

David Middleton

Calling Down the Birds

in memory of Louisiana naturalist Caroline Dormon (1888-1971)

You saw them just the way they really were,
Those flowers in your gardens and the wild,
Studied, preserved, in earth and paint and words,
The naturalist and artist of one mind.

The red woodbine and orange-yellow phlox,
Greenbriar, blue larkspur, nodding indigo,
The violet oxalis — rainbow names —
A covenant in pastoral catalogue.

You knew the birds as well, the goldfinch, wren,
The swallow, warbler, sparrow and the food
They loved to eat, calling them from the trees
To peck up at your feet the sprinkled seed.

And you would stay at Briarwood — birthplace, home —
Secluded in a wold's uplifted hills,
Your cabin, grounds, a modest green estate
By wisdom and solicitude maintained.

And there some April dawns a pineland quiet
Would draw you on toward spots in partial shade
Good for Celestials, common once, now rare
In north Louisiana's well-drained clays.

Their sky-blue petals graceful on the stem,
They open in midmorning, shrivel at noon,
Then die before their first and only day
Darkens toward far-off clusters of the stars.

And you remembered how their meadowlands
Once flowered around Old Shreveport to its edge,
Now ringed with plants and neighborhood escapes
Lying like slabs above the dusty bulbs.
I came from Shreveport often as a boy

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To visit kin close by you, in Saline,
And I would ask to share your solitude
By following and watching for a day.

You taught me birds you named by sight and song
And let me smell new cuttings taking root,
Species at threat that you would propagate,
Their wildness spared and thriving in your care.

And once, when I brought down those early poems
You read and complimented, being kind,
Sensing how I was trying to say my way
Back home to that same place you never left,

You had me stand apart, yet almost near,
Then called the autumn birds from bough and sky
To come to earth and eat Celestial seeds,
This time from open hands you lifted up

Toward feathers cloudy-black and iris-bright,
A kingdom needing peace, a saving grace,
A mixed flock growing larger by your love,
Still trusting that first promise you had made.

Porches

*The Village of Saline, Bienville Parish, North Louisiana
At My Late Grandparents' House*

The sand and gravel road, smooth asphalt now,
Passes beside the church and sunken stones
Of kin both dead and living yet awhile
In memories of one who left and stayed.

I slow down for those fields recalled and seen —
The cultivated, fallow, undisturbed —
Shift my old standard into neutral gear,
Then quietly glide toward stillness and the drive.

Others have owned this house for sixty years,
And though my home is here in every sense,
Possessing and possessed I cannot step
At will upon a transferred property.

So rolling down the window I look out
Binding in mind what's gone with what remains,
Then walk up to a gatepost where I wait
For shades to gather thin in autumn air.

And there, in seasons blending without end —
The bloom and fruit, oxalis and pecan —
On that deep porch between the hall and yard
I see myself and listen, man and child,

To voices long conversant with a world
Made up of things that have their place and ways
In calendar and catalogue and rhyme,
The holy days of ordinary time:

Spring's golden corydalis, white-topped sedge,
The yellow evening primrose, yellow worts —
St. Peter's and St. John's — in summer dusk,
Wisteria in thickets by the streams,

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The sprawling moss verbena — purple, rose —
By early August done, October's frost-
And chain-leaf asters, winter possum haw,
And dandelion puffballs at winter's end.

And where these thrive and die without a sound
Pine warblers nest unseen in tallest pines,
Their high-pitched trill forever coming down
While from the last few open longleaf groves

Now passing with the passing hillside farms
Lark-sparrows sing in elegy and leave
Stump fields of their unsettled breeding-place,
Searching in other woods for native ground.

Such things I take to heart and keep in mind,
Beholding and beholden, in their gift,
Each one a porch — a station and a way,
The inward and the outward reconciled,

The fathomed patterns matching, world and word,
Like mockingbirds whose mimicking in spring
Sweetens into a single autumn song
By Choctaws called "the bird of many tongues."

