

Flash Fiction Contest

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Peeks &  
Valleys

## Bird Watching

by Eva Schultz

John knew he should sleep, but it wasn't worth trying. All he could think of was the yellow light, the minivan driver too anxious to get to the highway, Stephanie still hanging on, even though hope had already let go and fallen into the darkness. She would not wake up, they said, and he ought to begin making arrangements.

They told him she couldn't hear him as he sat holding her hand, but he wouldn't have said a word anyway. He had never told her what was inside of him. Even at home, after almost a year of marriage, he still felt like her secret admirer. As she lay beside him in the shadowy stillness, he could only stare in silence, as if watching an oriole perched in a fir. She was so private – didn't want to be touched much, kept her smiles and words rare. Her reticence only intensified his passion: she was his now, yet he was still in pursuit.

Since he wasn't going to sleep, he went into their bedroom and approached her mirrored dressing table. It was surreal to touch the delicate perfume bottles – like tiny ice sculptures – and the silver handled comb and brush. They were hers, and he would no more disturb them than a nest of sky-colored robin's eggs. He opened the little drawer while guilt's fingernails dug into his neck.

Here was his grail: her diary. He had never seen it this close. When he walked in on her writing in it, she would hunch her lovely shoulders and shield the pages from his eyes.

His hands seemed too rough to be touching such a treasure. He stumbled back to the bed and sat, breathing hard.

The book's cover was red satin, embellished with bead that pinched bits of light from the bedside lamp. His fingers hesitated. As much as this strong-box of her thoughts had always fascinated him, it inspired a paralytic reverence. If he was ever to read her most private words, it should be as an old man, holding onto the last of her heart after laying her to rest.

He mustn't open the cover. If he never did, there would be no pastel sympathy cards, no reeking lilies on the table in the hall. She would come home, and he would resume the silence of bird watching.

To open the book now was to startle the turtledove, to send her fleeing into a misty sky.

But he couldn't untake the book from the drawer, any more than he could erase the last twelve hours. His breath stopped and the room went cold with death.

He opened the cover. The pages ruffled like the plumage of a cardinal flying into a snowy sky. He wept so hard that he could only touch the dear pages with one hand, catching his tears in the other palm. The parchment felt like her luxurious forearms under his awkward fingers.

He blotted his face with his sleeve and skimmed the neat rows of black fountain pen script.

*I didn't think marriage would be like this.... Ethan is going to want an answer, and he won't wait forever...don't know how to tell John...need Ethan's arms around me...never felt this way...love...desire forever.*

The lines all ran together into one throbbing sentence. He could see it as an acrostic down the edge of each page: "I don't love you."

John closed the cover, grazing his palm on the rough beading. He could still feel her slender shape in his arms. He wanted to run to her bedside, touch her hair, shout her sins in her ear. He might kiss every inch of her neck and then take the little gold shackle off her hand. Perhaps he would smash her bruised face, or maybe he would just hold her against his chest forever.

He wanted to cry the nauseating tears out, but they were too deep, scalding him inside.

The cell phone screamed a frantic rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In." He mashed buttons until the screen lit up. It took all his breath to say, "Hello?"

"John! It's Becky." Stephanie's sister laughed into the phone. "It's a miracle – she woke up! They say she's going to make it, after all!"

*Eva Schultz is a business proposal writer from Plainfield, IL. She has drafted two novels and many short stories. She recently published a six-part short story in ChiMe, the Chicago Area Mensa newsletter.*

