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## ON THE HABITS OF SWALLOWS

A month since I swam out to the middle of the pond toward them, trying to convince the sky I was a turtle, a log, a bit of nothing. Hoping murk would hide the pale articulations of my legs. A month since I knew I had to try and write it. *What were you waiting for?* It happened more than once. *More than once?* The second time I swam out hard, teeth clamped because someone—a woman with three kids—had found the path and five-foot beach I'd come to imagine mine. The girls were loud and presumed I'd think their splashes cute. *And were they?* From the middle of the pond, distant, they kind of were. Some manifestation of human joy, messy and concerned with its own bright surfaces. *Okay. Sure. But that's not it, is it?—No.*

But I want to suspend for a bit, hover like I did treading, oaks ovaling the sky, road-sound almost ignorable because the rest of it was so still, so idyllic, so self-in-a-painting.

*Get on with it.* I almost can't. To put it down lets you evaluate, opine, judge. *Get over yourself.* OK. I was trying to be nothing to startle from because in the low light of not-quite-sunset close to a hundred tree swallows rose, gathered, then came low to hit the water,

hit the water, like skipped stones that could lift and shake themselves and rise to circle again. They were going for water striders, which covered the surface like spilled pepper. They were like bits of the day given appetite and form. Around my head, at eye level, their small bodies hit the surface and then rose up through their own strange, machine-like voices. Was it Aristotle who thought they wintered buried in the pond, somehow breathing there? *Aristotle, yes.* Well,

it almost seemed like they were making forays toward it, summer coming to an end and this aggregation of swallows free from roosting and feeding, getting ready for the next season.

*Linnaeus*

*thought it too, you know.*

The point is I was in the water and they, beaks audibly snapping closed, blue neck-feathers glinting —*not really blue*—they hit and hit the surface around my head, and at last, at last I was the surface, too. Or at least as close to that as I could ever get.

## FIRST GOOD VIEW OF A BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER

Alone. Shin-deep in still water at the edge of mangroves. All week  
and all the week before I'd been hearing them, ear tuned  
by recordings downloaded and gathered—*Baja Passerines*—  
playing as background to email, dishes,  
the various domestic.

Once there it's                      verdin.                      Ash-throated  
flycatcher.  
   Canyon wren                      rock wren                      and everywhere  
   black-throated sparrow.

When you find a bird killed under a pine, the feathers  
on brown needles seem impossible.  
Not surprise at violence in the woods, but at the plentitude.  
Scattered from trunk to trunk and  
   then again under greenbriar and across  
bearberry. No bones, just drift.

Gnatcatchers sound like tiny red-tailed hawks with head colds.

   I've heard a man say that if  
you pulled a magnificent frigatebird out of the sky, held  
   its long, hooked bill, plucked it bare, stripped the meat,  
then weighed  
   the feathers against the bones, the scale would tip  
toward feather. Do I care if it's true? There are stories told not  
   to impart fact                      but to stop us  
in our naming and numbers.                      To move toward wonder. Like  
  
the one about old pelicans starving because their eyes  
have been ruined by a life of plunging.

Not true.

And the gnatcatcher  
has little to startle attention or startles because  
it is small        not boldly striped  
or spotted        but soft blue.  
Not shy, but busy  
with a life deep in foliage and so hidden until  
you are at last  
alone,  
and the motion comes out of the shadow  
and onto a bare branch,  
and the bird's soft body,  
eye outlined in white. It is gleaning insects. It  
is preening, scratching.

At last, at last        I don't care about anything  
other than this little, useless bird.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, *Poliptila caerulea*