

## Pleasantness and Pretense

By Katie Manning

Book Review:

*Mistaken for Song*, by Tara Bray,  
Persea Books, 2009.



The front cover of Tara Bray's debut poetry collection, *Mistaken for Song*, shows a vibrant painting of a bird: turquoise feathers, orange breast, yellow and brown striped legs and talons, beak high in the air, one eye looking straight at the viewer. When we turn to the back cover, however, we find that this painting by Joel Sager is called "Anatomy of a Dead Bird II." What we thought we saw is not the whole story of the painting.

These poems also frequently appear to describe birds in pleasant images, as we might expect. The first poem in the collection, "Carolina Chickadees," begins with a glimpse of "chickadees, their songs, pert shavings / of glee, the dart of their tight round bodies." Yet neither are such pleasant images the whole story. We soon realize that these poems are not *about* the birds. Even the final lines of the opening poem set us up for a deeper reading:

They whip and dip, sled quick slopes  
of air, and I plead to feel them beat  
upon my ear, chatter, tease me,  
meek cheek-fires I want to swallow whole.

This is more than observation—the speaker wants to feel the rush of life in the birds.

Two poems later, "The Preparation" begins with the line: "Go to the woman whose mother died young." Toward the end of the first section, we read the poems "How My Mother Died" and "Motherless," which also discuss birds—"Motherless" shows "Brothers standing still to watch the blue jays." Here, again, bird

watching appears to be merely the action that accompanies a deeper longing for life, and an attempt to deal with loss and grief. The speaker in "Marriage" almost finds in a bird the human connection she longs for: "inside the warbler's mouth—a human pink." Yet the bird is never human, never the lost loved one.

In the final section, "The birds are making me" provides the key to the book's title and shows the way birds work in these poems: "day by day, building me / with twigs and flecked notes / mistaken for song." The book's name comes from the idea that bird song is simply a collection of random notes, not truly an ordered song. Because this book is filled with lyrical sounds—especially alliteration and rhyme—it seems that Bray has created a sequence of poems that try to make sense of life and death, always a disorganized act, in a way that appears organized and beautiful. The poem continues with a straightforward explanation of the birds: "The bird / is not a symbol, but a live thing / with breath so spare / it can't be sucked toward the human; / still I pretend we share the smallest doses of quiet and disbelief." These poems look to birds for such connection and sense, and the pretense of order makes for some irresistible poetry.