



Photo Credit: Stefano Parrini

SEXY SYLLABLES

is, I read, a “real term” among ornithologists,
for male birds that use the syrinx to sing with
two different voices at once; dueting with self,

which females prefer to single-voice syllables.

Here we are walking up and down under the weft
of branches ringing with a swamp sparrow's double-
tunes, beguiling us along with the female flitting
up till she disappears. You're trying to spot her
when I fling my arms around your neck. "Whoa,
not so fast, pal," you chirp, "Till you double your
pitch!" At least you don't leave my side till dawn.
On the opposite shore the boughs are already bare.

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"STAINING THE ROCK WITH BANDS OF RUST"

"Dawn species," I've read, "pumped out oxygen
to sustain themselves. And for a long, long time
life was content to stay in such a state; incapable
of even aspiring beyond blankets of algae." Whew,
an imperceptible trembling comes over me. What's
the matter? you ask. My head's fallen to the back
of the rocker. We're on the nursing home's porch.
The sky's almost black, the air's sour. Our hands
sprout rashes, we know this is our last routine;
and this sort of speaking and thinking seems but
a wisp in the great mists of time. "Now, now," you
tease, handing me your pet rock, which a grandkid
painted expressly in your favorite colors. I run my

finger along the soft red band, put it to my tongue.

Even if things were better in general, we'd still be in this same place; and it's not pretty, let's be clear.

Our nurse throws shawls over our shoulders, it's time to dine. First, I spoon some mashed potatoes

to your lips, then you balance some peas on your fork to mine. So... we are well-contented after all.

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ON DYING OF ATLANTO-AXIAL DISLOCATION

Aka a broken neck, we read, written across Girolamo Zini's skull, a nineteenth century tightrope artist from Trieste, the first exhibit on our tour of the Mütter Museum in Philly. When our guide rubs the back of his neck, we all do too and follow to the next visine: Andrejew Sokoloff's considerable skull, of which he relieved himself following the dire command of self-emasculatation by his order.

By the end of the tour, I'm weak, melancholy, in great confusion treading back to the bus. One who has, as Dostoevsky puts it, "Borne sins before God." High time to wonder what the things we've seen might mean. Instead, alas, my seat-mate and I start sharing insipid jokes, protecting I suppose against something. He unscrews the tip of his cane, a cup of sorts, brimming with brandy. "If we can't rely on our

wisdom," he laughs, "at least let's wet whistles."

Then he rubs the back of my neck. I rub his
in turn, before we make straight for salvation.

* * *

TOM, DICK, AND HARRY

Dick is what you might name your mockingbird
if like Thomas Jefferson you'd spent Cucillin,
Bergere & Fingal naming horses and sheepdogs.

Mimus polyglottos, many-tongued mimic, Dick,
who cost the president \$10, serenaded him with
Scottish and French songs after first renditioning

the local birds, while my mother's, which cost
her \$125, didn't deliver on the store's promise,
could barely emit the species harsh tschak! No

wonder, the autopsy showed a malformed syrinx.
Pete's Pets talked her into going with a budgie,
instead: "It'll be lots easier to care for, and it can

vocalize almost as well as the mocker; eats cheap."

So Tom was the first of dozens that kept us company
at breakfast for years, his cage left open so he could

take food from her lip, sing back whatever she sang,
make her laugh like a little girl, make it ever clearer
she was more comfortable in Tom's company, to put

it one way. The day he disappeared she ran from one
window to another, suspected I'd left the milk chute

open behind his cage. “You could have opened it,
right?” she raised her voice. I swore the door was
shut the morning minus Tom. Gramma chimed in,
“No more tears, we just go out and get Harry now!”

* * *

“ONE SINGLE LIVING CURTAIN OF BIRD”

is how a prominent naturalist describes a flock
swirling over her head. The tits over my head,
still trying to decide what shape to take,
careen right then left then right again
as if suddenly quite vexed. I take a
long breath, pick up the spade
and dig a plot six feet from
head to heel, all I’ll need
to escape the curtain
of mist settling over
my 88th milestone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stuart Friebert

Stuart Friebert, winner of the Four Way Book Award with the volume *Funeral Pie*, founded Oberlin's Writing Program and directed it for twenty years, and co-founded Field Magazine/Oberlin College Press. *Floating Heart*, his 13th book of poems, has just been published (Pinyon Press). The *Language of the Enemy*, a collection of stories (2014. Black Mountain Press) and three volumes of translations: *Stomach of the Soul: Selected Poems of Sylva Fischerova* (Calypso Editions); *Puppets in the Wind: Selected Poems of Karl Krolow* (Bitter Oleander Press); *Be Quiet: Selected Poems of Kuno Raeber* (Tiger Bark Press).