

SAMPLER

If the Mute Timber

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Tom Docherty

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For Molly

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‘...Sound in another place...’

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If the sencelesse spheares doo yet hold a musique,
If the Swanne's sweet voice be not heard, but at death,
If the mute timber when it hath the life lost,
Yeldeth a lute's tune...

SIDNEY

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I

‘...Sound in another place...’

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Theory of Tuning Pianos

It begins not with a book
nor even an attentive ear.
You have to sit and live with the thing.
You must learn to see grand gestures
in a shiver, discern
each silence of every different moment.

Now place a finger. Be careful:
you are pressing on a beating heart.
Desire to understand nothing that is not
this beating heart. You cannot hear
the equations being made
perfect between two bodies.

Sound in another place. It is yours
to say well- or ill-tempered. Align shoulder
and breast. When time for movement,
move; rest
in the intervals. If your touch is not light,
make light of your thought.

So much is said by the breath
that follows. You are now
at the heart of the way
all this is numbered.
It is imperative you do not speak.
It begins to sound like your lover is awake.

Among Birds

Now is her moment of having nothing
to prove: she speaks only
inwardly as male wings
switch colour, fly and scuff.

The already-defeated sip
at a chlorine pool. All
give the same uninflected hoot:
short-long-short:
an avian amphibrach.

Just one of this rabble is real;
the others hack and mimic, stifling
the air with noise.

A bird emerges.

Neither does he need to prove
a thing, singing to what is
because he is. The tiniest birds
offer obbligato fanfares
to this unknowing purity. Joyous
they tweep and twiff in the freesia.

So the natural king and queen
process, it being theirs to process,
into the palace of sky;
rotating like balloons, children
enter in companionship
with bouncing voices.

The king may not yet realise
but the mocks have died away, foamed
into the distance to leave his hoot,
deep in the red afternoon,
quieter, softer, softening the day,
pleading without desperation
or self-pity. It is a voice so tender
that, hearing it, the other birds
have simply ceased to live,

having nothing to give and knowing
finally what can be given.
It touches everything in the place
without seeming to: the gape
of the moon. Long
after the awaited entrance
it will cry, now nearly dumb,
to balcony and terrace,
across each supine hill's face
and through every window,
only for her ear,
cry over everything
until it has been broken down
to the immortal
mortal
poise of her silence.

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Et cultus justitiæ silentium

Is. 32. 17

Milton's *pandæmonium* was for a reason.

He himself compassed
with infirmity in the line
of Homer, past
seeing human face divine,

came to please silence
before returning thence.

Every idle word (I note)
shall be counted in the epilogue
of time. By God. Hope not.
St James had it on the tongue:
a world of iniquity, innate.

Melt down thy gold and silver—
Sirach's abandoned mitzvah—

and make a balance for thy words.
Like marriage, to preserve
what is minted, the quiet works
on us until we can perceive
the coinage it works towards

(of which we have much to say, and hard
to be intelligibly uttered).

Lines on a Birth

Born as we would have had you:
into rain-season, into
a habitation of rain:
to which weeping without strain

can be compared (thus says my
Concise Etymology):
plorare: weep, make to flow:
bound with *pluvia*: rain: so

it makes sense to imagine
a full night's rain at the line
sung in the *Lamentations*
of Thomas Tallis: *plorans*

ploravit in nocte, sweet
against their meaning and yet
a part of it, since we wept
seeing you at last unkept.

Juana Maria

Whether genuinely alone then one
cannot say. Whether to address directly—
without language, genuine knowledge—
is a tongue-tie too. Is you more known or knowing than she?
Easier the probable they who penned her, if anything
like me, scrabbling at the feathers of her dress—
cormorant's—saying nothing of the heraldic cross,
the eating-up eighteen years, or greed.
They said she sang. Invited them in
to her square stanza, four-word, so they heard.
Red her abalone shells for fishhooks. Fetching,
evidently. Taut, to be sure. No line breaks
in her catching smile. All taste and sense
of a tune stripped but not abandoned, scrap
saved, savoured, elsewhere. A leap
out of the line of time
in tones no one
knew.

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