

But



Still,

Music

ANNE PITKIN

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MOCKINGBIRD

I heard the mockingbird:
robin, cardinal, blue jay, car horn,
one bird arguing in many voices.

I thought I'd escaped the secrets,
the lies behind which the smiling grownups hid—
whispers that hurt the child, telling me

I was not pretty.

*

I heard the mockingbird
the day my mother died, and I was free
of the last attachment.

That day, the sun clamored
into the windows of the mausoleum
our old home had become.

A cardinal streaked from the maple,
an ember over the dry yard.
It landed on the rusted pole

for the long vanished martin house
and flew away.

*

I heard the mockingbird
in the elm partway down the bluff,
where Michael and I found—we were certain—
the shell of a crashed plane.

*

Someone asked me after Mother's funeral,
Are you Episcopalian or Presbyterian?

Yes. I answered. *Guilty.*

THE FIRST HOME

*—for Michael, wherever you are,
best friend of my childhood*

You sat by the street, howling
so loud we heard you and brought you in.
Your mother had sent you to bed again without dinner.

You'd been late. Didn't hear her calling,
the two of us not noticing how late.

The mothers are dead.

The fathers are dead.

Jays scold, beautiful
and harsh. They know everything.
Can you hear them?

We lived on the same bluff
across the street from each other.
We quarreled, hitched rides on old Fines's garbage wagon,
played all day from house to house.

Where are you?
The jays know. Scolding all day long.

But where are you?

Once, years ago, we spoke by phone.

I'll love you forever, you wailed,
so drunk I could barely understand.

How many years

since the muddy Red River unrolled from under our bluff
along the future's unreadable maps?

I have a photo, the two of us holding hands
across the sprinkler, summer's first ritual.

We face the camera, laughing,
our eyes tight closed against sun and pelting water.

The maple we climbed and hid in for hours
still bends over the street. You warned me
about the Bell Witch, the perils
of Miss Sadie's fifth grade.

Once the bad boys treed us.

Dare you to come down, sissy, they said.

I think of trying to find you. Jays scold, *Too Late!*

One summer, after you'd been two months out of town,
your mother's old Ford pulled into the driveway.

All day I'd been waiting, all day under the maple.

You leapt out, tore across the street—
you picked me up and paused, the two of us dazed
with happiness, then spun me under the riotous sun.

GHOST STORIES

The grownups murmured
behind lighted windows.
Michael told ghost stories
inside the willow fronds,
a flashlight's green eye
keeping us safe.

The nine o'clock train
shrieked through town.
Cicadas sawed gritty fiddles.
A hundred silent creatures
blinked in the trees every night until the night

Michael bolted.
They're coming, they're coming!
he shouted. The world spun,
whistling, through the universe,
the two of us racing,
separate, blind

until Michael screamed—
I was sure they'd got him—

kept screaming, stumbled back
from the brick garden wall
his purple nose broken, face
a mess of blood and tears.

I've heard a *thunk* as a bird
flew into a window, as if the sky
had betrayed it.

Stunned, it recovered
or didn't. Afternoons go on
overturning buckets
of bronze and gold,
down the horizon that beckons
or clangs shut.

GHAZAL FOR A PRODIGY

Michael was most himself when he danced.

An unlearned grace possessed him when he danced.

A child, he brought onto the stage

a landing heron, a deer mid-leap when he danced.

All summer, acrobatic purple martins woke the air.

He could glide like them and spiral when he danced,

adored the air he slipped through like their scalpel wings.

The air adored him when he danced,

trees bent like aunts and uncles, birds

brought news of another country when he danced.

Sissy! The town called him. Pretty girl.

He was not normal when he danced.

He gave it up. Normal meant more

to the child than joy when he danced.

It's the past, Anne. Let it go—

how grace could save him only when he danced.

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