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The Black and White

SARA CROSBY

More often than not, when a bird flies into a window, it doesn't die from a broken neck. Even though it falls to the sidewalk, with its beak bent or broken off, its neck unnaturally twisted, and its head slack, it most likely died of a concussion. Birds, it turns out, have a very sophisticated system of vertebrae, which protects them from breaking their necks; unfortunately, they also have very large brains, protected only by very thin skulls (with the strength of a fingernail in young birds). So when they hit a window with a staccato *thunk*, their brains are shocked by the impact—maybe there's a fracture, maybe there's bleeding inside the brain—and they sail to the ground, landing with a feathery *poof*.

Nationwide, more than one billion birds die after flying into windows each year. That's more than 300 dying per minute during the fall and spring migration months. It varies depending on the size of the dead birds, but volunteers who pick them up estimate that 300 dead birds is roughly enough to fill up the kind of tall white garbage bag you line your kitchen trash can with, so that's more than 333,000 kitchen trash bags of birds per year. Millions of migratory birds, who are on their way to Canada's boreal forest for a summer of relaxation and procreation, negotiate with New York City's crop of buildings and skyscrapers each year. The numbers are fuzzy, but easily thousands of them slam into the windows of midtown office buildings because they mistook the glassy reflection of the sky or of Central Park for the real thing. So thousands of dead birds end up lying on the sidewalk in front of Brooks Brothers, waiting, as men and women in business suits swerve to avoid them, for a maintenance worker to sweep them into an upright dustpan with a pert stroke of the wrist.

The dead bird that was in my freezer until recently didn't technically die from colliding with a window. Nor did he die from a run-in with any of the other more popular man-made bird killers, like communication towers, electric transmission lines, or even wind turbines. He also escaped the appetites of house cats, who kill an estimated 100 million birds per year. In fact, his problem was a barely visible strip of wire mesh fencing on Charles Street that was rigged to keep rats and other street animals out of an apartment building's yard. He saw some bushes or maybe even a birdfeeder beyond the fencing, took a supreme blow to the head, and was reduced to a little flaccid blip on the concrete.

My father is a bryologist, a collector of mosses, and my mother was the daughter of a bryologist, so the impulse to accumulate things for any kind of study or measurement was not discouraged during my childhood. Our lives were peppered with the runoff of my father's professional collecting. Sometimes there was a spare plant press in the downstairs game closet, probably waiting to be transferred to its more permanent position in the trunk of my father's car. Stacks of homemade paper collecting packets, lumpy and bulging with moss specimens, sometimes sat on the kitchen counter or in the cool of the basement, smelling mulchy, almost edible.

The specimens my brother and I pined for, though, were usually from the fauna realm. We knew if you flipped over a flat stone in the creek by our house, you might get to see a crawfish, reorganizing its appendages in alarm. Or if you helped to turn the compost pile behind the garage, you'd definitely have to pause periodically to build up your tolerance to, and eventual appreciation for, garter snakes. Beetles were prized—usually chased, kill-jarred, and pinned into a wooden collection box. Voles, dying from feline-inflicted puncture wounds, were inspected, turned over with a stick, and then maybe buried.

When a downed bird was involved, though, my parents' standard response was to leave the bird alone. Birds—and animals, in general—my parents explained, were dirty, possibly diseased, and therefore shouldn't be directly touched. In addition, my parents also stressed that humans should try to stay out of nature's affairs. So, for example, when a bald robin fledgling spilled out of its nest in the honeysuckle on the garage, we understood that simply

returning it to its family would be futile since our foreign scent would make its mother instinctively reject it.

But then, at some point in the late '70s, my father's office at the Missouri Botanical Garden was relocated to a new, two-story modern building made of dark, reflective glass. Sometimes, while my father sat at his desk inspecting a specimen with his gold-rimmed glasses pushed down to the end of his nose, he'd hear a sudden *whap* against his office window. When he looked up, there was nothing to see, no smudge or smear, an unmistakable sign of an avifaunal window collision. It turned out that the Botanical Garden, despite its mission to preserve, display, and study plants and nature, had a new research building made of trick mirrors for birds. My father, seeing the opportunity for a new collecting project, rummaged around in the yew bushes surrounding the building, bagged the bird, and put it in the freezer of his office fridge. From then on, occasionally, when we as a family discovered, say, a crumpled-up chickadee that had ricocheted off the kitchen window, we would pick it up for my father's burgeoning new collection.

