

Nocturne: For the Night Workers of the South

Once, when I was young and loved every girl that breathed
the same summer air as me, I worked as a night watchman
in the county asylum, a forgotten place, lost among

the ubiquitous kudzu, the long-leaf pines birthing cones the size
of watermelons. It was the kind of place that, when it rained,
spotted-moth larva would tunnel from the wet plaster ceilings

and drink the patient's ears. The county wanted it forgotten,
their own kind gone bad, like in the Bible, where Christ
slaps rotting eggs from the yellow mouths of lepers.

Eat of this bread, he said, or something close, and the lepers
scraped up the eggs and made a sandwich, and I imagine for
the first time, Christ shrugged. *You are what you eat*,

he should have said, if he had any truth left in him by then.
I wasn't allowed to talk to the patients, and usually,
they were all medicated by the time I hitched a ride

there, on the backs of flatbeds wedged between crates
of sweet potatoes sighing under the moon.
When I found out that I wasn't really a night watchman

but an owl catcher, and would have to incinerate any owl
I caught, I stayed on anyway. I needed the work.
According to legend, seeing a Horned Owl during a meal

was supposed to mean *Don't finish your stew*.
Barn Owls seen more than a mile or so from their perches
were wandering ghosts, or meant that ghosts

would soon force themselves into your dreams,
a madness I could do without.
Sighting a Snowy Owl meant that bones would ache

but without further consequence. They would simply ache
for a while, then stop. I found this applied for all owls.
My whole body ached then. When I dressed for work

it was like dressing a wound. I couldn't tell if it was the girls
or the birds. I became good at it, though, despite the ache,
if that is even possible, chewing the stolen, orange meat

of potatoes to keep me awake, slumped in the attics

with a canvas bag from the laundry room.
Christ also said *Any true work is done alone*. This I believe.

The sweat of the insane is sweeter than ours, another belief
of mine: clover and bee's wing and honeyed ham.

I could hear them breathing beneath me in their beds. Don't ask how it was
to be so near that bleak sea of faces. It's the faces, paint flaking off,
dolls with blinking eyes, snow of paint in spilled urine.
Even their white breath, eight-petaled in the chill of their rooms,
was something I couldn't name.

Dogwood: no. Wild pea: perhaps...but no. Chamomile, milk-weed:
never. I never looked at them, the pink azalea of hair

between their legs, luminous with lice, not even down
the blouses of the nurses when they bent to look in
at the big-headed owls. Now, I think I brought those bastard birds

down through the wards, alive and flapping,
so someone would stop me. No one ever gets tired of the moon.
No one ever said *Fuck the moon, let's get it out of here*.

We keep it around, we learn to like it.

Habit is the devil's glorious invention, like I heard war could be.
Easing a bayonet into a belly was the same as opening

a can of tomatoes by firelight if you did it enough.

These were birds and I burned them and on rare days
I remember their heads, round and milky, baby's breath,

their wings not really wings, finally, but damp bolts of silk,
and the low sough of wind dragging their ashes into September's arms.
I remember the story of General Lee on his deathbed

telling a sad friend to cheer up, that he had known
but three happy hours during his whole existence.
Two of those as a child asleep in the boughs of a white oak,

the last in an asylum staring at a beautiful girl's naked ribcage
that had been woven into a basket by tuberculosis.
Night transcends what the proudest day can do, that's for damn sure,

all silently,
the indescribable night and stars,
far off and silently.

Documenting the Birds: Office Park

If this is what we become
then let me turn into light now while the spaces
between the leaves have enough room to hold me.

There are dead birds everywhere.
It's the windows of these buildings that get them,
mirrored, mimicking versions of a better sky

full of the wind-strung trees of late summer,
or the hibiscus red of blurred traffic lights.
A Black-Chinned Hummingbird,

its throat broken and pink, is the latest.
To hold its body, bare-handed, is to hold air,
the green-clothed breath murmuring among the groves.

