

Vivian Shipley

Birdsong for the Twentieth Century

*Wearing the inner skin
Of a sweater, ghost garment, I am with them*
—James Dickey

A robin is nesting at eye level in a blue spruce just outside
my bedroom. Preoccupied during the day with its safety,

each morning, again before dark, I check on her. I'm quiet;
she's still. Movement is what attracts my cat when making

a kill. Declawing is out; three cats live next door. I'll send
Taitiana away when the eggs crack, controlling what I can.

The robin's eyes are black beads of Emily Dickinson's bird,
frightened as those of a boy being held by his mother amid

charred Nagasaki. Photographed by Alfred Eisenstaedt
four months after the atomic bomb, they sit on what was

a tree. Everything else is dead. The boy's right hand tucks
into a sweater vest armhole; the mother has a string of hair

blowing across her nose, her mouth a crescent moon, perfect
in its downward curve. What would she make of my obsession

with a bird's life? Crawling out from under death, will she
resonate Arviragus's cry in *Cymbeline*? Holding Imogen,

believing his sister dead, he laments: *I'll sweeten thy sad
grave... the ruddock would, With charitable bill.* Centuries

old, robins are Anglo Saxon ruddocks, have power over
the dead's repose. Will my birds requiem this mother,

son, Japanese children a camera did not catch and hold,
ones ensnared by the twentieth century, its hundred years

of genocide? It could be April, 1915; I could be in Havav
as Turks dispose of one and a half million Armenians.

If the robin I watch sings a complete score, she must begin
the century in Africa's Namibia, Tanzania with Germans

slaughtering numberless fathers, mothers, children for land,
and livestock. If the robin doesn't hatch eggs that worry

me, no new generation will trill, remember new massacres
that outdo the old statistics: Stalin's system of purging;

the Holocaust vaporizing millions of Jews, Gypsies; China,
the Cultural Revolution; Iraq gassing Kurds; killing fields

in Cambodia; uncounted erasures in Argentina; peasants
massed in El Salvador's graves, in Guatemala; Rwanda;

Serbs' cleansing of Muslims. Too many millions to recall,
too much death for a single song or bird but each life,

unrecorded on paper, stone or film held breath, nested
just as the two blue eggs of my robin. Deaths avalanche

at century's close. I'll keep watch as robins hatch to chant
a requiem, watch over these dead. My calico has instinct,

claws; she's not efficient like gas showers. Leaving entrails,
Taitiana's a cat not a soldier necklaced in eyes, fingers.

There is no metaphor. Birdsong can't float so much death.
Requiem cannot bring repose for cries now swelling,

bursting, to symphony this century of death. Robins
have not hatched; another century has not begun. Seated

on stumps blackened beyond growth, Nagasaki mother
holds her future. She may yet cup joy of her son's flight,

she may not be moving closer to grief. I will crate my cat
each day, do what I can to preserve life, however small.

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Our Bodies, Arms of a Weathervane Pointing North and South,

Connecticut and Virginia, we walk Appomattox, peeling years
that wallpaper our graduate school selves. Martha, we are

growing old; I would not travel except to see you. I dwell
on my face and how it must look to you now, how my waist

has thickened. Getting off the plane, I sucked in but had to sag
back into myself. We repeat names as if fingering beads:

Cliff, Bill, Jimbo, Harry, Anne and Jennalie. I want to float out
over the corpse of my body while Cliff forgets the cigarette

he holds while he dances with me. How beautiful was the saint
we wanted to pursue: Dr. Duncan who fished through coffee

money in Old Central, unsure of how many nickels he had put
in the plate. A cup, we can pass him between us like our notes

on Ruskin, Morris and Pater that we shared in his seminar
that first fall. We pause before the ice house overlooking what

might have been a point in the river where soldiers could cross
for breath in the wood. Death has cored this place like the hole

that held ice in walls of rough plank. There would have been
a pole with a hook that hung from a spike, a room where saws

were kept, a floor that always stayed damp and cool. You explain
how ice was chunked and layered with straw to last the summer

and pretend to be the cook who opened then quickly closed
the door to keep in winter. I picture us hanging up sere leaves

of lavender, lupine or indian leaf from the overhang. It's quiet

now in McLean House, the doorway flanked with hollyhocks,
the rose and yellows contrasting their brave colors like the blue
and grey. In the photograph over an oval table with a marble top,
Grant and Lee are sitting right above where they must have been
sitting on April 9, 1865, as they will sit forever posing between
the two sets of curtains, now crimson velvet that spills on the floor.
Like countless takes of Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh's farewell
that Victor Fleming ordered in 1939 directing *Gone with the Wind*,
I add then cut detail after detail from scenes that might have been
enacted on these fields. I create a starring role for myself, waking
the morning after a battle, turning to cradle the head of my brother
in my hands that are positioned the same way they were when I held
the bulb of an amaryllis I had forgotten to take indoors after giving
it a day of cold in early spring. The temperature had dipped below
freezing that night and there was no resurrecting the plant. What I
had left was memory of that one March day, the white blooming,
bending almost into the earth. Martha, we have awakened no rumble
of cannon but when the guard's not looking, we can stroke flow blue
dishes. General Lee wouldn't eat without them as if each meal was
the source that renewed his passion. The taste of dust rising stays
in our mouths. We've let our bodies go too long, let more than years
lapse. Let's resolve to go on a fat-free diet, meet next year at a spa.
I'll draw the line, however, at liposuction, doing our eyes. Laughing
at our thighs, magic between us returns and if we could only linger,
The Lady of Shalott might drift by. Nothing happens but moving
of shadow across quiet water and the stirring of heavy headed iris

