

## MICHELE GIULVEZAN-TANNER

*Gold Finch, 2018*  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## ALTA IFLAND

### Walking the Bird

One day, after having seen Odile engaged in baby talk with a little green-feathered bird in a pet shop, Alex showed up with a goldfinch in a cage. It was a grayish creature with golden-spotted wings, throat, and tail, and a strong black bill that whistled all day long. Its cheerfulness was contagious, and no matter how down one might have been, one couldn't help feel a surge of joyful optimism at the sight of this creature, who, caged as it was, jumped about constantly and seemed to carry on dozens of dialogues with invisible interlocutors in its bird language without paying any attention to the iron bars it was surrounded by. It was a *joie de vivre* that extended from the bird's throat, touching everything and everyone, and Odile didn't fail to succumb to the bird's charm. She took the habit of consulting it whenever she was in doubt, or simply blabbered to it about whatever she happened to be doing at the moment, and the bird answered in various tones and intonations, for it had quite a rich repertoire. Sometimes the bird quarreled, and then its voice grew to a high pitch, sound after sound tumbling and spinning in a circle that carried with it all the day's worries, as if the bird understood everything and had a say in it. There was no doubt that this bird was moody and opinionated. Sometimes, when there were guests over and Odile wanted to show off her finch, the bird simply refused to open its mouth. It just sat there, hiding under its feathers with

a moping face and the silly eyes of a no-brain birdie. But no sooner were the guests gone than it regained its vocal abilities and sang all through the night. When Odile played the piano, its first reaction was of cautious listening. For a minute or two, it listened to the new intriguing melody, as if sniffing another, unknown animal, then it began to add its own sounds, in a rhythm that—and there was no doubt about it—imitated the foreign sounds.

No question, Bobby—for this was the name the bird seller had given it—was not your average goldfinch. Twice a week Odile took Bobby on walks down a street ten minutes from her apartment where all the bird owners from her neighborhood strolled, airing their feathery friends, most with cages in their hands, others with a bird on their shoulder or perched on their finger. It was there, on Bird Walk Road, that men and women of all social classes and from all walks of life strolled each afternoon with their pet birds under the mulberry trees, greeting each other and exchanging pleasant words or inquiring about their birds' health. Some of them resembled their pets in an uncanny way, the way some dog or cat owners resemble their animals, or a married man or woman their spouse after years of marriage.

A Caucasian man always in black suit and tie, with bushy, curly hair and a cane with a silver handle, sported a thin, crooked nose—an exact replica of the falcon perched on his left shoulder. The man's nose and the bird's beak stood proud in the jasmine-scented air, conscious of their uniqueness and spiteful of the smaller noses and beaks of the other walkers. An old English lady, all dolled up in a turn-of-the-century dress, graced the onlookers with the appearance of one who had just stepped off a stage. When her wigged, white-powdered head wasn't turned toward the tiny creature she carried in her cage, she smiled at the passersby or greeted vociferously Miss So-and-So, whom she hadn't seen in a long time and whose bird looked just marvelous.

Every thirty feet or so one could spot a wooden bench on which the walkers occasionally rested and gathered the strength necessary to reach the teahouse at the end of the road. There, the regulars dropped by every afternoon between five and seven, and after hanging their cages on the hooks descending from the ceiling, they sat at round white marble tables and ordered tea. Odile entered the teahouse