Excerpted from *Poem, Revised: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Writing Poetry (Marion Street Press 2007).*

19. Behind the Lines: Revising "Ornithology 101"

--Derek Sheffield

My muse is a wild one who reaches me at all hours, in any place, through all kinds of mediums: images, phrases, memories, and more. Typically, she leads a poem in through the backdoor of consciousness. "Ornithology 101" arrived differently, however. For this poem, I flung open the front door, called, clapped, and whistled, and that sweet lady of the lyric sent it fluttering down out of the blue.

After I took an ornithology class from a colleague at the college where I teach, I realized that I had been introduced to some amazing language, and I wanted to work that language into a poem while evoking my newly hatched biologic awareness. A month or so after the class ended, I began working on the poem by combing through my notes to create a word cache with terms like "plumulaceous," "keeled sternum," and *"Carduelis tristis."*

From the cache, I wrote a draft of the poem. And then I revised that draft, and the next and the next. The early version shown here is the fourth or fifth. As I began revising this one, I realized the dedication, "for Dr. Stephens," was a private reference. It came from my gratitude to my colleague for allowing me to take his class. Since it didn't add significant substance to the poem, I cut it.

In lines 1 and 14, I inserted "that" in order to narrow the meaning to more precisely create as sense of "after the fact": not "now you have" but "now *that* you have." In the second line, I replaced "a hollow leg" with "digit number four." Not only does the revision specify the image using scientific language, but more importantly, it sounds better, at least it does to me. It sounds cold and removed, especially "digit," which feels right for this poem.

There are a few places in the poem where I omitted deadwood—words that weren't adding much and only served to impede the pace. Poet William Stafford used another metaphor for this when he spoke of "cutting out the fat." In lines 12 and 13, I deleted "breathed / mothballs for three memorable months of study." And in line 8, I cut "plumulaceous." This one was a difficult choice because it's such a lovely, polysyllabic, ornithological word. But it had to go. It made the line too sluggish and tended to trip my readers, none of whom seemed to know how to pronounce it. In line 4, I didn't just omit language, but replaced two words with one. In place of "to feel" I put "for," making the

lines “pinched / a wishbone for resilience” more concise and less clunky. Also, the “for” here conveys the tactile image just as well as the infinitive “to feel.”

My most significant revisions appear in the last nine lines. Between line 14 and the end, I replaced two repetitions of the poem’s opening phrase, “now you,” with one. I felt that the third instance slowed the pace too much. I like the poem’s tone of urgency and onwardness created by fewer sentences, and I wanted to sustain that as much as possible.

In this same section, I replaced some more general and expected natural imagery—“green trembling,” “undulant streak”—with more sciential and surprising details—“diagrammatic movements of geese,” “dotted lines,” and “Latinate streaks.”

Lastly, I altered what is arguably the most important part of any poem, the last line. Initially, I wanted to finish on the scientific name for the American goldfinch, the Latin binomial, “*Carduelis tristis*,” which means “thistle-eating sadness.” (It eats thistle seeds and someone thought its song sounded gloomy.) Beyond sharing the simple beauty of the name itself, my impulse here was to emphasize the scientific. Also, the name evoked for me one of the outcomes of my newly acquired knowledge. The more I learned about birds, in one sense, the sadder I became. I discovered that most of our songbird populations are in steady decline owing primarily to massive habitat loss up and down the American continent. However, I determined that I was violating a cardinal (yes, a pun) rule: show, don’t tell. I therefore decided to end with an image.

In place of a scientific name no one except birders and Latin teachers can pronounce, I came up with “the air is feathers / measuring the bones of your face.” This image is visual *and* tactile. I like that. I also like the heavy *s* sounds. Poet Robert Creeley said, “Form is never more than an extension of content,” and I think the sibilant *s*'s evoke the touch of feathers—in other words, or rather, word, onomatopoetic.

And beyond the imagery and texture of this passage, I like what it *suggests*, that the world (not just the air, but “air”—through synecdoche—as entire world) returns humanity’s analysis. In other words, if our interaction with the world comes entirely through the lens of a scope or the tongs of tweezers, maybe an animated world examines us? Put another way, perhaps it is a matter of becoming our attentions: as we *are* so *is* our environment.

Of course, there are other ways to read these last few lines, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. One last caveat: even though I consciously set out to write this poem, to work with the scientific

language of birds, I had absolutely no idea where that language, those rhythms and sounds, would lead me. It is most often a deadly proposition to write a poem with the end in mind, deadly in the sense that the language can be lifeless, a collection of hollow shells (many overtly political poems suffer from this). Poet Richard Hugo, in his vital text, *The Triggering Town*, writes that "all truth must conform to music." And that New England farmer and versifier, Robert Frost, advised, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."

Therefore, a golden bird with pepper-black wings lights on a green-needled branch and sings and sings all morning. Do you hear the melancholy? Can language contain it?

Early Version

Ornithology 101

~~*for Dr. Stephens*~~

Now you have staked their skeletons,
eyed the scope of a hollow leg, prodded
strutted, white ribs, pinched
a wishbone ~~to feel~~ resilience, thumbed
a keeled sternum's edge still attempting
to steer the absent feathers, stroked
a hummingbird's mum iridescence, ruffed
the ~~plumulaceous~~ white breast of a great egret
slit and stuffed as last spring's final project,
sprinted with a severed wing to catch
the physics, given new vision
to a blackbird with two dabs of cotton, ~~breathed~~
~~mothballs for three memorable months of study,~~
you can leave with an "A" in class *Aves.*
Now you know the American goldfinch in Latin
is thistle-eating sadness, you can walk out
~~into green trembling, and the air,~~
~~with blind fingers remembers your face.~~
~~Now you have looked into birds~~
~~the undulant streak at the edge of sight~~
~~calls your new song:~~
~~*Carduelis tristis.*~~

Final Version

Ornithology 101

Now that you have staked their skeletons,
eyed the scope of digit number four, prodded
strutted white ribs, pinched
a wishbone for resilience, thumbed
a keeled sternum's edge still trying
to steer scattered feathers, stroked
a hummingbird's mum iridescence, ruffed
the white down of a great egret
slit and stuffed as last year's final project,
sprinted with a severed wing to catch
the physics, given new vision
to a blackbird with two dabs of cotton,
you can leave with an A in class *Aves*.
Now that you have looked through birds, you see
the diagrammatic movements of geese
across the blue sky, dotted lines
narrowing a million years. You expect
from every American goldfinch thistles
and sadness, and when you walk out
among the world's perches and Latinate streaks
at the edge of sight, the air is feathers
measuring the bones of your face.

Chosen by Li-Young Lee as the winner of the James Hearst Poetry Award and published in *The North American Review*.

Derek Sheffield's poems have appeared in the *The Georgia Review, The North American Review*, *The Seattle Review, Crab Creek Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Swink, Margie: The American Journal of Poetry, Ecotone, Puerto del Sol, Passages North*, and several anthologies. His poems have also been included in the *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and selected as finalists for the St. Louis Poetry Center Award, the Pablo Neruda Award, and the Elinor Benedict Poetry Prize. He has received a Washington State Artist Trust Grant, and David Wagoner chose nine of his poems for *Poet Lore*'s Poets Introducing Poets. Blue Begonia Press published his chapbook, *A Mouthpiece of Thumbs* (2000). He teaches at Wenatchee Valley College, where his classes include creative writing and a learning community called Northwest Nature Writing, which he teaches in cooperation with noted ornithologist, Dr. Dan Stephens.