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Canto

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Canto

Mary Dengler

Liquid songs of one dark bird
—A “Swallow,” someone said—
Seeped through last summer’s wall of sleep
as did his parent’s songs last year.
Having left his mate beneath my porch eaves on her nest,
He found a more transcendent spot
Atop my chimney where,
from night to dawn, he sang a cycle,
five or six repeated songs,
at first against a deep-blue sea of sky
made darker by a slip of silver moon
and intermittent jets of light, but then
against a powder-blue
before the waves of cloud washed in
to bathe, in morning gray, the trees
and end the song an hour or two.

So different from the daytime scolds of harried adult—
flying from his nest of striving young,
whose constant hold compels the father,
raging, to the local trees for food—
these night-long songs seemed broodings of a mind at peace,
his sleeping young replete,
his struggling mate done in,
his throated efforts tuned to soothe a sleeping house.
Compelled to sing, he traded hours of sleep
for songs painlessly composed.

And what about the listener?
My chimney like an organ pipe
produced such blasts outrageous
in the dark, it seemed an angel and his muse
had lighted just to deconstruct
my sense of day and night,
propriety and slight.
Like D.H. Lawrence honored by “The Snake,”
I smiled at this display unorthodox,
awake against the edge of sleep.

Next morning, after three short weeks,
the family decamped
with forced fluttering, clean sweep,
except for one smashed egg. Impatient
of their weak-beaked young, they left,
untroubled by this tragic loss, a ravaged nest behind,
their heartless canto fading in the wind.
And did I sleep or dream? Keats might have asked.
I neither did but felt the pull of God’s economy—
The lull of song against the stress of rest.