

for the first time a few months after she'd received Bobby and was shocked by the babel of bird languages: dozens of birds chirped, whistled, billed, and cooed in their cages under the wooden roof while their owners sipped tea, chatting or reading the newspapers. The air was fragrant with jasmine, ginger, rose petals, and other aromas she couldn't identify, but also with an undercurrent of stale feathers—an animal odor drifting under the mixture of tea and French perfume. Every single thing that hit her retinas and ears was piercing, glittering, and somehow liquid, unstable like the reflections of a semiprecious stone, as if the entire scene had been enclosed in a jade snow globe. Green reflections danced on the walls, twisting around the smoke swirls coming from all the pipes and cigarettes, and bits and pieces of interrupted sentences floated in the air:

“I told her before, it isn't so much . . .”

“But you know, she didn't . . .”

“And when I saw her yesterday . . .”

“. . . not lamb stew, pork ribs . . .”

“Yes, sweet and sour . . .”

“And then . . .”

“Because, think of it . . .”

She looked around to see if she recognized anyone, but her head was spinning, and all she could see were patches of blinding colors: red silk cheongsams with golden dragons, sky-blue and emerald-green cheongsams, canaries with soft, yellow feathers like chicks, Asian rosefinches, and parrots of all species, from the Australian rainbow, with its blue head, orange throat, and green back, to the white cockatoo, with its white crest, to the blue-and-yellow Macaw to the blue-feathered Amazon to the Australian ringneck, with its dark-blue head, to the black-billed and the yellow-billed Amazons to the blue-crowned lorikeet, with its dazzling mixture of reds, blues, and greens.

She found an empty table by the window and sat down, placing the cage on the empty chair next to her. Since other customers had let their birds out and the owners didn't seem to mind the flutter of wings and the feathers flying all over, she slowly opened Bobby's cage. Bobby stood still for a few seconds, then took two hesitant steps and stopped in the cage's open doorway. Before Odile could take a second breath, the bird flew out of the cage and from there, in a split second, out of the teahouse. Odile jumped off her chair and followed the goldfinch, which, after hitting

a red paper lantern under the roof, stopped, dazed, on the first tree. The goldfinch was on a branch low enough for Odile to catch it, so, very, very slowly, and not daring to breathe, she moved toward the tree, extending her hand. The bird was still, seemingly following her movements with a trancelike expression. But when Odile's hand darted forward, the bird took flight and stopped on the next tree, this time on a branch entirely out of reach.

“Please, Bobby, come down!” Odile pleaded, and Bobby answered with a short flutter, then flew to the next tree, but before she could even get there, the bird had already left the tree. Odile began to run after it, trying not to lose sight of the golden feathers, but when she stopped to take a breath, Bobby was nowhere in sight.

“Bobby, come back!” she screamed, and the few remaining bird walkers turned their heads. It was almost dark, and the only lights came from the teahouse. Bobby was nowhere. Odile's tears welled up, she began to run again, but she could barely distinguish the outlines of the trees. She stopped, breathless, shaking. Bobby was gone.

Alta Ifland is the author of two collections of prose poems (*Voice of Ice* and *The Snail's Song*) and two books of short stories (*Elegy for a Fabulous World* and *Death-in-a-Box*). Her book reviews and translations from French and Romanian have been published widely. She lives in Santa Cruz, California. “Walking the Bird” is an excerpt from her (unpublished) novel, *Longing for the Promised Land*.

MICHELE GIULVEZAN-TANNER

Homage to Pierre, 2018

Oil on canvas, 36 x 60 in



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