

Songbird Barn

Scarlet integers are my favorites; maybe that's why they were the first. I'd gotten the ladders and drop cloths out, and I'd set staging on the side of the barn. Some chickens and the goose were around the paint pail when I went in for dinner, and they were still there when I came out. But there was something else. You know what those feather dusters look like? Two or three of them seemed to have been shoved, the feather parts, not the wooden handles, into this pail I had planned to pour red paint into. I looked at that, then looked around. I thought it was some joker's idea of fun.

I pinched hold of a clump of the feathers and it felt like there were twigs in them. I lifted one of the twigs and it looked like the leg of a bird. I kept lifting and it was the leg of a bird. The bird was gray as a rain cloud, eyes closed and neck limp. I pulled out another bird, then another and another. I wasn't certain, but I suspected they were tanagers from the bill. Also, near the bottom, one seemed to be draining out this red color. And my pail was half-full of the brightest red I've ever seen. It burned in there, like coals in a fire. It was swirled with black. I wasn't sure if it was paint.

I tried it on the barn. It spread fine and went five times as far as any half gallon of commercial paint ever thought of going. I'd already scraped, so moving right along, I got across and down to that bulge caused by all the hay waiting down. I climbed down and walked back. I took off my hat.

I had part of my barn painted scarlet tanager.

It happened every day like that. Except every day, the gray birds in the pail were different sizes and shapes, with different bills. And the pail was half filled with different colors. One day it was yellow and black from goldfinches. Another day it was slate gray with just a touch of pink from juncos. Then blue, rust and orange from barn swallows. Orange and black from Baltimore Orioles.

Then one afternoon, it struck me that maybe this wasn't such a good way to be painting the barn. I was around on the end, painting bluebird beneath the deer head; maybe that was it. I stopped. I put the pail away, took a walk, didn't put any pail out the next day. Yet, when I came out in the afternoon, not wanting to even look that way, there was a pile of rose-breasted grosbeaks. The ground around was black and white, with that deep rose color still wet underneath them.

I've been varying each flock behind the garden, so I took these grosbeaks over there and dug a hole. I had them buried and was leaning on the shovel, pondering, when the whole side of the barn, the side painted orange-red with black, with goldfinch yellow and black, with slate gray touched pink, with blue, rust, orange and black began to sing away. It was like twilight, or dawn, in the woods, all the different bird calls thicker than the bugs. I stared at the side of the barn and it seemed to be swelling and easing with the effort of those shrill, chirpy, beautiful love calls. It was just what I needed to hear to carry on.

I finished the back end with purple martins and greenish warblers. The windowed side of the barn that faces my neighbor's got hermit thrushes, robins and house wrens.

The colors there are more browns and tans, with hints of red and rust, but the songs the barn sings off that side are so wonderful my neighbor says , they often make his wife weep.

The front door and siding were all I had left when the birds stopped flying into my empty pail. I had watched the thrushes come, one at a time, straight into the pail like they were flying right through, only their feathers staying there over bones, and I'd gotten over feeling bad about the way the barn was getting painted. But I hadn't thought I'd run out of birds.

Whatever it was telling the birds spoke to my goose to. I found him, gray as a rain cloud in my pail, the third day no songbirds came. So the front of the barn is a soft white. It doesn't sing at twilight, or dawn, just sort of holds the place down so all those other songs don't lift it right off the ground.