And so I leave the gatepost and the drive
In treetop light from afternoon's low sun
That blinds me in the rear-view mirror's glass,
The future now reflected in the past

Along this sand hill road where crest to crest
Pines rise sky-high in colonnades of fire.

Charts

Saline, Louisiana, 1957-59

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained,
What is man that thou art mindful of him?

— Psalm 8:3-4

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and
in the stars . . .

— Luke 21:25

*in memory of my maternal grandfather, Henderson
Edward Sudduth, 1892-1959*

1

You woke just as the stars and moon and sun,
Poised in their constant moving, blended lights,
A moment's single beam in dark and dawn
Spreading along the dense midwinter clouds,
Snow holding till it fell straight down like rain,
Dry shadow-drops in patterns on your bed.

Now sixty-five, finding it harder to rise
For one more day as village banker, mayor,
Church elder, still you did what must be done
Because your word, once given, was for good,
In oath and vow, in pledging the full tithe,
Plighting your troth in civic, private life,
And first to her beside you, dreaming on,
Mary your wife of nearly forty years.

You felt achy and stiff as you sat up,
Leaving the warmth of quilt and comforter,
Legs swinging till your feet touched cold wood floor,
That metal plate like weather in your head.

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Unsteady, you shuffled along room to room,
Turning up each gas heater's pilot light
Or scratching kitchen matches till a flame
Spread port to port behind the radiant grates.

But as you leaned toward burners in the hall,
Your right side deadened, nerves blocked off from brain —
That path between the muscles and the will —
Then you collapsed, half-paralyzed by stroke,
Those sounds that come before and after speech
Rousing a wife from her long bridal sleep
To find you staring helpless past her eyes.

2

An ambulance soon there from Natchitoches,
Men pushed you on a gurney through the yard,
Immobilized by straps, your mind adrift,
Mixed flocks of birds and leaves on bough and ground,
Your body dotted with crystal hexagons.

And as red flashing sirens cleared the way
Past logging trucks loaded with sand-hill pine —
Their chain-links stressed and strained by dip and crest —
You slipped into another place and time
When medics with a stretcher reached your plane
Shot up by German gunners, limping back
With leaking gas aflame along the wings,
Gliding toward No Man's Land, topographies
Of ink and earth mapped out, their legends read,
The shock of sign and thing at odds and one.

You lived, but with a steel brace in your brow,
The hole in your right cheek a dimple-scar,
Those wounds the medals you would always wear.

Yet now, a harder fall, and you lay still,
Doctors scanning a clipboard by your bed,
Zigzagging needle peak and valley lines,
The heart's cartography, a brain surveyed.

In time you walked, foot-sliding on a cane,
Reason intact but speech a slur of words
Like a toddler's mangled language, though you strove,
Grappling back through babble toward a voice
Eluding you ever after, damage done.

3

To let you say what needed to be said
As statement, question, answer, or request,
Your son-in-law, my father, drew a chart
On plywood — a rectangle painted white
A straight row of numbers, zero to nine,
And two rows curving for the alphabet,
Then underneath YES, NO, HELLO, GOODBYE,
All taken from a talking board, and HELP,
Words ready if you grew too weak to spell.

And so you lived, in silent dignity,
Hobbling in pain and numbness on the porch,
Your cane-tip tapping out its open code
Between the swing and rocker where you watched
For hours seeing more deeply than before:
Split husks dropping pecans through torn cocoons,
Strung stars and wrens along the winter limbs,
Spring lizards on the warming summer walls,
Sunflowers climbing noons toward noonday sun,
The grains they came from shaken from their heads.

