

11/20/09 - Don't Think Twice, It's All Right

When I asked Bird if she would stay for good, she laughed and said You should know by now. Don't you know what I'm thinking? This was after the fire and after she had come back for // the fifth time? / the sixth time? // I don't know. But it was before she was gone for good, which is now but could be a dozen different days. I'm not sure anymore which act this is, which parlor, or even which part I'm playing. But I know the trick ?? the disappearing bird. But am I the bird in the cage / or the bird up-sleeve? There are two birds to this trick. One vanishes / one emerges.

Every time Bird left, it went about the same. It was always temporary. And it was always permanent. And the last time is the only one I can ever remember. It's like a stranger's memory, except this one feels like I'm wrapped in cotton. The last time //

I had been on the couch all morning, a few bills and junk-mail spread out in front of me, when she came on stage ?? a sharp, practiced entrance from stage right, toting a bag on her shoulder, another in her hand.

"I'm going out for a while," she said as she passed.

"With half of your shit packed?" I asked.

"I've got to go for a little while," she said, back turned on me.

"Look, if this is about your mom??"

"I told you, it isn't. I just can't do this now," she said. I stood and shuffled to the kitchen to drop bad credit card offers and first notices in the trash. The trash wasn't full, but I tied the bag shut anyway and hoisted it out.

"As long as you're going," I said, "would you mind taking the trash out for once." I tossed the bag at her feet. "Maybe if you wait with it at the curb, someone will pick you up, too."

I might as well have baited a hook with a brick. It didn't even phase her.

"I'll be back," she said.

"Don't bother."

She looked at me for a moment, feigning comprehension, and put her hand softly to

her lips. She shut the door without a bang or a soft click, just normal, trying to tell me she didn't walk on eggshells for anyone. But I heard them cracking. She couldn't hide it from me. Everything beneath her feet was white and thin and just barely keeping together. She left the bag of trash behind, and I thought of bringing it out, of following her outside. But I didn't.

I guess you could say I always had the same problems whether Bird was there or not. But she was always there and not. So I don't know if you could say things got worse. But they changed for once. The scenery was different. I tried to change, rebuild it myself, I remember. But something else took over // It came from outside //

I don't know what day it was. And I didn't hear her coming up the stairs, approaching my apartment, lifting her hand slowly. In confidence, Bird makes sure her resonance precedes her. But I heard nothing. Nothing, that is, except for her light tapping. It was the most timid knock in the world??like three kamikaze ladybugs at my front door.

I had been sitting by the window when she came. The TV was on, muted, and I hadn't shaved in days, couldn't have if I wanted to. My chest hair had crumbs in it because shirts were too much of a hassle, and there were stains all over my sweatpants. I knew it was Bird instantly. At her knock, I moved faster than I had all week, nearly jumping straight up, but I stopped halfway to the door. Quietly, I stepped up to the peephole. She looked good, even with her body contorted in a bubble. She shuffled her feet, looked around, jiggled her leg. And her bottom lip kept popping out from between her teeth.

It had barely been a week since the fire. I looked at my apartment // overflowing sink with orbital flies / coffee table legs with no discernible top / unspeakable living room floor / burned bedroom // myself ?? aching arms wrapped in gauze from fingertips to shoulders.

Bird knocked again. I fumbled with the bolts and rolled the side of my arm along the doorknob to get it open. Bird's shy smile vanished.

"What happened?" she said coming in, three months already forgotten and closing the door behind her. "Oh my god ?? why didn't you call me?"

"Call you where, genius?"

"I've just been at my dad's place. You could have tried. I would have come."

"I didn't know," I said. She started throwing things away, tidying the place. "Are you going to be staying at his place for a while? I could use some help moving a few things out."

"Moving?" she said, turning on me.

"Not me. Just some broken furniture. So you're gonna be there or what?" I asked, unable to keep from looking at her, watching the bend of her waist.

"No," she said, "I'll be here." And for some reason ?? I want to say it was the drugs ?? I said, "Okay."

And she said, "So what happened to your arms?"