And so, last September on Charles Street, I picked the dead bird up. It was a black and white warbler, whose streaky body was the size of a small jalapeño pepper. I was out walking my golden retriever, Hank, and when I picked the warbler up with a clear plastic poop bag, it seemed to weigh as much as a handful of leaves. Other than its rumpled undercoat, which was puffed up in chaotic tufts around its wings, it seemed outwardly unharmed: no jagged, broken wings, no chipped beak. Looking at it more closely back at my apartment, I suddenly felt very large and awkward in my cargo shorts and bulky sneakers compared to the warbler's needle-thin feet. Its black and white plumage reminded me of the intricate arrangement of notes on a sheet of music—so coordinated and tidy—while I stood over it like a fairytale ogre who was sneaking off to admire a stunned lamb or one of nature's other flawless beauties. But then, driven mostly by raw childhood associations, I sealed the warbler up in a Ziploc baggie and settled it in my freezer between a pint of vanilla ice cream and a ball of pie-crust dough.

On the way to the subway that morning, I called my brother, who was already at his office in Washington, DC.

"Matthew, guess what I found this morning?"

"I don't know, what?"

"A black and white warbler on the sidewalk."

"Cool," said Matthew, stretching the word out into several syllables. "Did you pick it up?"

"Yeah."

"Awesome. You put it in your freezer?"

"Yeah," I said again, feeling giddy, as if I'd captured recess time and put it in my freezer.

"Dammit, that's cool."

I waited a few seconds, holding my breath through a patch of Waverly Place that smelled like human urine.

"Dude," said Matthew.

"Yeah?"

"You should totally get it stuffed."

"I know, right?!"

"You want me to look up some taxidermists on the Web right quick?"

I told him I was getting ready to get on the subway and that I'd start Googling when I got to my desk in Brooklyn.

"Dammit, that's so damn cool," he said before we hung up. "All right, listen, call me back and let me know what the taxidermist says, okay?"

Just before my first visit to a taxidermy studio, I was pretty worried about throwing up. My imagination kept obsessively riffing on the moment of the first incision, slathering on unrealistic details involving spurting blood and the sticky, gooey sound of someone reaching their hand into a stew of organs. What if my stomach couldn't handle it? What if I sat down on a stool beside the workbench, ready to ask questions during the afternoon-long taxidermy project, and suddenly had to scamper off to vomit in the scrap-fur bin?

Back then, taxidermy was a mystery to me. Now, after several months of taxidermy excursions, giant projects, like a spread of tapirs scavenging in the jungle at the Museum of Natural History, are still puzzling, but the basic process for birds is clear. A mounting project begins when a taxidermist opens his double-wide deep freezer and rummages through the differently sized, tightly rolled, and taped plastic bags until he finds the bird he wants to defrost for a day or so. Then he makes a dainty incision in the defrosted bird's abdomen, and, using massaging motions with his fingers, he pulls the skin away

from the entire body, pausing to clip the bones that attach the bird's legs and wings. He removes the eyes and the skull, but usually keeps the beak. By then, his hands are lightly gloved in bodily fluids; his fingernails are brownish with blood. He constructs a replica of the bird's body out of wood, wool, or foam; drapes the skin over it; and adds structure by pegging the bird's new body to its legs, wings, back, and head with wires. He sews the bird's abdomen shut. He works the bird into the pose he wants and adds glass eyes. Finally, with wedding-day zeal and obsession, he arranges the feathers. There's smoothing and petting, tucking away the gray down feathers with the lead end of a pencil so they don't interfere with the more decorative outer feathers, and ordering and reordering each segment of the fanned tail—all tireless, repeated attempts to get the coat of feathers to behave naturally, to fall into place with the fluid effortlessness that really only a living bird can achieve.

That first day, I didn't get sick. I sat on a stool next to Frank Mucha, a mid-60s Pennsylvania taxidermist who smelled like mint and whose specialty was actually mounting deer heads. Once he made the first delicate cut into the lower belly of a defrosted ruffed grouse, I knew I'd be fine. No liver-colored worms squirreled out at us, and there wasn't a jumble of bloody organs, just the grayish beige of past-prime chicken meat. Frank ran his fingers between the grouse's flesh and skin, gently working them apart down to the rump of tail feathers. As he reached for a stubby pair of scissors to cut the left leg just below what would be the knee on a human, I leaned forward. The crinkle of the disposable plastic apron he'd given me to wear made Frank look up, as if he'd forgotten I was there. "I gotta get a new pair of snips," he said, tilting the scissors in the overhead lamp to inspect their apparent dullness. Then, as Quiet Riot's "Cum on Feel the Noize" came on the nearby transistor radio, Frank nuzzled the scissors into a crevice of flesh, skin, and sticky feathers and severed the grouse's right leg.

