

Their Wintering Calls

I

A long day spent in quiet respite stings,
Pins and needles with each motion,
As if every muscle were sleeping sound.
Waiting for the night to come on,
Tracking time by the ticking of the rain
On the roof, which ends with the sunset.
That was when I first heard it,
Young and twenty, a real concert.

I go outside, expecting, with the air
The old cicadas' routine lullabies
But receive a different motion
A fantastic, rhythmless melody
Echoing everywhere
Emerging from the boughs,
The calls and songs of countless birds
Resting high in the trees.

I do not know their names.
I do not know their songs.
I wish to learn.
I am drawn out of my front yard
To find them by flashlight.

—

The noise brings me to the edge
Of a field
Of ten, maybe twelve, trees.
They are louder
They are so much louder here,
Even here, so far off,
The chorus is sharp to my ears,
Pressing in, warning.

I am to take a step forward
But stop.
Can I transgress this?
Should I?
I catch a reflection of moonlight
Off leaves.
I feel an urge to hide

From birds.
I want to run but I need
To see.

I stop to take heed.
I shine my light on the nearest wood,
Ten yards from where the asphalt ends
I want to see them, I want to know.
But they're quiet.
There is nothing.

I recall the light.
They begin again.
So, I see. I am the one being watched.
They are afraid.
I shine it again.
Still nothing.
I'm too far off.

I am being heard among the swirling, piercing song.
I am heard, walking.
What's more, the sounds hit me
And bounce off
Creating a veil between us.

What do their calls tell me?
What will their bodies say
About the futures?
Theirs and mine, interlocked.

My ears resist the pull.
I should leave.
I flick the light on at my feet,
And glance a toad
Dead on the ground, no buzz of flies.
A bloody affair,
The skin having failed to hold
The inner organs in,
Leaving them puffy and indistinguishable.
I walk away.

Poor birds. Far off from home.
I wish I could help.

But they're not even lost.

I turn back, approach the edge,
And fall back again.
Tonight I tire of this dance,
And return home at last.

—

The cool air hits my skin,
A reminder of the
Heat, which has soaked my shirt.
I'll need a shower now.
I hear them, still going.
The walls do little
Against so great a sound.
How come nobody else came?
How could they endure it—
The sound, the mystery?

I catch my heart racing.
I suddenly gather
What made the sound so strange,
What left me so off-guard.
They were hardly bird calls
Save for pitch and time.
They were more like alarms,
Like those bushfire birds,
But more foreign, stranger,
As if they flew in from
Some far-off other world.

II

They left the next day.
And I carried on
Like it was a dream.
I went on with work,
With leisure, we all
Youthful abandon.

But I remembered.

I knew it was real
And I carried that.
Even going on
Even long after
A chance encounter
I remembered it.

I could still hear it
Sometimes, in the dark
Echoing behind
The bones in my ears.
As if another
Life was calling me,

I could still hear it,
I would still dream of it:

Dreams of walking in,
Of stopping before,
Of singing with them,
Of oneness with them,
Of the manifold
Warmth and sound, new ears.

At times I would speak
And they would respond
With something just as
Meaningless (to me),

At times I kept down.
Never spoke, just heard.

I wonder what

Became of them what
They meant to say what
Made them fly here. I
Could not let them go.
And I said nothing.

But I remembered.

III

I hear it again, in the same way,
After waiting for so long
I hear it, the siren, the song.
They have stopped here once again.

I've learned your names now,
Dearest field sparrows,
I know who you are.

But why do you sing?
What do your words mean,
If they can be words?

What do you say to me?
What can I tell you?
Why where, in these trees?

The very same field.
The night, all the same.

A universal redundancy,
Doubling back just for me
To take the fateful step for real
To know it, once and for all.

The sky is dark,
The air thick as ocean waters —
But I will swim
To meet you —
I will meet you.

But I am stopped again
By the edge.
I feel it again, pain.
I'm held back.
Their perfect solitude
Repels me.

I worry, over again
That crossing here
Will end this all.

Their wings will contest
My steps as they rise
To formation, off
In a dense spiral
Casting shadows by
The light of the stars.

But the promise is too great.
I must gather myself.

I take out my light
And cover it well
Showing

Only a lapse, a gap
Through which all but
The thinnest thread
Of spider silk could be guided
By the most delicate weavers.
A needle's eye, barely large enough
To let through the dullest, smallest
Stream of light.

But it is enough.

I see the path.
I need to be closer.
I must get closer.
Now is the time
To make the step.

They will show me something,
Something these sounds hide,
Something I must know.
Now is the time to make
The step.

I will lose nothing, for there is nothing
Lost in this life, I can only change.
Since I must change — everything needs to —
I will. Now is the time to make the step.