What happened //

My neighbors were in love with home electronics, appliances, and alarm clocks. The long and short of it? Old building, bad wiring, too many plugs. Oldest one in the book, the fire chief said. The spark ignited on the far wall of their bedroom, curiously close to three curling irons and a stereo. That wall was also my wall, my headboard. Their bed didn't burn, but mine did, taking Bird's smell with it.

I had just come inside the building when sirens began whispering in the distance. Halfway up the stairs I smelled smoke. Ten flights passed in a blink, and there was our floor, toxic and blinding. Somehow the door opened, and I ran through the apartment to the bedroom. It was Hell ?? wailing and gnashing of teeth as promised. I dove to the floor, suffocating, and groped under the bed for the fireproof box Bird thought was so stupid.

What they don't tell you about fireproof boxes is that a certain kind, say, a lower grade model, is not necessarily heat proof. Third degree burns covered me from fingers, up my forearms, to my biceps. Like a cow, I got branded, complete with the box's serial number on my right forearm, sticking out in white like an infection. Now I'm the property of Econosafe Inc.

In the box //

Documents / certificates / the things that prove I'm alive.

What else //

Pictures of Bird / all of them blurry // She's always moving out of frame.

So she stayed, back in swing within an hour. Her clothes were just outside the door in an old, brown suitcase. Right away, she asked about the pills.

"So what did they give you?"

"Petroleum dyosophate."

"Oh man, can I try some?"

And on it went. We made love ?? carefully. We drank and took pills. She put her clothes back in the drawers. Time passed slowly as the petroleum sunk deeper into my spine.

"So how's your dad getting along?" I asked. She had been back maybe a week.

"He's doing okay," she said. "He said it was time to get along by himself for a while."

I had to make up with her in a different way each day, and that was how I apologized ?? by showing interest in what lay outside of us. I usually didn't. I usually couldn't. Before Bird, my own mother was all I had, and she died when I was three. There was nothing, no one else, and no real feeling for anyone before Bird. If she was here, I was happy. The only time we had talked while she was gone was the night I picked up the phone by accident, drunk and hoping for a wrong number and someone to talk to, not bothering to screen it. Bird whispered through tears on the other end. Her mother was gone. She didn't want to bother me, but

she had no one else to call. She just wanted to hear a familiar voice. On some level, I believed that was all she wanted.

All I could say was, "I'm sorry," but I remember saying it like I'd drunk the last of the milk. I wished nothing ill on Bird's mother. The old woman's vibrancy amazed me. Bird made more sense in light of her. And I was sorry she was gone. But I was not sorry in the least for Bird.

I guess you could say I know how to hold a grudge.

Bird came home one evening from work ?? a little beer and wine shop ?? and found me in the chair by the window, the TV cocked towards me, muted. I guess I didn't hear her talking, because the next moment she was at my right ear.

"Hey! Earth to stoned-guy." She circled around me and bent down, her eyes inches from mine. "Anybody in there?"

"Hey you," I said, finally able to make out her face.

"Jesus, when do you stop taking those pills?" She went to the kitchen and brought back a corkscrew and a bottle of wine.

"I don't know," I said. "A few more weeks."

"They turn you to stone," she said, filling her glass to the rim. "I don't like it."

Later, she fixed dinner and set a plate next to me, but I forgot to eat. We watched television until it was dark. Bird's plate sat crusted on the floor next to a quarter-full bottle, and she was nodding off.

"Bird?" I mumbled. She stirred and yawned. "Do you remember when we were on the frozen lake?" She squinted, like a bad dream had just finished and she was afraid to open her eyes.

"I remember," she said.

"Remember how it was so warm at home? You wore sandals and we just went. But the lake was still frozen solid, in April. It was like winter forgot to go away and the

lake was safe enough to walk on. Remember?"

"What about it?" She changed the channel to Leno.

"Nothing," I said. "I was just thinking about the sun shining and the snow on the ground and how you had to hop around on patches of grass. Then we walked on the lake. Remember how we wondered what it would take to make cracks, to send us through the ice? And then I jumped and you screamed, but it didn't break. What would it have taken, Bird?"

"All I remember is cold feet," she laughed.

