

Mockingbirds

There are birds here,  
black and white,  
that look like mockingbirds.

A thin, dark-haired woman,  
smiles, wrinkling the corners of her narrow eyes.  
Every morning she tells me  
about something beautiful.  
Today, she says  
that when a Korean hears the song  
of the black and white birds,  
she will know  
good luck is coming.

I step out of her car  
and the bird we've been watching  
picks insects  
from between blades of grass—  
silently.

In the hills behind my school building,  
there are dozens of tiny farms.  
One day, I stand on a road and watch.  
A man squats over a row of cabbage  
while the birds  
fly in arcs from field to forest  
above his head,  
landing first on greenhouse,  
then rooftop,  
then nesting in the nearby trees,  
singing.

The sun sinks and their black bodies are silhouetted  
against the grey and pale pink sky's  
dimming light.

Sixteen birds on a wire  
turn their backs to my bus as it passes.  
If they are singing, it is a sound  
I don't hear.

Are you mocking me,  
bird in the grass,  
your beak too full of bugs  
to speak?

Or do you know  
I've already had my share of luck?  
Enough to bring me here  
to a country road  
where you shower a man with your song,  
to a setting so pastoral,  
it seems pulled from a painting  
in a history book,  
removed from time  
and set here  
on this hill  
just far enough from the highway  
for the song birds to stay.

One evening, I walk through woods.  
My path winds its way  
around houses with crumbling concrete walls  
that were once washed in brilliant white,  
and then between fences  
built to keep farms  
and farmers in,  
and then between clumps of bamboo shoots  
and trees with fall reddened leaves.

Among the farm plots  
sit small shacks, of plastic sheeting  
placed against itself at right angles.  
From one shelter,  
across the ravine,  
I hear saxophone notes.  
They follow one another slowly,  
then a few burst forth  
all at once,  
unable to endure the wait,  
to sit back in a man's breath  
while the others  
ring out clear,  
in the cool air,  
building a melody that settles  
on foreign ears,  
ears that are deaf to all language but this.

The notes rise and fall  
and drag from her a sweet sadness.  
She thinks of her home,  
and she smiles and cries all at once.  
The notes penetrate her chest  
and massage her heart

until its beats slow,  
fill her lungs until her breath  
comes deep  
and low.  
Her eyes close.

She stands there,  
her non-conforming blonde hair,  
her clothes that aren't right,  
her voice only capable of forming words  
that don't belong here,  
and she listens.

The notes sweep up the hillside and break  
against the edges of the ravine,  
like water over the spillway of a dam.  
The melody surrounds her  
until she is no longer separate  
from this country, from this world,  
until she is no longer a woman  
among the trees and  
the breeze and  
the sound.  
She is sound.  
She is breeze.

She opens her eyes  
and a bird that's not a mockingbird  
flies silently by.

*My luck has all been spent,*  
she thinks,  
chest tightening,  
eyes closing.

Alone in the forest,  
slow saxophone tones  
carry her home.

Circles

If you want to leave the Knights Inn  
in Flagstaff, Arizona and head south on Milton,  
you cannot do so by turning left.  
No, if you want to leave the Knights Inn  
and take Milton down to the movie theatre or Bookmans  
or the Safeway in University Plaza,  
you have to turn right up that diagonal road whose name I can't remember,  
then right again on Benton or Cottage,  
and right again onto Butler,  
where the Knights Inn will be on your right.

You can't get to southbound Milton  
from the Knights Inn in Flagstaff, Arizona,  
and so you must circle around the long way  
to reach your destination.

There are a lot of places like this in Flagstaff.

There are a lot of people like this in Flagstaff,  
people who lived down the street from one another in second grade,  
who attended the same classes with the same teachers a year apart,  
who worked in the same strip mall,  
drank at adjacent bars,  
whose lives circled each other  
until one day they met on vacation in Cancun.  
I can't get to you from here,  
and I think I'm going to blame Flagstaff.

Our galaxy has a slight spin to it.  
All the stars circle each other,  
planets orbit stars,  
moons revolve around planets,  
like cars making their way around obstacles  
in Flagstaff, Arizona,  
like water circling my shower drain,  
like vultures circling a carcass.

The man I was with last night,  
a little drunk,  
began musing on the thought that  
we are all born of stars,  
and the image was too beautiful not to steal:  
From stars out there, spinning and exploding,  
comes every element in my body,  
in yours,  
in the bricks that make up the Knights Inn,

in the engines of the cars that circle it.

I think sometimes that we are two stars  
opposite each other in the Milky Way,  
that we keep trying to come together,  
but at best, we end up  
shouting each other's names across the darkness.

The man I was with last night wanted me to be a star for him,  
to use my body to create new life to put into the world.  
He thinks I am radiant and warm  
and that I glow with a brightness dangerously close to blinding,  
and I think he wants to see more of that in this life.

The man I was with last night cheats his way onto Milton,  
cutting through a parking lot to get to Butler.  
Circling is not his thing, and his directness  
leaves my head spinning.

I told him about you,  
circling back on the topic again and again,  
revealing a little more with every pass,  
my history with you a little too complicated  
to accommodate parking lot-cutting directness,  
or maybe, being from Flagstaff,  
I'm used to going in circles.  
I am, after all, mesmerized by the eddies in creeks,  
by the dog that chases its tail,  
by the dust devil whirling through my yard,  
by the stars passing through the sky as the planet we occupy spins.

I told you yesterday that I couldn't wait for you,  
that I was here, just spinning my wheels  
and running out of gas,  
that I felt like I'd been driving in circles  
around the Knights Inn for days,  
only to learn you can't get there from here.  
I told you I couldn't wait for you  
and my heart  
and my guts  
and every internal organ went super nova,  
and I birthed tears for hours.

The man I was with last night  
is older than me and not as geeky,  
and he doesn't understand things the way you and I do,  
but yesterday I told you I couldn't wait for you,  
and the man I was with last night

found a way to turn my tears into laughter,  
and I can't quite bring myself to turn and walk away from that.

You and I like to tell each other the story of our future together,  
to whisper it to the stars before we go to sleep,  
to revisit it night after night,  
circling past elements we've already covered,  
adding details, layers, making it feel so real,  
so like we are under the same stars at the same time,  
our arms encircling one another.

I used to tell myself that story in the car while I drove around Flagstaff,  
finding little ways to circumnavigate Milton,  
but I don't drive anymore,  
and I've grown so sick of traveling in circles,  
so I told you yesterday that I couldn't wait for you,  
and I walked in a straight fucking line  
down Milton  
past the Knights Inn  
to the apartment of the man I was with last night,  
and I laughed,  
and I watched a movie,  
and I tried not to give a shit  
about you  
or the spinning of the stars.