

Julia Laurel Mueller

A Genial Anticipation

Merrill Gilfillan. *The Warbler Road*, Flood Editions 2010.

Plainspoken, modest, arresting, Merrill Gilfillan writes in his own idiom. *The Warbler Road* turns on the writer's perception of warblers. He stays close to the birds, always. But the birds do not stay in place, and what results is a meandering taxonomy of perception's vicissitudes.

In addition to moments of luminous presence, there are meditations on warbler absence. On seeing, unable to hear, a grasshopper sparrow singing. On ephemeral traces: a stone beside a creek, "wet tracks of what must have been an ouzel [American dipper] just disturbed." On an orange-crowned warbler, lingering in imagination: "I'll squeeze out the back way, not to disturb [him.] By then, I always think he must have a light sparkle of golden pollen-dust on him, after a morning of browsing through that ocean-foam of flowers." On a warbler genially anticipated, in a future the writer will have moved on from: "I'm betting a yellow warbler will find that inviting, greenwood grove upstream where I waded across yesterday. He's just not here yet. That song will add a sharp-edged anti-mirage note to the valley."

The Warbler Road names a place in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia where many warblers may be encountered; and it names a place for warblers in the mind. Gilfillan is also a poet and fiction writer. His sphere of reference in these essays—West Virginia, the Ohio of his youth, west to the sparser warbler country of Colorado where he lived for years, south to the Chiricahuas in Arizona near the Mexican border, across the Atlantic to Hampshire, England—makes the small world new. "I began daydreaming the Warbler Road as a sort of Way, a way of ordering one's priorities in life so as to proceed, at a core aesthetic level, from warbler to warbler . . ."

He describes what it is like, desiring one warbler (a chestnut-sided), when another appears instead (a black-throated green), teaching the unmarked transition from the desired to the unasked-for. He anticipates a warbler not yet met, the (Old-World) Dartford warbler in England, training himself on his local Wilson's, for its size and shape, "a sort of stoking of the potential and a running of the scale." How well he describes the preparation, ever insufficient, for a fleeting glimpse in an unfamiliar place. To this very end, I am steeping myself in his evocation of a Swainson's warbler in "A Glimpse," because having

now lived in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia almost five years, I am impatient to go south to New River Gorge, where they are reputed to nest.

It is in the very privation of detail that I am convinced of Gilfillan's Swainson's, seen somewhere outside Charleston: "There it was, crouched, low, brown, brief, glancing sharply right, left—then off again into the thickety." How that will help me to find one when I get to New River Gorge at last, I cannot tell you exactly. But it prepares my mind, senses, imagination, as even the best field guides cannot. Not only the evocation of glimpsing convinces, but also Gilfillan's way of tucking it in, closing the essay with the woman who helped him find the bird:

Shreve, that's the name, Anne Shreve. I believe that congenial woman, too, gave me a parting pastry for the drive, a brownie or some such. Her husband had a car dealership in Charleston, and I later saw his giant portrait on a billboard or two as I wended my way back out through the city and started north.

(A West Virginia painter named Anne Shreve passed away in 2016, as per an obituary in the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*.) Gilfillan savors the glimpse in the way he "wends" his way back: from the memory of the bird through the memory of the human, a continuous path.

Many bird books nowadays are inflected by a language of scientific discovery, promising to unlock secrets and reveal inner worlds of the life from which twenty-first-century people feel increasingly estranged. There is sometimes desperation in the 'race' or the 'rush' to find things out before it is too late, such that panic crowds out wonder. Not that Gilfillan lacks a naturalist's concern for accuracy, but he peers up at his winged subjects from below, never forcing a confidence. It is good to be in the company of a writer in no hurry, who makes no promises, who waits on birds with his "begging cup" and shares what he is given.