By that point, even though I thought the idea of having my warbler mounted and displayed on my mantle was irresistible, I knew it was also illegal. In 1918, Congress passed the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, or the MBTA, which saved hundreds of species from the destruction, and sometimes extinction, brought on by the effects of commercial bird trade. The MBTA essentially bans any human contact with migratory birds. You may not kill, capture, or pursue them; you may not collect their eggs or nests or even their feathers; and you

may not pick them up if they are dead. Taxidermists know all this, and so—with the exception of the permitted, but regulated game birds from hunting—they will not get near a migratory bird. (In fact, two out of the three taxidermists I called after talking to my brother the day I found my warbler both told me to immediately throw it away and then suddenly needed to hang up.)

I was interested in keeping things legal with my warbler, at least while I weighed the option of doing something illegal, like stuffing it. I contacted the Fish and Wildlife Service in Albany, where a woman named Joanne talked me through the possibility of getting a salvage permit, which lets people temporarily possess a migratory bird. However, the salvage-permit application wanted legitimacy I didn't have: it required me to include authorization from the scientific or educational institution that would receive any salvaged specimens I collected when I was finished studying them. So instead, I joined a team of local Audubon Society volunteers and walked a weekly route, scavenging for window-collision victims.

The program was called Project Safe Flight, and my orientation packet included a piece of paper stating that I was covered under the Audubon Society's salvage permit. The packet also included all the items I would need to scour the sidewalks on my Wednesday-morning loop around the World Financial Center: a map of the route that indicated all its high-risk glassy areas, rubber gloves, Ziploc bags (gallon-sized for woodcocks, sandwich-sized for warblers), a sharpie marker, a dark green hankie for picking up injured birds, and several hole-punched paper lunch bags for transporting injured birds.

In the early morning each Wednesday, the World Financial Center broiled with people. Mercantile traders, sporting prep-school-style jackets and the pallor of stress, huddled in the 40-degree weather to smoke before the opening bell. Ferries from New Jersey disgorged men whose belts were lined with communication devices, and women with umbrellas and soft coolers filled with lunch. Livery drivers inspected their fingernails or reorganized their trunks while waiting for passengers. I was most concerned with maintenance workers and security guards, though. Since they were the only people who shared any interest in the concrete that made up my route, their presence made me anxious. The first couple of Wednesdays, I spent the half-hour walk to the Financial Center hoping and wishing that I would not find any birds; then, on the walk home, after having found nothing, I'd feel guilty—what if

there *had been* birds but the maintenance man had swept them up just before he power-sprayed the Winter Garden plaza?

At some point, I just started making friends with both maintenance men and security people. I handed out Project Safe Flight brochures, which I kept along with all my other paraphernalia in various pockets of my raincoat. I shook hands, gave them my cell phone number, and talked about dead birds. Once, a red-faced security guard named Chuck showed me where he'd seen several dead birds earlier in the week. As we walked along the side of 2 World Financial Center, he pointed at the knee-high hedge beside us.

"Whenever I see them, I usually just sweep them into the bushes," he told me in a thick New York accent. "People complain otherwise. They see the bird and it's horrible to see, and then they look at me like they want me to bring it back to life." When I asked him what the birds looked like—if they were little, for example—he shook his head and smiled. "These birds, you can tell, aren't from around here. They're too good-looking to be from around here!"

At the end of the spring migration, we dozen or so Project Safe Flight volunteers found only 72 dead birds after eight weeks of walking four different routes throughout Manhattan. The project's manager said the total was unexpectedly low and was probably due to a cool spring and delayed foliage: if the trees that surround glassy windows aren't leafy, birds aren't interested in them, real or reflected. Despite the low numbers, the project's data confirmed what the Audubon Society has long known: some of New York's most familiar buildings also kill the most birds. The glass room that houses the Egyptian Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, overlooks Central Park and therefore kills lots of birds. The Jacob Javits Center kills even more. But Project Safe Flight's biggest killer is a U.S. Postal Service mail-processing facility on Ninth Avenue in Chelsea; during the fall 2006 migration, one volunteer remembers collecting 33 dead birds, mainly woodcocks, from the building's sidewalks. (Recently, after years of negotiating, New York City Audubon convinced the USPS to install screens over the facility's windows, which ironically are purely decorative and have nothing behind them but concrete. The building's number of bird kills is now almost zero.)

