

ICON AND EVIDENCE, 2001

“Epistle to Gerard Manley Hopkins”

(excerpt)

. . . but just as I am writing entirely dark
a dull thump at the window, muffled,
strikes me still, unlatches the catches me
swift to the sill, where, down from the oak
shearing over, or from the shagbark, swept
too near, a bird has flown into itself,
in the unfathomed depth of the selfless glass
its own self-shadow seen too late—too late
in the riddling and (your word) fire-dint rise
and fall of bright air and curved branch—rebuffed,
then stunned, or worse. Too firmly I hold
to what I’ve seen before, expecting to find
a smudge, a smear, blear share and bits of down,
a hint of blood. But there on the glass,
foreshortened, the whole bird, ghosted, is—
its shrugged head sidewise, soft breast full on,
plush, the arc of its extended wing, the front edge
of its flying there, obliquely, as if
with a soft brush a Taoist had summoned
from ink and water, as gracefully awry
as the fling of early forsythia,
the very essence of grief—for it is a mourning dove,
I think, windhovering, backlit by bright air. . .
the blunt breath of that moment of impact
held on the glass, and so breathtaking, so
beautiful I can tell the flash and mortal
dazzle of the bird, and its probable pain—
mind-sloggering, smoldered and unadorned
auras of invisible pain. No need
to ask you, Hopkins, what works so darkly
in our favor, and sustains. What keeps me
from blank despair is just this word-tumbled
world of ours, not ours, rough and not rounded,
scabrous not smooth, pitted, pocked and twisted,
twined, twinned, all of its pattern and disturbance
evidence of power, poised poser,
entirely dark, flung at random toward us,
or wrung out of us, ready or not—ours
only to give, obliquely faithful, back