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Field Guide

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BETH SUTER

FIELD GUIDE

I keep going back to the pelican
in a sparse Oklahoma prairie,
the wonder of a creature displaced.

I want to tell you about its survival
as if it were something like mine.
I want to give you the wordless

with feathers, something light
enough for you to carry,
maybe braid into your hair

even if it's from a mockingbird,
an escapee from Paradise's ashes
singing like the birds that didn't make it.

There ought to be a gospel
in every field guide,
a hymnal for those alive and gone

like the white owl
perching on the soft bones
of our drought-stricken birch,

wholly itself, no symbol of mine, just
giving you what I've been given
like the sharp-shinned hawk

striking at the feeder—
how the air filled with dove-colored down,
hunger's softness

covering the ground like shed petals.
I want to give you the beauty of what's left
like a woman on her knees

overcome by phantom pregnancy.
Can I tell you a secret?
She named the impossible

fluttering Phoebe.
I wish I could give you more
than a prairie girl awed by a seabird,

that lone pelican in a split willow.
I want to give you its salvation,
to tell you the pelican found a way home

or learned to eat catfish from the mud.
The child that was me wanted to know,
of course I only saw it that once.