"Sure," I said. Bird shook her head and turned towards the television. I thought about that lake for the rest of the night. When Bird fell asleep on the couch, I took another petroleum, and I swam in the lake, plowing through the ice, turning over and over from breaststroke to back. Then I climbed out onto an icy shore and lay in the sun. The ice cooled my smoldering arms as the sun warmed my face, wet with cold water.

Once a painkiller as effective as petroleum dyosophate is introduced to a body like mine, it becomes the pain. Instead of my arms burning, a new sensation filled me and told me when I needed relief // a pulse at the base of my spine / neural epicenters opening up slowly / icy electric signals surging to the top of my shoulders, careening down my arms to fingertips // Pure voltage filled my stomach.

When I took the pills, my body rejoiced. It scratched all those static itches and chased the chill back to a little spot in my spine. The epicenters shut down. All the neurons rested themselves. And in our silence and stillness, each one of us was rejoicing. Every last nerve in me was free from stimulus ?? floating, detached, isolated. And every day ?? for how long, I'm not sure ?? I watched the street through the window. I saw people walking back and forth, coming then going.

Bird had fixed up my spot by the window one morning. Usually, I just kicked a chair in the general direction until it was next to the window, but Bird had put cushions on my chair and a tray of food beside it. She even made a footrest ?? two cinderblocks that had been carelessly left in the bedroom, out of place. I stopped when I saw them, having not been in my room for weeks. She hadn't asked where they came from.

About a week before the fire, I took the cinderblocks from a construction site. Whiskey was involved. I carried two of them, one in each hand, up to the apartment with the notion of going back for more. I wanted to block off Bird's side of the room, even her side of the bed. I wondered what it would be like to roll over and find those cold, gray stones.

Bird was already gone when I got to the chair that morning. A little note on the seat said she'd be back with groceries and a refill of my pills. I had none left except for a few days worth of extras stashed around the place. Trying to open pill bottles with my arms wrapped up like leg-of-lamb had gotten old quick, so Bird took over. But I always had some ready to access, just so I didn't have to ask. I took one from a plastic bag hidden in the potted plant soil. It lasted until Bird came back. It was only midmorning. I knew by the shadows on the street.

"I got bacon!" Bird laughed as she charged through the door. "I haven't had it in years. You want some? We can fry it up."

"Did you get the pills?" I asked.

"No ?? I couldn't."

"What?" I turned from the window.

"They said you were out of refills, honey."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I had one more." Twisted in the chair, half-turned to her, I yelled over my shoulder. "Why did you let them do that?"

"You used the last one two weeks ago. Besides, it's time to get off those things. Maybe it's better if ?? "

"Shut the fuck up, you don't know. They're just trying to fuck me over. God damn it, why didn't you tell them the doctor would call in more or something?"

"They don't just hand it out on trust," Bird said, trying to laugh. She had stopped putting things away and was close to the chair, talking to me from behind. We hadn't looked at each other much in the weeks before. "The pills are done. Get over it."

"But I still feel pain," I said.

"That's a good thing," Bird said. "Don't you know?"

As the sun set that evening, Bird came near the chair and stood over me. Her eyes darted; her lip could not escape her teeth.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. Her right leg bounced. "But I'm going to my dad's for the night. He needs some help." She looked out the window as she spoke. "Okay?"

Her image blurred in my vision. "Alright," I said. "But come back early. I'll need you."

She left me there, promising to return the next morning. I slept in the chair that night and woke to silence and a piercing sun. A few hours passed as I rode a wave of petroleum dyosophate, crest to trough ?? sinking, then rising. The day got brighter, and it was hard to even look out to the street. Through water, I saw small figures skating along the sidewalk, short shadows trailing behind. I knew they'd be standing on their shadows soon, and Bird had still not come home. So I decided against the sandwich she had left in the fridge and ate three more pills.

I slumped back in the chair for a while, feet propped up, watching as the noon sun brought starkness to the sky and buildings. Everything was just right, flat and colorful, only light. But the window began to hurt my eyes, less and less could I see color. Like a blizzard, white blotted everything out except shapes, outlines. I leaned forward, rubbed my eyes, and looked down at the street again. But the street was not there. It was just a band of white. People seemed to dance on it, though they were only dots on sticks. They could have been anyone.