so bronze and so big, they might be lanterns. Almost as if we are

rehearsing our senior play, we repeat, *She has a lovely face. God
in his mercy lend her grace.* Subdued like the green by the stillness,

we listen as a rising wind predicts autumn to the leaves that must
know what is forming in the trees just as the Confederates had to

suspect that Union troops were just over the rise. Now, as soldiers
must have done the last day, we listen for a voice to say, surrender.

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We were wrong, terribly wrong

—Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, 1961-1968

Dressed in a black three piece suit with a roll of toilet paper
in one hand and a Bible in the other, your brother starts
at the corner of Wooster Square Park on Chapel Street
then parades until he spots an elm that suits him. Before

spending two years in Vietnam, he would walk up State Street
to the front window of Denton's Drug Store and stand
looking at Joseph Rosenthal's AP photograph of an American flag
being raised on Mt. Suribachi at the top of Iwo Jima.

In WWII, when the Fifth Marine Division made it to the summit
after four days of battle, your father was one of six men
who raised the flag. He died within days. It was late February,
early March of 1945. There were little banners in the windows

with stars on them. Blue meant someone from that house
was in the service and a gold star meant someone had died.
Your grandmother's house had three stars, two blue, one gold.
Then two turned to gold. Your brother still has the letters

written by your father about the firefights: Marines would hold
their weapons over a ridge, exposing only hands and upper arms
to return fire. The letters were filled with Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian
who also raised the flag but who survived to die of alcohol.

Hayes would pop up to fire, flop back down to reload. During
one mortar attack, he walked off to relieve himself.
Six thousand, two hundred died on Iwo Jima in shallow gulches,
from snipers, shells being logged. Hayes was the soldier

your brother wanted to be when he enlisted and asked to be
shipped to Da Nang. There were no flags to raise, no pictures
placed in Denton's Drugs, no stars in front windows. Not killed
in battle like your father, your brother is unable to drown

himself in shots and beers like Hayes. He will take nothing
from the living but cannot stop what the dead drain
out of him. Shouting at the elm tree about bodies splitting
the surface, your brother hurls the roll of paper high into air.

Is each layer a beginning, wiping out years in Vietnam that are
like ice on the window spreading into a jungle of ferns
or waiting fingers? Streaming like a rocket unrolling all the way
to heaven, the tissue always misses the branches and piles

in the street. Shrugging it off, your brother goes back home
to your mother who never complains about the mess
but worries over the extravagance of it, the waste of good paper.
Your cousin Joyce stuffed cotton in her cheeks to fill them out

but she didn't throw it away. Dried over night, cotton could be
used again and again. The toilet paper is useless, melting
into the street like the years your brother spent waiting out dark
knowing every stumbling place his hand might touch down

on a face. The eyes were always open, darker than veined coca
leaves or concentrated pools of light like silk from Hanoi.
Sucked back again, your brother confronts the eyes, your father
the look in his eyes as he braces to raise the flag, making

shoulders ache with the permanence of it. No Joseph Rosenthal
photograph of your brother in Denton's Drugs, no red, white
and blue only black, lined into a wall of eyes that will never close,
that will never disappear, that words of remorse cannot erase.

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Charlie's at the Wire Waiting for You to Sleep

for B.R.

Your weekly poems were reruns: prisoners of pirates walking the plank. In San Francisco, you jumped, hiding long black dreds under a red bandana to imitate your father who tied one around

his head dipped in blood from bodies that could not deny him. At ten, lighting up Camels without filters, you knew hands didn't leave the same marks as a belt. Dope sick at Thanksgiving, you

ranted about nine months of signing in on a yellow pad printed in black: National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The night watch belched you down white tile threading a beige

corridor, your hands in jeans to stop the shaking. On paper sheets that ripped with weight, your father sat, holding a Dixie cup of orange juice for his pills. His arms, once pythons, were now

stems leafed with scars latticed over crosses, death unit insignias. He would start with sweat on skin, then the helicopter droning like the West Haven VA ventilation system, the elephant grass,

the necklace he wore of yellowed ears beaded by kidney stones. Predictable, your father ended with the tiger cage, boasting about earning his blood bandana again, then again. Gallon of Dewar's

every two days didn't drown the drums at your father's funeral you kept sounding out on a xylophone of bones he brought home to your mother from razor mountains in Pleiku, South Vietnam.

