

MICHELE GIULVEZAN-TANNER

Gold Finch, 2018
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ALTA IFLAND

Walking the Bird

One day, after having seen Odile engaged in baby talk with a little green-feathered bird in a pet shop, Alex showed up with a goldfinch in a cage. It was a grayish creature with golden-spotted wings, throat, and tail, and a strong black bill that whistled all day long. Its cheerfulness was contagious, and no matter how down one might have been, one couldn't help feel a surge of joyful optimism at the sight of this creature, who, caged as it was, jumped about constantly and seemed to carry on dozens of dialogues with invisible interlocutors in its bird language without paying any attention to the iron bars it was surrounded by. It was a *joie de vivre* that extended from the bird's throat, touching everything and everyone, and Odile didn't fail to succumb to the bird's charm. She took the habit of consulting it whenever she was in doubt, or simply blabbered to it about whatever she happened to be doing at the moment, and the bird answered in various tones and intonations, for it had quite a rich repertoire. Sometimes the bird quarreled, and then its voice grew to a high pitch, sound after sound tumbling and spinning in a circle that carried with it all the day's worries, as if the bird understood everything and had a say in it. There was no doubt that this bird was moody and opinionated. Sometimes, when there were guests over and Odile wanted to show off her finch, the bird simply refused to open its mouth. It just sat there, hiding under its feathers with

a moping face and the silly eyes of a no-brain birdie. But no sooner were the guests gone than it regained its vocal abilities and sang all through the night. When Odile played the piano, its first reaction was of cautious listening. For a minute or two, it listened to the new intriguing melody, as if sniffing another, unknown animal, then it began to add its own sounds, in a rhythm that—and there was no doubt about it—imitated the foreign sounds.

No question, Bobby—for this was the name the bird seller had given it—was not your average goldfinch. Twice a week Odile took Bobby on walks down a street ten minutes from her apartment where all the bird owners from her neighborhood strolled, airing their feathery friends, most with cages in their hands, others with a bird on their shoulder or perched on their finger. It was there, on Bird Walk Road, that men and women of all social classes and from all walks of life strolled each afternoon with their pet birds under the mulberry trees, greeting each other and exchanging pleasant words or inquiring about their birds' health. Some of them resembled their pets in an uncanny way, the way some dog or cat owners resemble their animals, or a married man or woman their spouse after years of marriage.

A Caucasian man always in black suit and tie, with bushy, curly hair and a cane with a silver handle, sported a thin, crooked nose—an exact replica of the falcon perched on his left shoulder. The man's nose and the bird's beak stood proud in the jasmine-scented air, conscious of their uniqueness and spiteful of the smaller noses and beaks of the other walkers. An old English lady, all dolled up in a turn-of-the-century dress, graced the onlookers with the appearance of one who had just stepped off a stage. When her wigged, white-powdered head wasn't turned toward the tiny creature she carried in her cage, she smiled at the passersby or greeted vociferously Miss So-and-So, whom she hadn't seen in a long time and whose bird looked just marvelous.

Every thirty feet or so one could spot a wooden bench on which the walkers occasionally rested and gathered the strength necessary to reach the teahouse at the end of the road. There, the regulars dropped by every afternoon between five and seven, and after hanging their cages on the hooks descending from the ceiling, they sat at round white marble tables and ordered tea. Odile entered the teahouse

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*.

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Homage to Pierre, 2018

Oil on canvas, 36 x 60 in



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