And though at last bedridden, you held on,
Your sleep a kind of waking, waking, sleep,
Mind all but done with measuring the world —
God's copybook of tablet-clay and light —
Prefiguring equations, slated sums,
The ABCs that count the telling names,
The ordinals and cardinals and primes,
Chapter and verse, the tally marks and logs,
Denominators, numerators, lined
And rhyming in the diagrams and schemes
Derived from an elemental paradigm,
Spellbound orthographies, broken ground maintained
Until the end of particle and star.

And just before you left us for a state
From which there is no waking, that last place
Of sleep and breath, you motioned for the chart
To be brought back once more. Then your good hand,
Guided by magic, science, or providence
Moved like a Ouija planchette, swivel-wheeled,
Fate's heart-shaped indicator prompted at will
Through grammar's fractions, lettered formulae.

And there, where axioms and syntax blend
Like lights above a clouded winter dawn,
You found your way along the road you came
From our first home and lasting habitude,
Those old geographies of soul and mind
Beyond the posted gates, your only toll
A solitary scansion of the land,
The layered tracings, ghostly palimpsests,
That chart and board a Ptolemaic map,
Four corners marked like heaven's windy zones,
A grinning sun, a smiling press-lipped moon,
Two matched pentangle circles, ringed by stars
In a galactic dance, the striking fires,
Bright ciphers of the Nothing and the All
Worded in night and silence, carried across,
Radiant declarations, pilots ablaze
Against a No Man's Land that no one knows,
Direct reflections, certainties unguessed,
One word just like a code-blue button — HELP —
HELLO that only others needed now,
And three for dying: GOODBYE, NO, and YES.

The Gust of Wind

*after the painting by Jean-François Millet (1814-75)
1871-73, oil on canvas*

We keep our heads down as we have to do
Because this picture does, for thus Millet
Has kept things in perspective, make us safe . . .
What dominates the painting is unseen.

A wind-throw oak half torn from a blasted crest
Sends pulled roots searching upward for the earth.
One clump, unpulled, is reaching toward its tree
Buffeted by the gusting northerlies.

The storm leaves frothy ruffles in a stream
That flows before and under dip and rise,
Its jutting rocks forever worn away
By currents of the water and the air.

The oak falls toward its shadow and a man
A snapped branch harries clutching with its twigs:
The shepherd falters on toward scattered sheep.
His dog and crook are nowhere to be found.

Near distant rippling swells of autumn wheat
The dawn-fires wash stone houses, pens, and barns.
A spreading light turns orange on the ground.
The earth and sky are clouded and aflame.

Wind-bent, the shepherd bows before the sun,
Planting his feet in fear — then driven on.
The tree, too, seems aware and terrified.
We hear the primal waters in its leaves.

And in that rushing sound our heads stay down
Here in this world whose roots have been exposed
By atoms blasted outward, gust on gust,
Prevailing winds no painter can compose.

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First Steps

*after preliminary sketches, the finished drawing, and the
“pasteled” drawing by Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)*

*

1858-66

*with quotations translated from letters written by Millet
to his art dealer in Paris*

Washed linens draped along a picket fence
Running beside the garden, house, and yard
Dry white against the greens of shrub and tree
Whose shades are Conté gray on thread and board.

The garden has its own fence — like a toy —
A line of tiny sticks that barely stand,
A marker, not a barrier, a sign
For any who step over or around.

The autumn plants have wintered into spring —
Sprouts rising toward a light on melting snow —
Maturing, then dug up, a poor man’s food,
Potatoes, carrots, turnips, cabbage, beets.

Nearby, a mother, bending from behind,
Steadies a little daughter set to walk,
While almost too far off for her to reach
The father kneels, his rough soiled hands stretched out.

And there, upon the edge of letting go,
The toddler takes a first step on her own,
Uncertain . . . fall after fall to come,
Making her way toward strong uplifting arms.

*

How long Millet would take to get this right,
Sketch after sketch to shape and place, and then,
The finished drawing, monochrome, composed
In “calm” he sought “to stop the rush of time”

Until the scene would “concentrate itself”
On “real essentials” — “catch the intimate” —
In these our common lives . . . a trusting child
Who like us all must learn to walk alone.