I was lucky. I didn't find any dead birds. I did do a weekly double take at the same disintegrating orange peel near the north entrance of 4 World

Financial Center. And I did find a song sparrow who had slammed into the same window twice; I used my green hankie to bag him and then taxied him to a veterinary volunteer at Animal General on the Upper West Side. Her name was Rita, and she was wearing her horseback-riding outfit. The sparrow spent two days recovering, and then Rita left me a voice mail saying she'd released him in Central Park and that he hoped to never be back.

The project was a great distraction, and being covered under the Audubon Society's salvage permit helped me feel a little less crooked about the little plastic-bagged warbler in my freezer. It was hard to admire it in my freezer, though. Sometimes I'd squint into its baggie on my way to the ice trays, again relieved that it hadn't been swept up and sent to the indignities and disgrace of a landfill-bound garbage bag. But the door of our New York apartment's freezer wasn't all that respectable either. Despite what Joanne at the Fish and Wildlife Service said, I wanted the warbler out in the open. I wanted it displayed, like family photographs or hydrangeas from the garden. I wanted guests to be able to study it, as they studied the bound spines on our bookshelves.

In 1803, when one could still see thousands of white pelicans on the Ohio River, or forests heavy with millions of passenger pigeons, John James Audubon arrived from France. He was 18 and quickly became known for his fidgety energy and rough English. He'd already started drawing birds in France, but in America he began to think of his work as more than just scientific profiles of lifeless specimens. He became focused on trying to bring birds to life through his drawings; he wanted to permanently maintain the beauty of birds in their natural setting in an artful way, or, as he put it, in a way that was "pleasing to every person."

The problem with this, of course, was that in order to get a bird to pose for his sketchbook, Audubon had to go out and shoot it, which created his lifelong challenge of trying to portray the beauty of a living bird while looking at a very dead bird. In his *Ornithological Biography*, the scientific essays that accompanied his *Birds of America* collection of prints, Audubon recalled that as a nature-obsessed child, he'd begun to recognize that "the moment a bird was dead, however beautiful it had been when in life, the pleasure arising from the possession of it became blunted." Throughout his life he grew more skilled at combating this problem: he developed ways to quickly pose a freshly killed bird using a wooden board and wire; he always

tried to make his subject life-sized, no matter if it were a warbler or a pelican; and he often used poses that made it seem as if the birds were making eye contact with the viewer.

Dave Tuttle, a bird taxidermist in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, is somewhat of a modern-day version of Audubon. He has Audubon's same restlessness; graying, wavy hair; and slightly receding hairline. He still uses names left over from Audubon's time for certain birds, as many hunters do: my house sparrow is his English sparrow; my female long-tailed duck is his oldsquaw hen. He also shares Audubon's habit of making meals out of the meat from his subjects—he once held up a couple of chukar partridge bodies, all skinned, gutted, and wrapped in plastic, and asked, only half jokingly, “Should I just put these in your pocketbook?” And, like Audubon, Dave Tuttle loves to shoot guns. He likes to sit in the woods in a full-body camouflage suit that's designed to make him look like a tree branch. He likes the sport of shooting, the years of tradition behind hunting, and the yap of his dogs working. Especially, though, he likes birds.

“I really love birds, man,” he told me one day in his studio, “because they're moving 50 miles an hour.” He leaned closer to a vice-gripped mount of a wood duck, inspecting what looked like plaster casts on its feet. “So many people deer hunt, but with deer hunting, it's just so boring. You just walk out and start shooting. With birds, I like that you have to consider their habitat and their food and their mating habits.”

I was sitting in an office desk chair across the wooden workbench from Dave, watching and listening and trying not to lean back too far or else I'd get my ponytail tangled in the steel brush of the bird flesher on the counter behind me. “So,” I said, as Dave switched from the duck's feet to adding a strip of blue photography tape to its fanned-out tail feathers, “you're out hunting for a lot of the same reasons I go out with my binoculars.”

Dave laughed, which, like all his laughter after what sounds like years of smoking, turned into a phlegmy cough. “Yeah,” he said when he'd recovered. “Kind of.”

