

1993

Reflections

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Recommended Citation

Sage, Norman. "Reflections." *The Iowa Review* 23.2 (1993): 31-34. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4272>

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REFLECTIONS

AT CERTAIN TIMES of the day, when the light is just right, the birds seem to think that our house, which is mostly glass on the lake side, is wide open, and they bang themselves to death on the windows. We have tried various means of preventing these catastrophes: we have crisscrossed masking tape on the glass, we have painted designs on it in washable poster colors—nothing seems to do any good. Aside from the really shabby appearance of these disfigurements, the birds, used as they are to darting between the branches and leaves of trees, simply head for a spot between the lines of the designs and bash their brains out anyway. We regret this carnage—not always fatal, of course—for we love birds and know that there are few things more wonderful to see than a bird in flight.

One recent morning I heard a thud on the glass and knew what had happened. A few moments later I heard my father's voice as he explained to our children what had happened—not that they didn't know. I sometimes think of my father as a stock character out of a Victorian novel. I know that we are all to some extent stock characters, but he seems to work at it. He is a retired professor of English, and in retirement he seems to have refined some of his professorial attitudes, particularly in his association with our children, now his only available students. They love him dearly and I dread the time when he will not be here for them to love, but they are sometimes put off by his making, of everything that happens, one of life's great verities.

"Now this is a common house sparrow," he was saying, "and not much damned use anyway, but still a living thing until a few moments ago, and therefore cherished." I have asked my father many times to watch it with the cussing around the kids, but he bridles and says, "What are you trying to protect them from?" He thinks a little cussing is not only human but even a shade gentlemanly.

"You see, his little neck is broken," he went on. "He died at once, as we must all die someday, usually not knowing any more about where or when than this little fellow. He certainly had no notion that he was going to bang his head into a window—didn't even know what a window is, for God's sake." He paused, and I could see him shaking his head at the ineffable mystery of it all.

“But see how wonderful he is, even now. One usually thinks of sparrows as drab little creatures, but look at the marvelous variety of colors in his plumage—up close you can see it so much more clearly—and the magnificent articulation of the feathers when we stretch the wing out to its full length. Imagine the unbelievably intricate skeletal structure beneath the feathers and the flesh. Imagine!”

“What’s that?” Beth asked.

“What’s that what?”

“That what you said about artic or something.” Beth is only seven.

“Oh, you mean ‘articulate’,” my father said. “Well, articulate means how things fit together to do what they are supposed to do.”

“I thought it meant to like talk,” said Alex, superior in learning at eleven.

“‘To like talk?’” my father said. “Like quit saying like, man.” He can play at being as *en rapport* with current irregular usages as the next cat. “And it does mean that, too,” he continued. “It does mean the ability to put words together into sentences in an understandable and forceful way, but it also means jointed, or connected, or put together by connecting in such a way that the result works or performs as it should. So in both meanings it concerns putting together, connecting.” I don’t know how much of my father’s instructional conversation the children really understand, but I do have the hope that enough of it will soak in unbeknownst, so to speak, that they will be able to dredge up a certain amount of it when useful. Beth persisted in her inquiry.

“What about that skeleton thing you said?”

“You mean ‘skeletal’? Well, skeletal is the adjectival form of skeleton.” I thought to myself, “For God’s sake, Dad, take it easy.” But Beth had her own way of telling him that he was shoving it at her too fast.

“Now you’ve said another one and I’m getting funky out!”

“Sorry!” her grandfather said. “I’ll slow down. Let’s get skeletal out of the way first. You say, ‘This little bird has a skeleton underneath all of the feathers and flesh.’ But you can also say, ‘Underneath all the feathers and flesh of this bird is the bone structure, the skeletal—having to do with the skeleton—the *skeletal* framework of the sparrow.’”

“Oh.” Beth seemed to understand. Alex snorted, indicating that he understood it all without explanation, which I doubt that he did.

“Now,” my father went on in his best classroom manner, “skeleton is the noun, and a noun is a person, place, or thing. And skeletal is an

adjective. An adjective modifies a noun, telling us what *kind* of person, place, or thing, or even what color, or what size—that sort of thing. Does that explain it to you?”

“I think,” said Beth, in her womanly wisdom, “that I’ll wait until I’m ready to understand all that stuff.”

“Good for you!” my father said, not in the least put off. There was a quiet moment, and then he said, “I just want to leave this thought with you. Back in the fourteenth century, I think it was, an obscure—that’s highbrow for not very well known—philosopher—that’s highbrow for smart thinker—by the name of John de Dondis said, ‘We are born and placed among wonders and surrounded by them, so that to whatever object the eye first turns, the same is wonderful and full of wonders, if only we will examine it for a while.’” And I thought to myself, “Now where in hell did he pick that one up and why did he remember it? It’s not very profound—really fairly obvious.” My father is, I realize, a warehouse of quotations, the result of long years of lectures, explanations, comparisons, and parallelisms, all cast out freely to his students in the hope that one of them, someday, will experience a reaction more sublime than “Like wow!” And I was thankful again, as I have been often, for the many things my father taught me. True or not, in the light of subsequent experience, many of his attitudes and beliefs have become mine, and are integral parts of my conception of things as they are, or seem to be—part of a general sort of truth as I understand it. And one of them came unbidden to mind: that the violin, of all instruments, is more nearly human in its voice. I realize that this revelation is neither astonishing nor original, but I always listen for tonal memories which will confirm that idea whenever I hear a violin. So I make no effort to subvert, in even small ways, his efforts to educate and inform our children.

I stood in my study window and watched as Beth and Alex wandered off down the path toward the lake, my father standing there watching them go, the dead sparrow still in his hand. He looked up at the window where a small tuft of feathers clung still to the glass and shook his head sadly. I wondered what he was thinking, and I thought I knew. At least, I knew what I was thinking, and I am my father’s son. I imagined that the sparrow, in the last split second of his life, saw his reflection in the glass and recognized his mortal self.

My father walked slowly across the grass to the utility shed and dropped the dead sparrow into the trash can there.

Does the sparrow forgive the glass? The worm the plow? My father is an old man and I am filled with dread for him, for myself, and for my wife and children above all. My mouth is dry and I walk into the bathroom for a drink of water. I look at myself in the mirror and I see what the sparrow must have seen.