivaled only by her infinite smallness.