

# PROTECTIVE COLORATION



poems

David Jibson

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## The Birds of Morris Graves

oh these are not the pretty  
painted plovers of Audubon  
but spirit birds of nature  
that seek to nest in that  
wounded wilderness of the inner eye

maddened by the sound of machinery  
and logged-off mountains  
myths of division and separation  
Taoist owls in times of change  
moon birds with their haunted bouquets  
singing in the next dimension

## A Word

Corn stubble in a frozen field,  
some patches of snow  
along the fence row,  
maybe a crow or two.  
There should be a word for this.

# Canals of Mars

How glorious, the canals of Mars,  
as Percival Lowell described them.  
How dry the red Martian desert.  
How welcome the relief  
of water pouring from the polar icecaps  
flowing like life's own blood  
through the arteries and veins  
over the surface of the warrior planet.

And where they intersect,  
a sprawling city of crystal towers,  
home to the great university  
where once a year in Martian summer  
great minds gather to debate the theory  
that there could be life on Earth.

Too close to the sun's deadly heat,  
the philosopher-scientists say.  
How could it be?

Too wet and the air too heavy to breathe,  
argue the philosopher-physicians.  
Nothing could live in those conditions.

Even if life could exist there,  
argues the philosopher-poet,  
how could one write music or poetry  
or fall in love under the influence  
of a single moon?

# What They Left Behind

A carpet stain that will never come out,  
a toy fire truck with no wheels,  
a doll with one arm, naked,  
one eye permanently closed,

four extra squares of kitchen linoleum tile,  
a worn broom, straw tips blackened with soot,  
an overlooked drawer containing  
a tin box of assorted Band-Aids  
with only the smallest size left,

one leaky D-cell battery, some rubber washers,  
twist ties, bottle brush, a box  
of strike-anywhere matches, paper clips,  
and an extra stopper for the bathroom sink.

In a closet, a half used can of Comet Cleanser  
with a rusty lid, a dozen wire hangers,  
most of them bent, a paper grocery bag  
full of plastic grocery bags,  
about eighty percent of a broken dust pan,

one tennis shoe, child sized,  
for the left foot, still tied  
in a double knot with a muddy sock  
stuffed in the toe.

# String Theory

As I'm about to walk out the door I decide to stop  
and scratch the dog behind her ears one more time.  
While I'm doing this, another me,  
the one who decided not to take the time,  
splits off into another universe.  
This is string theory and it puts the other me  
about thirty seconds ahead of me in life.  
I don't know how much difference it will make  
in the subsequent details of our lives.  
Will he end up married to a prettier wife?  
Will his children be smarter than mine?  
I wonder, according to the laws of the universe,  
if I drive a little faster to work and I catch up with him,  
will our lives merge again in a single universe?  
I hope so. I hate the thought that his life  
could be better than mine.

# Symphony Number Eleven

after Dmitri Shostakovich, *Saint Petersburg, 1905*

*Adagio: The Palace Square.*

Cold and quiet the crowd of cellos  
gathers like snow in the clouds,  
menace of timpani rumble,  
an earthquake beneath the square,  
a call of brass from some distant place.

*Allegro: The Ninth of January.*

A restlessness of burning violins,  
a swirling blizzard, a sudden riot  
of snare drums like gunfire,  
timpani horses thunder  
to the march and clash of gleaming brass,  
a panic of piccolos and woodwinds.

*Adagio: Eternal Memory*

A bent mother searches among the thump of drums  
in the quiet dark of deserted streets,  
picks through remnants of shattered violas,  
crushed bass clarinets and trampled flutes  
for her son, the harpist, who lies frozen,  
stretched over the splintered carcass  
of his wrecked and ruined instrument.

*Adagio non troppo: Tocsins*

Tocsins toll in the churches,  
a call in resilient G minor  
to a future of violent trumpets,  
trombones, cymbals of power, tubular bells,  
celesta and strings but, for now,  
the music is tacet in the square.



# Mobility Training

The tip of her white cane weaves back and forth  
sniffing at the sidewalk in front of her  
like the nose of an excited beagle.

She stays close to the buildings on her left,  
testing for the cliff edge of the world,  
hoping she won't drop over it into nothing.

I watch her for half a block as she falls  
behind two other trainees who seem  
to have more confidence.

She comes to a stop, still twelve feet  
from the intersection at Main and Liberty.  
Then, turning her best ear

through each cardinal point  
of an imaginary compass,  
she listens, her face a quiz.

## Niagara Winter

The famous mist had frozen to everything  
so solidly that it couldn't be scraped away  
so we sat hunkered inside the car,  
shivering with the dampness,  
listening to Sarah Vaughn, waiting  
for the defrosters to do their work,  
talking about the drive ahead  
over the Rainbow Bridge into New York  
and on to Connecticut,  
how we thought the little motel in Ontario  
was overpriced for this time of year  
until we realized the price was in Canadian dollars,  
and how the mist, frozen to your eyelashes,  
made you look like a chorus girl -  
even at this age.

## Protective Coloration

The Walking Stick is indistinguishable from his habitat,  
as is the Dead Leaf Butterfly, the Pygmy Seahorse,  
the Tawny Frog-mouth of Tasmania and the Giant Kelp-fish.

So it is with the poet of a certain age, hidden in a corner booth  
at the back of the cafe, as quiet as any snowshoe hare,  
as still as a heron among the reeds.

## Ex Libris

The noise of pages turning in the library is deafening  
despite signs everywhere demanding silence.

The romance section is filled with non-stop sighs  
of the starved-for-love and sweet smell of jasmine.

From mysteries there is the crack  
of a revolver and from behind a shelf  
a woman screams.

Travel is a cacophony of train whistles  
boat horns, jet engine sounds,  
jangle of busy porters,  
people in a hurry.

From history, the sound of clashing swords,  
acrid smells of black powder, flashes  
of heavy artillery beyond the horizon  
like heat lightning, horses in the throes of death,  
mourning cries of widows.

In religion, calls to prayer,  
odor of brimstone,  
moans of the damned.

But in poetry, where both  
love and death have come to read,  
only the sound of leaves  
falling on water.