Back in April, sitting on the rocks at Morgan Point, your words would lift. Caught in the down draft, you'd be drawn back, begin by comparing chalky birds undissolved on the wave's tongue to

a pill you found too bitter to chew: your father stalking, spearing
shadows, leaving holes for eyes. Unerring as gulls dropping
mussels, you would probe until you found veins you could rip.

Like their yellow beaks flipping up strips of grey popcorn
to light, wings dissolving to air, you kept plunging to feed pain
you needed to keep Charlie at the wire, to keep you from sleep.

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Perennial

*The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
When neither is attended...
—William Shakespeare*

Guilford, Connecticut Resident, Former Nazi Guard.
Below *New Haven Register* headlines: it's you.

My next door neighbor for eighteen years, have you
been hovering over death camps, a helicopter, a hawk,

or a dirigible, fearful someone would poke a hole
in your story, light a match? Accent of a distant place

clings like seeds of milkweed but for the reporters,
your tongue, mute peninsula, drags up the sound for *no*.

Stooped at seventy two, I calculate the dead weight.
You were my son's 4-H leader, took nightly strolls

on the green with Dylan, your yellow lab. As October
shortened life, you remembered to feed sparrows

after the birdbath froze over. A newscaster calls me
for a live on-the-air interview. I should have suspected

something, knowing you raise pigeons to feed a falcon,
coops positioned like Siamese twins joined at the chest.

You never invited me to fields back of Bishop's Orchard
for a hunt. So, all day, I guillotine hosta, day lilies, hoping

you will come outside, tomatoes, zucchini in hand, to trade
your garden for mine. It's details that seduce me, to know

first hand in what position most died, get a metaphor
for bodies in box cars. A heart can talk itself into anything

while alibis revise themselves, but one story will finally
catch another off guard, crisscrossing. I stay alert, ready.

With arms elbowed on your fence, I rest then start digging
again until dusk. I want to learn from you about power.

Does it feel like a B-52H Stratofortress bomber lumbering
on a runway in England, tail lifting to make Kosovo

quake, evaporating those below into white noon sky?
To pass time, I play connect the dots with numbers you

rounded up, leveled to ash. Think, I might say, of Poniatowa,
of all who resisted you by staying alive, who wake as you do

but with memory of mother, father, sister, brother, daughter,
son you denied them. Pilgrims in a Holy Week procession

some carry names, photographs, some knowledge in faces.
A conductor, your hand extended, have you emptied hair

from lockets, wedding rings, teeth? Neat, I imagine you
would have toed out a cigarette burning in a man's hand.

You do not come out that first day, then the next, while
editorials debate what to do with you, murderer, torturer

now that you have been found. To stave off impending
deportation what will you offer to do? Taking a widow

to find notebooks in her husband's breastpocket, giving
her poems she could dry in sun, to soothe her, would

you say how ink if not his breathwords have been saved?
A week passes. I continue to mulch with the same need

that made me travel to see the Museo di Criminologia
Medioevale in San Gimignano, Italy. The Inquisition,

torture devices when a death sentence was not about
 quietness and efficiency. Thumbscrews, branding irons,
 skull crushers, tongue clamps, the pear, spiked speculum,
 are tucked away in a Tuscan hillside. My breath fogged
 the glass. More than six feet tall, an iron maiden towered
 in the corner. Spotlights were on a spiked interior, bread
 and juice to keep the victim alive and alert. Description
 of water torture was less visually interesting, unlike
 a spiked chair which was wooden with inch-high studs.
 There were even multimedia extras: a voice bellowing,
 a woman who admitted guilt, pleaded for mercy. I left her
 Exiting, a smiling ticket taker, his wave, his *Buon giorno*
 eased reentry to land as peaceful as that seen from trains
 on the last ride Jews took from Lublin to Majdanek,
 Belzec, and Sobibor. Straight sand paths funneled
 into flat Polish woods of birch and pine, millions of trees
 like the dead, anonymous as their gravestones Germans
 used to pave new road. As my neighbor, you have grown
 safe, escaping into your daughters. You lined gardens
 with day lilies I clumped, bordered them with hosta
 I shared. Each autumn, wind splayed our maple leaves
 like shoes, hair carved into piles by guards as if dividing
 beef: shank, loin, flank, round. I want to know what
 you remember, shoveling clay from rock, sprinkling
 bone meal like holy water on snowdrops, digging roses
 to repot. What does the color of their pale roots trigger?

Your porch drips with wisteria, the lavender petals
like moth wings. Honeyed afternoons cannot lull me

into believing the years have erased the particulars
I want to hear. Darkness pulls the street lamp, bats dive

into halos alive with insects who never see the light,
who are drawn to it as I am to you. A carrion crow

tugging at suet, your darkness is in me, lifts my wings
on air tasting of salt blown in from Long Island Sound.

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