I opened the window. Even in the warmth of the sunlight, the air was cold. No sounds came from the street, no shapes either. It was all white and cold and bright. I wanted Bird there to close the window. It had hurt to put it up, so I called her name a few times, but no answer. I yelled out the window, but no one seemed to notice. They just continued skating along the cold white expanse where the street and sidewalk used to be.

Down at my feet, the two cinderblocks snuggled next to each other. I took the right

one and slid it away, fit my forearms through its two large holes, lifted, and set it on the window ledge. The street ?? white ?? showed no weak spots, no pressure points, and I wondered if even this would not be heavy enough. The block moved itself across the ledge to the open side, did not even hesitate to dive from my hand. It got lost in the glare for a moment, but I saw its shadow come into focus before disappearing ?? before the strike.

I thought I saw a crack, a fracture, start beneath the block, and like a shadow it crept up the street and went and went and I wondered if it would split the earth, and I thought of the street breaking jaggedly and folding in on itself like a worn piece of paper ?? all the people and things sliding in after.

But then there were only a number of bright, squinting faces looking up at me, gathered around the cinderblock like it was a corpse. There were no cracks ?? only questions.

The police were pacified easily enough. One look at my arms, my helpless expression ?? I was trying to bring it inside, sir, to prop up the window ?? and they closed their pads.

I could have killed someone, they said. I should have someone helping me out.

"She's out right now," I said, "but she'll be back."

They said she better make it soon. Then they were gone.

Bird's father greeted me on the telephone that night. His voice was trapped in another year, happier than it should have been, because his wife's voice was there beside his, speaking as one. I left a single message explaining how somebody had almost died outside the building that day and how strange that was. I said I felt shook up from the whole thing. I was sure, I said, that Bird had forgotten to call me and was staying one more night. And would it please only be one more night. The close call had really got me thinking ?? You know Bird, I could go tomorrow. Then I hung up. I took five more pills and called again at three in the morning.

"I cracked the lake, Bird. I did it. It only took a little bit of pressure. The ice split open and everyone slid in, Bird, but I didn't see you there. I didn't see you there. Where are you? I'm on the lake and jumping. It won't let me in. You're underneath it, but I never saw you go down. You're in the water, Bird. And I'm on the ice."

I started to sob, and somewhere along the way, a loud beep cut me off. I dropped the receiver to the floor and went roaming in the house for more pills. I pulled the potted plant out, but couldn't dig through the dirt with gauze on my hands. Biting off bits of tape with my teeth, I began unraveling my bandages. Yards and yards of gauze curled up in little piles on the floor. My forearm looked like pot roast left in the sun ?? rotten and leathery. The other arm was free in under a minute. I lifted the couch on its end and looked for the stash in the underside. I pushed the TV from its stand, though I'd never hidden any pills there. I went everywhere but the bedroom. I hadn't stepped foot in it once since the fire. But it caught my eye as I went to the bathroom to look in the toilet tank. The black marks on the wall were beginning to fade, along with the smell of ashes. I don't know how long I stayed right there, staring at our bed, at Bird's half.

// And from here everything remains the same, or goes the same I should say / repeating in small cycles easy enough to catch on to if only the windows are open just enough. It doesn't matter where I am now or where I was before Bird left and came and left again. I've forgotten which time was which and the birthdays of my family. I've forgotten which month she disappeared and the year I met her. But it doesn't really matter. I told you every time was the same. I always had burned arms / I was always addicted to detachment / I always loved Bird. I'm always standing in my room smelling ashes. The parallel universes of my apartment / where in one Bird is there and another not / gave me something to move through or live in / I don't know the difference anymore / They all happened at once, in an instant, the same as // sleeping / waking // We're always doing both at once. Where I am now is the same as where I was / all my lives like tiny bubbles / amassed into one.

In one life / I'm always in the apartment // In another / I sleep in the street.

In one life I am always myself / And in another I am always Bird.

In one life I am always on fire / and in another // extinguished.