

Birds at Noon

Before mid-summer I shake out my pockets in the sun. The trees pay no attention. The long grass is young green, full of buttercups. The unknown key, worn smooth in my pocket: it seldom sees the light, yet it shines. I reproach myself, in passing, for indolence, lack of faith, not knowing the key. Leaves are shining pieces. When I look at them I feel myself trying to remember. But we are new.

Over the wall, bird-cherry trees, plum trees with green plums, oaks, ivy thicket. Smell of bird-cherry, *prunus avium*. I can blame only myself for my age, and it is too late now to do anything about it. I feel responsible for what I have forgotten. Meanwhile, the sound of magpies, voices of stones in a river. I am words that I do not hear, but I grew up believing that I might. A photograph passes through three lives and the one in the middle never looks at it. In the flowering bird-cherry trees a flock of titmice have gathered for the first time of the year, as though it were already August. For the first time they make sounds that they were born knowing. The swallow and the goldfinch utter whole sentences of hard joy. How do I know? What is the first thing that I remember? It flew away.

Everything is flying. The sun is flying, and the trees: the living and the dead hand in hand. The jay flashes through the intricate thickets like part of a storm, but without crashing and without turning its head. It shrieks for the victim, so that the victim hesitates. I try to imagine the woods as they appear between the jay's eyes. The green dark woods unfolding through the head of a jay, at great speed, to that one syllable, and no choice. The needle jay.

The nightingale comes and sings in the shade of the bird-cherry, too deep for the jay. I see only the woods I can see. I am a foreigner, with this key. I watch. The jay is preceded and followed by a brief hush such as surrounds a wind skimming like a plate over the woods. A taut, invisible horizon. Approaching it, the messenger jay: *Change! Change!* When the echo has gone, the titmice speak again, about August.

White-throat, black-cap, wrens sing in turn in one oak tree. As each of them sings a whole branch lights up. The presence of singing. At moments the whole tree lights up. The nightingale makes the whole tree light up, in the middle of the day. Green light occurring as a skylark makes morning. When the singing stops I go on sitting with all that I remember, from there and from many distances, and with all that I have forgotten, in that grassy place in late Spring, after hearing something I wanted to know.