Along Erie Canal

Nicolae Babuts
Killdeer take note of my walk in the path,  
But pretend to have other things on their minds.  
They'd deny they have seen you,  
And it's your word against theirs.  
Reluctantly they stretch their pride,  
Take wing and let me briefly see  
Their rings, their golden skirts.  
Juggler of the high maple, a cardinal begins  
With two long whistles;  
Then, his profile rippling in the sun,  
He tosses his notes with urgency,  
As if his life depended on it,  
One after another till the air is brimming over,  
And drained he comes to a paid-up halt.  
Pause. The foliage hides his timing.  
Suddenly a change of heart, a mistrust,  
Makes him lift his wings, cut short the act.  
A cantankerous gull grips the vault  
With her prolonged, frosty catmeowing.  
A crow strives against a stubborn breeze;  
His dark bobbing signal flares  
With far-flung memories of wild geese.  
I am now a man with a walking stick  
Poking his way on the return path  
To the rehearsal stage of paradise.  
A lowly song sparrow nests fearfully  
Among the shrubs of the stony bank.  
When I steal closer he gives up,  
Skims away across the water.  
A few blundering steps farther  
The same huddling among dead branches,  
The same sleight of wing,  
The same skimming.  
Another and another . . .  
This is how the first children must have learned  
How to perform feats of counting,  
How to tell fear.