There have been Canada Geese, rising from the asphalt lake
and splitting themselves open, leaving a thick \surd of spit on the glass.
Last week, it was the same Chimney Swift, twice,

with a chattering flourish, its eyes full of the nothing
that comes with this place. The first time didn't do the job,
the second brought both wings off, as if to enter this new sky,

to be a flame in this dusk, requires an exchange of desire.
For each wing of a swift a sycamore must fall, somewhere
under our breath and between the cities of our closing eyes.

*In his journals, Audubon talked of a hollow sycamore
full of swifts, hundreds of them. An ocean of wings.
And how, after he put his ear to the bark, he watched a farmer*

*set the tree on fire to rid his land of the birds.
The birds would not leave the tree so they became it,
blackened and soaring under the furrows.*

The worst: a lost pet Canary in the parking lot,
its feet amputated by a weed-eater.
The Canary couldn't understand why its feet

were no longer tucked below, and so it hovered
above them until its wings gave out.

What I know about Canaries isn't much.

I held one once for a quarter at a county fair,
and in its brightness it held me, a child dumb beneath a living flame,
the husks of its clipped wings rustling in the shadows of the parachutes.

And there's the story of my father's Matilda,
who could write the letter *M*
on the butcher-block paper lining her cage

with a tiny pencil in her beak.
The same lazy and shaken *M* a blind girl would carve
into a picnic table to mimic the feel

of her classmates' words deep across the wood.
There are many kinds of sickness, I know,
and the women's white dresses billow and cling to their legs

as they stroll around this lake at lunch because
that is how things happen, the wind blows and fills us,
but what if time is the illness?

What if the plentiful burst from being so many at once?
Audubon said that the only real number is one,
the rest are mere repetition. I admit to believing him at times,

the third-person fading into a sort of artificial twilight,
the air in flames all around us not really air anymore
but a small bright space between the leaves.

The raspy screech of the Barn Owl is now the fax machine,
the coffee maker's incessant drip is the nasal *peent*
of a Nighthawk, calling his lover home.

Even the singular truth of a Red-Headed Woodpecker's beak
against the sycamore became Audubon's knife
at the black heart of the wood, because to matter,

here in this field of bricked glass, there must be
evidence of a life, a narrowing, a slimming down,
tailored to fit the body of air a hand could hold.

One mantle, one nape, one crown, one crest.
The Great Blue Heron wading in the lake doesn't count yet
as it lifts one leg in front of the other,

over a plastic bag and onto the sidewalk where we sit
and eat our perfect lunches, talking of the trees,
the glad and empty trees.

Just For You

I'm beginning to understand the moon,
the way the years disembody themselves
from it. Not ghost, not heart, not mulse or acacia,
but a peach-borer moth, wings of slate-colored

gauze, its flight a messy thing, incinerator ash
over a pond well-tuned with the music of frogs
and everywhere great patches of irised air
like horse-mint in the fields

or the rose-bloom of the wild bean.
The moon's light is not its own.
The moth knows this and maybe that is what
the perpetual shimmer of the peach trees

have been trying to say all June. Not *All is peace*
but *Poor moon this will never be yours.*
To translate light into form isn't quite enough, really.
The world hurts as it is, lit, swelled.

To untie a dead raven strung up with copper wire in an orchard
isn't enough, either. Look how the black scaffolds of wing
come apart with the days. Twenty years from now I might only remember
this bird among the dark fruit, the bare unending solitude

of its wing and there's nothing that can be done about it. Light loosens,
ripens through branches, a bloom. The moth asks to be born
from a peach, from telephone poles graphing the blunt
edges of streets. In exchange, it gives up its gauze

to the sky, kind moth, and with gray winds evening comes.
The moon has wings, too, don't forget,
or hands, the perfect hands of air, work-gloves burning in a pile
of leaves. *I am only I.*

After a dream of dancing trees, Whitman awoke
and wrote down what he could remember
of the curious promenade, "With a whisper from one
bending down as he pass'd me

*We do all this on the present occasion exceptionally,
just for you."*

As does the moon in its best season of devotion,
not mend, not change,
not the moth's white cloak of light,

not calm, not raven's breath,

but Calf. Blind.

Flower. Seed.

Eyed. Faced.

Shine. Struck.