

Five Poems

ROBYN SARAH

In the Medical Building Lobby Café

She is looking at him
out of her old face
with her young eyes.
Eyes that still appreciate
a tall young man with a nice face,
a strong frame, a young man's
loose-limbed, purposeful stride—
this young man, striding her way.
When she looks out of her
young eyes, she forgets her face
is no longer young, she forgets
her face. She expects—*what*
does she expect?—her glance
to be met, that's all. That flash
connection in passing, split-
second signal exchanged between
strangers, fellow humans—
subliminal salutation,
no more than that!

But he,
easy of motion, at ease in his skin,
glides on by. Registers her look
a bit absently; files it as requiring
no response. His eyes don't even
seem to know they've done that.
(His eyes, that saw only
an old face.

Hers.)

Tapestry

For months now, how many months—I've lost count—I wake to ghost birds. A soundscape of birds at dawn, but heard from far, far away. It doesn't happen every day. I only hear it if I wake just before dawn. It's something my mind imposes on the silence, or extrapolates from the faint ambient sounds of the house—hum of the air cleaner, gurgling in the pipes. It's a memory of birdsong at dawn that we no longer hear in this neighbourhood. It's my mind trying to bring the birds back.

When it began, the soundscapes were so vivid that wishful thinking sometimes impelled me to jump out of bed and open the window, on the chance this wasn't just a waking dream or a shifting of fluid in my inner ear. But opening the window only confirmed what I already knew: it was silent out there. It was still dark. The sounds were in my head.

My ghost birds. I can hear the near and far of them, the layers of birdsong, nearer birds and farther birds, foreground and background. And strangely, it's as if they're contained in a frame—it's a tableau, a tapestry—as if I can visualize the sounds I'm hearing, some at the edges of the frame, some nearer the middle, in clusters or overlapping, criss-crossing,

an embroidery of sound. All the different kinds of chirp—the birds that cheep and chirrup, the birds that whistle and warble, some loud and glittering, others subdued or muted by distance. The complex textures of their interaction, a counterpoint so familiar —playback of a soundtrack my mind must have recorded long ago without my knowing it, or how could I hear them now in such detail?

Did I know I had all of these songs saved in my head, once it registered that we had stopped hearing them in real life?

Did I ever really hear them, before memory gave them back?

Once More

1

Friends have passed on—too soon, and suddenly.
Two in as many months. With each, we had
Scant time to catch our breath between the sad
Verdict first shared, and sad finality.
The years of making memories are gone.
We did not know those years for what they were.
All seems in flux. Dark forces are astir.
Children have grown and flown. Friends have passed on.

We dreamed a world untouched by war or want.
We lived a lie that we believed and preached.
Now we can't look the future in the eye.
As spring arrives once more, with airs that haunt,
We turn, gaze backward where our hopes lie beached.
Old men come out to watch the world go by.

2

Old men (come out to watch the world go by,
 As old men ever will) know what they know.
 They weren't born yesterday. New winds that blow
 To them are winds remembered, winds that lie.
 Stalwart, they stand like pillars in the sun,
 Or lean on porch rails, testing with their weight
 Another winter's wobble to set straight,
 A seasonal adjustment to be done.

Old men in springtime don't look far ahead.
 This April's crocuses have broken ground.
 Next April's crocuses—well, who can say?
 Their garden tools lie rusting in the shed.
 They nod to neighbours as they gaze around.
 They sun themselves. Let someone else make hay.

3

They sun themselves. Let someone else make hay.
 Their houses have grown old with them. They choose
 Their battles wisely, know the ones they'd lose;
 The porch rail can be fixed in just a day.
 Weeks on, the young in one another's arms
 Sweetly entangled, lie on the greening grass
 Oblivious to the eyes of all who pass,
 Steeped in the moment, lost in each other's charms.

The young in springtime don't look far ahead.
 Their time is timeless, every day a world.
 An all-consuming "Now" holds them in thrall;
 No mighty strivings yet, no nameless dread.
 Unguessed, their futures wait, still tightly furled.
 Summer unborn, who can imagine fall?

4

Summer unborn, who gives a thought to fall?
Summer will overtake them, just the same,
Wrestle them down and bind them to a frame,
The baby carriage in the entrance hall.
Tethers of silk will hold them twenty years.
Moments that stun will bring them to their knees.
They in their turn, makers of memories,
Will float brave hopes and fend off dogging fears.

We turn, gaze back to where our own brave hopes
Foundered and ran aground to lodge in sand.
Under what colours did we first set sail?
We had a map. We thought we knew the ropes.
We were the future. All would go as planned.
(We learned the many ways a plan can fail.)

5

We learned the ins and outs of plans that fail.
We had our shot at family, work, and love,
And fame, and fortune, and our chance to prove
Some noble dream wherein we could prevail
In service of a greater good. We tried.
We learned to temper expectations, own
Our modest winnings, rather than bemoan
False starts, wrong turns, and gambits fallen wide.

In short, we did what humans do. We rode
The winds of our own times, for good or ill—
Sometimes they favoured human enterprise,
Sometimes they hindered it. The winds have slowed,
Or is it we ourselves—who now stand still,
A hush around our ears, as motion dies?

6

The hush around our ears as motion dies
 Dismays. We dreamed a world untouched by war,
 Yet war and want rage on—a distant roar.
 On air, new journalists repeat old lies
 We once believed, or half-believed. Now doubt
 Has taken over; things we thought were true
 Hang in the balance, things we thought we knew.
 It isn't something you can talk about.

All seems in flux, unhinged, a world gone strange.
 Do we imagine this, or is it real?
 Children have grown and flown—their visits brief,
 They and their young ones headed into change
 Beyond imagining. How will they deal?
 Don't ask. A robin sings. Trees are in leaf.

7

Outside, a robin sings. Trees are in leaf,
 Their green lace tossing in the wind. A friend
 From far away has just arrived to spend
 A day or two in fellowship of grief
 For one we loved in common—laid to rest—
 With whom we shared some long-ago green hours.
 (Before the world wide web, before the towers.
 When years for making memories seemed blessed.)

Dark forces are astir, but air of spring
 Wafts lilac through the screen once more. For now,
 A voice, a face—familiar company;
 A word, a touch of hand; remembering.
 Friends have passed on—too soon, and suddenly.
 We will go on from here. Don't ask us how.