

The Round House, Somerville, MA

Everybody wants to live in the round house

but nobody can. Nobody can live there.

Not Sam or Jill, or Jack or Kate, or Peter or Tom.

But this doesn't stop them from dreaming

of a house deaf to all their dreaming.

God is a circle and they all want in,

believers and strays, unwhimsical folk—those too

who wear egg-beaters and funnels and fake birds in their hair.

If they want at all, they want to live in the round house.

At parties, couples fight over who needs it or deserves it most.

They throw wine on white dresses. They wrestle and come to blows

And leave the party thinking if not me then nobody.

There's Nancy who says if only we could live there, Ruth and I

would get along again. Then Kate who says No, No if *We...*

Sam would give me a ring. Then the hostess throws up her arms,

"Round house, tell me my future, tell me yours!"

Everybody smiles at her, fearing the worst. The hostess has thrown

herself a going away party with no idea where she's going.

Bettina smiles like the rest, fears the worst like the rest.

Every dusk and every dawn she walks past

the round house hoping this will help her conceive.

I understand. I tell the round house all the secrets I can't keep.

I whisper into its locks. What else could furnish a house like that?

I say, Guess what, Round House? T. is sleeping
with a married man. Who has toddlers! Has infants!

I say E. is pining again for the child he gave up.

I used to feel like a sound enough vessel
for the longings of my friends.

I might have said to them, pour excess liquid here.

But now, more than not, I have to go to the round house.

The Round House. Surprised By Nothing.

A doorknob tycoon built it in the 1800's, before the civil war.

Indeed, from the sky, it must look like a giant, faceted doorknob.

A doorknob that won't turn, won't open onto anything.

Yet for all that not turning, not opening onto anything, it seems
like a good listener, this padlocked ruin, the windows painted black.

"No trespassing." "Beware of dog." Yeah, right.

I'd like to see someone try to live there just once.

In this house on the verge of extinction, without a corner
where a single thought can drag itself
away from the others, without a corner for one's past
to die in. The echoes must be terrible.

God is a circle, yes, we all want in.

But a circle whose center is everywhere
and circumference nowhere. Hardly a shelter at all.

Say we whittled ourselves to one desire. A deep nap, the next meal.

It would provide more shelter more protection than God.

In a fog, the round house almost completely
disappears. Pale gray boards curve away into a pale gray sky.
I have to swallow when it does that.
Though I know it's only an illusion, and I should be on my way.
There are walls, I tell myself. There are hats, there are bootsoles.
There is boundary, there is end. And I have
things to do, duties, responsibilities.

Once I saw a keyhole in a cloud. So what?
Blind, round house, tell me my future, tell me yours, before I go.
Once I saw a keyhole in a cloud. Wait, let me draw it for you:

[Crude drawing here]

There's a rumor squatters used to live in the round house.
I suppose that's the only way one could. Without any thought
of the future. Like small birds that have made their nest
inside a skull—bits of flesh strung on a handful of notes.

In Defense of Birds

We have reached the stage of history
in which there are almost as many birds in poems
as there are actual birds. In fact, there are almost as many poems
decrying the use of birds in poems as poems which feature birds.
I don't know if those against birds in poems knew
they were adding to the pile of birds but really, how could they not?
Let me catch a layperson up. According to those
against the use of birds in poems,
the mention of birds is a cheap way of exciting
a naïve, unread human with outdated metaphysics
akin to insisting on painting female figure in this day and age.
But I have nothing against the female figure,
having had one and enjoyed one since I can remember.
As for birds, I have never been a bird. At least
I don't remember being a bird, but banning them
from poems amounts to a kind of racism or speciesism
don't you think? Poets have a special relationship to birds
and we must allow for that. Otherwise, perversions will arise.
I have already seen this happening. For example,
I have noticed the use of birds in poems is permitted,
even praised, only when the bird is treated badly
for example set on fire or split lengthwise with an ax
for the supposed extraction of its music.
I can't see how this wouldn't affect our view

of real birds in the real sky and other real nature places.
Some day you might be walking through the forest
and a wounded bird, the last of its kind, might stop you
and ask you for refuge in a poem, and you
might not understand what it's trying to say to you.
Instead you might think, "You are just a bird,"
and stamp your feet to scare it out of your path
and back into the leaves. Even worse you might think,
"You are just a bird, I put you in a poem last week
where I crushed your wing and stole your heart
for love purposes, get out of my goddamn way."
I don't know about you but when someone
tells me not to do something, I want to do it.
I want to put a bird in every poem from here on out
One by one birds fall out of the sky into poems
but until there is more art than world, let it not give us pause.
A poet against birds might fall onto your plate—
in which case consider yourself lucky.
Throw a handkerchief over your head and eat him
bones and all in two or three bites.