

Dan Campion

Gag Order

The starlings did their Alfred Hitchcock thing
this morning, flocking to the cedar trees
for berries ravenously, taking wing,
then perching on bare ash limbs in the breeze
of more starlings arriving for the feast.
Their murmuration utters not one note
of song, as if some magistrate or priest
forbade their singing and they'd learned by rote
the eerie silence of a moonstruck moth.
But when they're startled, all take off at once,
and those first wingbeats churn the air to froth,
a gush of sound like all the elements
competing to be foremost to fulfill
the natural fate of ordered things. To spill.



Of Fences

A fence is older than the laws, but not
as old as trespasses. Its posts and wire
or rails, or piled-up bricks or stones, concede
priority to footprints, although faint,
still visible, left by intruders long
ago. A fence describes a simple plot.
Except, that is, for fences that require
that nothing leave the lot. For this, we need
a different storyboard, a can of paint
or whitewash, and an anthem or plainsong.
A worm fence follows still a different route.
Admit you've peeked through fences, in or out,
to see what's on the other side. "God's spies,"
Lear says, and bids Cordelia wipe her eyes.



To the Figure in White

Go study Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek
and Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic, enough
to get by in the marketplace. Then seek,
among tired, shoddy wares and useless stuff,
provisions for your journey to the isle
for dreaming. Through the desert you will need
a guide. Choose carefully. Too quick to smile,
pass by. They'd leave you in the sand to bleed.
You want somebody grave of mien, but not
severe, who speaks about as well as you,
who'll bring you safe to Tyre. Then you have got
to find the right ship that will bring you through
the Cyclades until you reach the cliff
of caves and cypresses and board your skiff.



Concha aurea

But what if time won't tell? We'll say again
that time will tell. Of course we will. And time
won't disabuse us; time would lose out, then,
to oracle and dream and nursery rhyme.
An emperor jots down his thoughts, and when
we read them in our distant age they feel
immediate, as by a borrowed pen
from our own desk. And yet, they're under seal.
For time won't tell, no matter what we tell
ourselves. The question is, how telling might
avail. Our ear has hovered near that shell
since sea and land first met a morning's light.
That light was gold and green and rose and blue.
The shell was weathered, though the world was new.



Statue of the Watcher

Do not by any means embrace, I told
myself, the coils of the Laocoön.
Observe, and even touch, but never hold,
or you'll be drowned or torn asunder. John
the Conqueror would think again before
entangling himself in that melee
out in the churning water. I'll stay ashore.
No sons nor serpents have a claim on me.
It makes no difference, when a god decrees
a punishment. Mine is to stand and stay
composed while twin sea monsters rise and seize
two blameless boys and guilty priest. Why pray?
Apollo and Poseidon know their minds,
and, though they don't exist, their ruling binds.



Blank Stare

The eye stays innocent no matter what
is seen. It's not responsible. It keeps
no log for future reference. When it sleeps
no bad dreams trouble it. It's weepy, but
it can't think it will be forever shut.
Mortality lies elsewhere, though it seeps
at times into a look, and even creeps
throughout the frame, until it's cropped or cut.
So don't believe it when they say no eye
is innocent, all eyes are knowing. They're
mistaken, or they misspoke, or they lie.
It isn't for the eye to know or care,
affirm, consider, pardon, or deny.
The eye receives, reports, and leaves it there.