Once during my time with Dave and his assistant Bob Coughlin, I met the glassy stare of a mounted canvasback—or maybe it was a bufflehead or a hooded merganser—and commented on how amazing it was that people were allowed to shoot birds like that, which, when compared to Audubon's time,

currently have relatively small populations. After all, I told him, these days, sightings in the wild of most of the birds mounted in his studio would make a very successful morning of bird watching. And even though Dave knew I wasn't an animal rights activist, and even though he knew about my frozen black and white warbler ("We can't stuff it for you," he'd said, seconds after I first told him about it), he looked down at his sneakers, smoothed down his hair, and picked a clear plastic bag up from the workbench.

"See, hunting is not the problem," he said, shaking open the bag with an aggressive swish. "It's habitat destruction that's the problem. For example, a ruffed grouse is a totally wild bird that needs a lot of habitat. It's not hunters and hunting." Bob, who often punctuated things Dave said with, "Yep," or "That's right," stood quietly next to the workbench, tossing half a dozen skinned-out house sparrows in a pail of corn-cob grit.

"Well, actually," Dave said, raising his voice a little, "I can't say that, because hunting's the reason birds are protected historically." He was referring, of course, to the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. It was apparent, as Dave went on to describe how nineteenth-century market hunters on the Chesapeake Bay could unload a cannonball and collect an entire flock of canvasbacks, that he respected the MBTA. After all, one of the results of the MBTA was the creation of state wildlife management agencies, which, due to annual open seasons and bag limits, allowed him to legitimately live like Audubon, as a naturalist who, with equal passion, both admires and hunts birds.

When he paused and scanned the studio for his pack of cigarettes, I asked him if his admiration for a bird had ever overridden his desire to shoot it. He thought long enough to locate the cigarettes on a catalog-ridden desk. He stood between the desk and a soaring blue-winged teal vice-gripped to a nearby shelf, with the unlit cigarette in his hand.

"Yeah, I remember one time I was sitting up in the woods on a day even nicer than today, and I saw this *big* turkey come into the clearance in front of me." He looked at the end of his cigarette. "The sun hit his feathers, and you could see all the iridescent colors. And I was just overcome."

"Wow," I said. "And so what did you do?"

"Shot him!" He launched his phlegmy laugh.

"Damn," I said, glancing up at a wall of the studio that was lined with dozens of taxidermy-competition ribbons and plaques. "I thought you were going to tell me that you were overcome, and so you *didn't* shoot it."

“Oh, that would never happen,” Dave said, walking toward the door to smoke his cigarette.

“You don’t know Dave,” Bob added, still tossing the sparrow skins. “If there’s a gun in his hand, he’s going to pull the trigger.”

Dave stood in the studio’s open doorway, looking out at his pen of hunting dogs. “I did sit there, though,” he said, “and I really enjoyed watching him.”

It’s most obvious, though, from his studio’s collection of owls, waterfowl, and wild turkeys in permanent perching and soaring poses, that Dave Tuttle also shares Audubon’s desire to bring dead birds back to life. Once, as he watched a pair of Eastern phoebes, Audubon reported looking “so intently on their innocent attitudes that a thought struck my mind like a flash of light, that nothing after all could ever answer my enthusiastic desires to represent nature, than to attempt to copy her in her own way, alive and moving!” Audubon made thousands of sketches and outlines of birds, relentlessly practicing how to express on paper not just what they looked like, but how they moved and how they behaved when they were alive. And his life’s work, whether you love birds or not, is awesome: by so artfully documenting actual birds in their true surroundings, he does manage to keep them, metaphorically at least, alive. (This is especially true of the now extinct specimens he portrayed, like the Carolina parakeet or the passenger pigeon.)

Dave Tuttle’s work, like Audubon’s, is also exceptional. The first time I visited Dave’s studio was in March 2007, and it was filled with wild turkeys. I stood in front of one of them, a male in his strutting position, and thought of the time my husband Mark and I were hiking in Westchester County and met the calm leaf-crackle of a flock of wild turkeys. We were on our way to see some migratory waterfowl, so I just kept walking, thinking that we could enjoy the turkeys as they cautiously moved out of our path. We’d taken about 20 steps and were watching the flock do their prehistoric slink down an incline to our left when we heard a loud gush of air and saw a gobbler fully strutting about 15 feet from us, looking directly at Mark. Tail feathers fanned, wings pointing toward the ground, red wattle jiggling, he was perfectly posed, like the stereotypical turkey that’s tirelessly depicted among pilgrims and Indians in Thanksgiving motifs. If it had suddenly raised its foot to turn showily to the left and then the right, the strutting turkey in Dave’s studio could have been the same bird. It was eerily real.