But in the 1850s few would buy
Such drawings — peasant life too stark and hard
To hang on paneled walls, near port, cigars,
In Paris, Boston, London, or New York.

And so, to stave off poverty and please
His dealer, Sensier, Millet “enhanced”
A picture he thought done in neutral tones,
Coloring in the lines with soft pastels.

Yet “First Steps” as he sold it, heightened, bright,
Depends on the perspective coming down
Draft after draft — black chalk across white sheets —
The father, daughter, nearer, unenhanced,

Drawn closer to each other and their ground.

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Fairgrounds

Louisiana State Fair, Shreveport, October 1961

after Philip Larkin's "Show Saturday"

Late morning and the first cars roll up,
Motioned into their parking spots by staff
Who point down a roped way toward ticket booths
Either side of the clicking turnstile bars.

The children go through first, racing ahead
Into a place where fantasies come true;
The parents listen for the rising pitch
Of barkers holding toys out from their stalls.

But it's too soon for that and carnies still
Stay busy picking up last night's debris:
Matted cotton candy, deflated balloons,
Popcorn scattered like seed, crushed Dixie cups.

And so, to start, the Ag-Show, on its own,
A harvest festival of crops and stock,
Now set apart from midway games and rides
Long since the main attractions of the fair.

The parish champions are on display,
A town of temporary tent-barns, pens,
Black Hereford and Angus — bull and cow —
State winners with blue ribbons garlanded.

Some city boys and girls in shorts and T's
Printed with Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck
Marvel at beasts both magical and real
Serenely chewing cud above the dung.

Off by themselves, under a bigger tent,
New tractors gleam, posed like showroom cars.
Pamphlets are given out by salesmen dressed
In Caterpillar yellow, John Deere green.

They nod toward a corner where an angled fence
Rails off a nineteenth century wooden plow,
Its iron blade dulled and rusted, handles, smooth,
Worn down to fit a single pair of hands.

The children, hungry, tug at their parents' arms.
They're restless, and it's getting well past noon.
Concession stands entice them with the smells
Of corndogs, burgers, onion rings, and fries.

And now they're ready for the carousel,
Holding tight to the ponies on their posts
Going up and down and round and round
And that's enough: they're ready to go home.

Soon afternoon and twilight bring the teens,
Older ones driving, younger ones dropped off
By fathers, who'll return for them at ten.
The carnival and night grow bright and loud.

And everywhere thrill after thrill draws crowds,
The Teacups spinning and the Tilt-A-Whirl,
Bumper Cars, the Wipeout, and the Whip,
The Wild Mouse with its unbanked hairpin curves,

Playing with gravity, jolting space and time,
The riders still dazed as they find their way
Down platform stairs onto the firm flat ground,
Some whooping, giddy, others, throwing up.

The line is slow outside the House of Mirrors,
(An even flow so panic doesn't start),
A maze of see-through panes, reflecting glass,
And doorless frames that seem to lead nowhere

Then suddenly confront one with a form
Known, yet unfamiliar, bending out or in,
Frightening and laughable — the mixing tears —
Torso collapsed, a bulging wide-stretched mouth.

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The carousels outgrown, not wanting to leave
Just yet the revelers head for the Ferris wheel,
Couples among them snuggling in the seats
Spoke rods lift north, each stopping at the top.

And when the gentle back-and-forth is stilled
They look down at the midway, up toward stars,
The wheeling lights and music, in their spheres,
The fairs of earth and heaven almost one.

But then a slow descent to the exit ramp,
The long way round to reach the parking lot,
To make it last, the couples hand in hand.
And as they pass the Ag-Show tents and pens

They see the cows asleep on hay and sand,
At home and whole where others once had been,
The winners with blue ribbons garlanded,
A childhood memory come back again.

Let all this be forever as it is.