

Routine vigil for a songbird

On the crest of the brink the ranks gathered
quiet of breath and step, a rough-pillared
unshaven forest of stubble and mind,
surrounding the muddy ledge in the earth
looking down towards the end of effort,
towards which cables lowered,
lowered the casket towards
the shaft hewn for this first passage
along which they might yet pass.
So they gathered to watch and to wait,
while the little suspended object
passed the shingles into the shadows.

Not mourners, but miners,
and in the missionary capsule a canary,
flitting to cling and cling again to the bars on its air
in the perhaps unbreathable void,
uttering breathless responses to silence and blackness,
its range never sinking though its space went ever lower
and the ranked watchers on the rim above
seemed ready to sing choruses grey like their faces.
They closed overhead without voice
and the rope whistled on alone,
its song its only reference and company.

All held their breath while the songbird's breast still breathed it,
down where the eye only compensates with impressions of black
while the windpipe invisibly assumes the true colour of what it inhales.
The song was lost to the ear but not the rope to gravity:
still it reached down, still it hung, still.
Wait now, men, wait now for the test.

So they stayed, faces lowered,
wondering what they might hear if the song never returned.
Among the ranged stragglers soon silence failed
and they turned from the vault
with thoughts of tomorrow's labour
unserenaded and soiled.

From a heart of slate no canary takes wing
though it sings on in the echoing tunnels.

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