Dave's birds were so seductively real that I often caught myself thinking he was magical, as if he had some god-like power to recreate birds. But his talent has a very simple, hard-earned source. For example, for years he's hidden in the woods, watching birds. He knows their motions, their posture, their feather coloring and arrangement, and their mannerisms so well that he can effortlessly reconstruct them in his workshop. He's also compulsive about detail. As Bob dried and prepped the skinned-out house sparrows, I watched Dave make the sparrow bodies, starting with an arms-length block of polyurethane foam. It took him at least 45 minutes of fast-paced work to produce one sparrow body the size of his thumb: he took measurements; he sawed; he took more measurements; he shaped the foam with sandpaper to its get exact size and shape, periodically stopping to run his fingers over the body's developing shoulders; he made and attached the bird's neck, a cotton-covered wire bent to create a perching pose. When he was finished and passed it to Bob so he could begin fitting the skin, Dave didn't take a break to smoke or chat before starting on the next one.

But Dave's obsessive quest to recapture nature's beauty in a mount was an unnatural and brutish process. In fact, the way taxidermy toggles back and forth between dogged natural beauty and brutal lifelessness began to increasingly disorient me. If Dave were mounting, say, a ruffed grouse—his favorite bird to hunt—it would be unrecognizable for half the taxidermy process. I've never seen one alive, but apparently a male ruffed grouse has a large black ruff, or feathery collar, around his neck; his posture is erect and proud, and his movements pertly exhibit his ruff and his turkey-like tail plumage. After skinning it, Dave would turn the remaining coat of skin and feathers completely inside out, and it would become an off-white lumpy mess that would look a lot like a mound of the spongy flatbread you're served in Ethiopian restaurants. Even when the skin is flipped so the feathers face outward again, it still looks more like roadkill—matted and oily and flat. And it garners the same response as roadkill: whenever I saw skinned-out birds, particularly larger birds, I had an automatic urge, probably brought on by the revulsion and shame of mutilation, to just look away.

When they are finished, Dave's mounts seem more like pieces of art, objects to be admired. And originally, that was what I had imagined for my black and white warbler: I, like Dave and like many hunters, wanted to have a perfectly preserved bird perched on my mantle to resurrect its natural beauty. After a

while, though, I was too familiar with taxidermy; regardless of Dave's ability to ultimately restore a bird's natural beauty, I would look at a mount and see only a very, almost exhaustively dead animal. And I just couldn't imagine my warbler ending up like the dozens and dozens of birds I'd seen in taxidermy workshops: those mounts convey the belief that there is an abundance of birds out there, that they are such a commodity that they should become merely decorative, that their glass-eyed stares represent nothing other than their status as beautiful hunting souvenirs.

Back in the '70s, when his accumulation of dead birds started to crowd his reserves of coffee beans, my father called a colleague at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Then he packed the dead birds in a Styrofoam chest of dry ice and shipped it to the Department of Vertebrate Zoology. Someone from the Division of Birds sifted through the dead birds and chose to add several to the museum's collection. In the spring of 1974, according to the Smithsonian's online database, my father is credited with collecting an ovenbird, a ruby-throated hummingbird, and lastly, a black and white warbler.

After exhausting the idea of taxidermy, I slowly admitted that my warbler couldn't permanently rest in my freezer door. So I called my uncle, who directs the Florida Audubon Society and who, after jokingly telling me to have it stuffed, said that his organization didn't have any use for a black and white warbler from New York City. Then, at the end of volunteering with Project Safe Flight, I contacted an organization that studied wind-turbine collisions, which was supposed to be given the dead birds we'd found on our routes. After some digging, however, I learned that the Project Safe Flight birds were destined to be placed at wind-turbine sites and then monitored until either a wild animal arrived to eat them or a turbine employee found them and threw them away.

