

Descent

In the late afternoon, snow litters
the shrubs and trees, bare and lean

against the slant of hills. Just now
near the feeder, a white breasted nuthatch

jogs down a tree head first, joining
ground feeders and red-winged blackbirds—
epaulets in display.

Here and there a few cardinals, red
as papal vestments, ornament the thicket

darting to the feeder and back again
while zebra-backed woodpeckers

alternate between suet and seed, red heads
hammering a secret code, a history lesson:

How could I forget to live from the beginning
like the rhea and emu—birds who walked

the southern Gondwanaland, surviving
the break-up, the shifting landscape

vulnerable to every misery, every predator
like the hawk attack at our feeder:

life without peace—amen

—and how could I forget to live between
the silence and the solitude

[Break]

set only inches away from the birds
who scatter instantly and so completely

that the mind can't comprehend
the sudden emptiness of the thicket
or the small shadow

that drops to the ground in a faint
landing near a coil of barbed wire—

apricot beak perfectly silent
in the cradling snow.