

SILVER GHOSTS

Every winter, the ice on this lake forms later and vanishes sooner, rotting and fragile in the too-warm air. A few years from now, the birds will no longer come here at all: the birds that I watched with my father when I was a girl, and that you watched with me not as long ago, when you wore your small red snowsuit and pushed joyously out from the bank to spin on the gleaming white plate that the water had become. You stayed near me, where the ice was thick and safe, while I stood in the thickets of the last summer's greenbrier at the lake's southern edge and trained your grandfather's camera on the flights of snow geese. We heard them before we saw them. Their black-tipped wings whistled overhead like voices of ghosts.

The birds that came this year will go farther north soon, chasing the last of the crystal cold. You will go back to your city apartment, chasing a life that answers your wishes. Then the burning blue sky and my creaking old house will both be empty and quiet.

Today, you and I stand in last summer's greenbrier thickets to watch the birds come in. The woods behind us hide the old house where you grew up. I look at you and wonder when you became this image of me, frozen in time.

You say I have more words and time for my camera than you. You have only three decades to look back along, compared with my too-many, but you've already forgotten the thick white ice of your childhood, and you never saw the flash of color you made on it, the spirals of delight. Now you use words like *always* and *never* to sum up what you and I have been. You show me the total, circled in red: lacking.

My camera, your grandfather's before mine, reaches back to the long-ago past and etches images onto glass. I use it to trace ghosts of birds in silver, because I will be gone long before you, along with the lake ice.

I have no words to bring back the ghosts of gone winters. Instead I give you my birds,
frozen this way on the photographic plates. The silver-etched glass shows no earth or sky, no aching
past or shadowed future. These birds are perfect and free.