Finally, I followed my dad's example and found Kim Bostwick, curator of birds and mammals at Cornell University's Museum of Vertebrates. When I arrived with a warbler in a soft-cooler of ice over my shoulder, Kim, with the deliberate calm that reminded me of my father on his moss-collecting trips, reached for a notepad on her desk and wrote down the bird's history, mainly exactly where and when I'd found him. There was a tiny refrigerator under one of her lab tables, and she knelt down to seat my warbler next to several

containers of soymilk. It happened fast, while I was reziping my soft-cooler. The refrigerator door shut with a muffled thump, and I wondered if that would be the last time I'd see the warbler. Then Kim, who has light brown curls that after a couple of days in the field develop into a '70s-glam frizz, took her fistful of keys and asked, "So, do you want to see the collection?"

The museum's collection is down the hall from Kim's office. It consists of about 50,000 study skins—dead birds that have been skinned out and stuffed, but are not realistically posed. They lie, belly-up in their wafting preservative scent, in the paper-lined drawers of giant metal cabinets that are sealed up against hungry moths and beetles. During my tour, Kim rolled out drawer after drawer of specimens—each, I realized after a while, to illustrate all the different uses for dead birds. For instance, a drawer of dozens of grosbeaks, robin-like birds, was an easy lesson in hybridization, since some of the black-headed grosbeaks had streaks of a rose-breasted grosbeak's red-rose plumage. ("That's what we're trying to do," Kim told me. "We're trying to catch evolution in action.") Two trays of tanagers from Mexico, Peru, and Colombia had feathers that were shocked with color: swatches of aqua blue and indigo, a yellow the color of acorn squash, the kind of bursting, toxic-seeming green I'd always assumed could only be made by chemicals. These were not just to humble me and my drab human coloring; they showed off how study skins defy age. These feathers were brighter and more pure than any color I'd ever seen, and yet the identification tags tied to their feet reckoned they had been preserved in 1908 or earlier. Another drawer, laden with four puffins, brought up the collection's ability to help the research world: scientists in Maine, for example, can study the levels of chemicals puffins absorb, by harvesting comparison data from the specimens' feathers.

We visited a cabinet filled with pelicans, and Kim pulled out a brown pelican so I could closely inspect the accordion folds of its beak's pouch. We leaned over a wandering albatross that was collected in 1849 and that couldn't be picked up, because his head was a little wobbly. A bottom drawer at the end of one of the aisles of cabinets held a Philippine monkey-eating eagle that, lying stiffly on his back, was as big as a seal. And, toward the end, we stopped by the cabinet of extinct specimens and saw a passenger pigeon, a Carolina parakeet, and a pair of ivory-billed woodpeckers. The passenger pigeon, which stood erect, as if it were listening for danger, had clearly come to the museum as a part of a taxidermy mount. When I noted this as we walked back to her

office, Kim said, "It's funny. I just never know how people are going to react when they look at all these dead birds."

Statements like this were so uncharacteristic of a scientist, so fueled by empathy and intuition. And, frankly, so correct: no matter how well they held their color and overall shape, these birds had been prepared to look lifeless, with wings and feet folded away and nothing but white cotton showing through their eye sockets. It was understandable that visitors often thought of the collection as merely a bird morgue.

"As a person who's in charge of a lot of dead things," she told me, "I don't want to put people off. For some people the specimens make it more real, and it's such a valuable experience. And some people look at a dead specimen and they just see a dead thing."

For Kim, though, the specimens are both lovely and symbolic. Back in her office—under the relentless gazes of an antique kakapo mount and Kim's enormous flat-screen Macintosh—we sat in sliding desk chairs. Kim explained that when she sees a dead bird in the collection, and especially during fieldwork, she can't appreciate its beauty enough. "It's just so magical, so moving," she told me. She looked out into the woodsy area beyond her office window. Then she pulled up the cuff of her coarse khakis and scratched her ankle. "That's why our collection seems more like an altar or a shrine where we show reverence to nature."

Before I left, Kim took my warbler out of the refrigerator and unwrapped him. We stood at one of her lab tables, and she tilted him in my direction between her hands, holding his beak between her thumb and index finger. His eyelids were open, and his black eyes seemed to be squinting. Even though I *wanted* to leave him with Kim, who I knew would so thoroughly appreciate him, my body felt a little bit saggy, as if I needed a nap.

"I'll make sure one of our best students gets this guy," Kim said. It might take a couple of months, she explained, but ultimately my warbler would be scientifically prepared and then join the 35 other black and white warblers in the drawer marked with their scientific name, *mnioilta varia*. "Don't worry," she told me, wrapping him back up in his cling-wrap cushion. "When the student sees this bird, he'll recognize how beautiful it is."