

Birding in Winter

by Susan Edwards Richmond

Empty yourself of expectation,
the flutter of common creatures.
Nothing will be close.

Leave behind pencil and list.
But keep the book.
Be sure your layers match the earth—

silk sheath for ice,
wool for snow,
down for air,

master the cold
with the same firm hands
your raise each year to the spring.

Then be prepared
to stand immobile for hours
in the snow fields

where the temperatures
hover lower
than a harrier's flight.

Be prepared to read nothing
but patterns, configurations, the absence
of color in coverts and wings.

Go along if you can,
or with someone who shares
your aptitude for patience,

someone who can gather in
her own silence, as the scope
pans ice floes, as the flocks recede

and the air
at the edges of sight
shimmers and shimmers.

"Birding in Winter" from *Birding in Winter*, poems by Susan Edwards Richmond, Finishing Line Press, 2006. Used with Ms. Richmond's kind permission.

Notes

I've been enchanted by this poem for years, waiting for the opportunity and the ensemble that could help me turn it into music. It expresses so well the cold necessities of birding in wintertime, with a subtle undercurrent of why we birdwatchers would put up with winter cold for the thrill of a sighting, whether it's an unusual bird or an ordinary bird found in a special place.

Mostly, the music follows the rhythm of the spoken words. My setting alternates between big declarative moments and textures to evoke a mood. The declarations might slip in and out of unison/octaves ("master the cold..."). The textural sections vary between almost modal and rather chromatic (for example, "nothing but patterns,..." and "silk sheath for ice..."). In the end, the snow and ice and feelings of cold dissolve in a musical texture of shimmering light.

Pamela Marshall