

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

WITH BIRDS YOU ARE NEVER LONELY

I can't hear the barista
over the coffee machine.

Spoons slam steam rises.
I catch the eye of a man

sitting in the corner
of the cafe reading alone

about trees which are, incidentally,
all I can think about

since returning.
Last week I sat alone

on a stump, deep in the Zealandia forest
with sun-syrupped Kauri trees

and brazen Tui birds with white tufts
and yellow and black beaks.

They landed by my feet, blaring so loudly
I had to turn off my hearing aids.

When all sound disappeared, I was tuned
into a silence that was not an absence.

As I switched the sound on again,
silence collapsed.

The forest spat all the birds back,
and I was jealous—

the earthy Kauri trees, their endless
brown and green trunks of sturdiness.

I wondered what the trees would say about us?
What books would they write if they had to cut us down?

Later, stumbling from the forest I listened
to a young Māori woman.

She could tell which bird chirped,
a skill she learned from her grandfather

who said *with birds you're never lonely*.
In that moment I felt sorry

for any grey tree in London,
for the family they don't have,

the Gods they can't hold.

SUMMARY:

In the first lines of this poem, the poet begins by describing the narrator in a cafe. They're struggling to hear a barista because of the narrator's hearing aids and the sound a coffee machine is making. This triggers a series of memories of the Zelandia forest and the surrounding trees and birds. In this memory, the narrator turns off his hearing aids to immerse himself in the surroundings differently. The poem then shifts to utilize the perspective of the trees, suggesting a relationship between humans and nature. The poem concludes with a reflection on a conversation with Maori woman who possesses the ability to identify birds based on their chirps.

STRUCTURE AND FORM:

With Birds You're Never Lonely' by Raymond Antrobus is a nineteen-stanza poem that is divided into couplets and a single, one-line stanza. The poem is written in free verse. This means that the poet chose not to use a specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. This is very common in contemporary poetry, even when the poet uses a well-known structure, like couplets.

Literary Devices

In this poem, the poet uses a few literary devices. For example:

- **Anaphora:** This can be seen with "I" at the beginning of multiple lines. For example, lines one of stanza one and three of stanza two.
- **Caesura:** This occurs in examples like "When all sound disappeared, I was tuned" and "on a stump, deep in Zealandia forest."
- **Sibilance:** This is seen through examples, like "Spoons slam, steam" in stanza two and "sun-syrup" in stanza six.

• Detailed Analysis

• Stanzas One-Five

- I can't hear the barista

(...)

since returning.

Last week I sat alone

- In the first lines of this poem, the poet, with the narrator describes an issue he's having with hearing. He can't hear the barista over the sound of the coffee machine and the ambient noise around the coffee shop. The overwhelming environment shifts to mention a man in the corner, reading about trees.
- This strikes the speaker as interesting because "trees" have been on his mind since he came back from a trip. The sight triggers memories from this trip that are explored in more detail in the next lines.
- These simple, easy-to-read lines are filled with colloquial language that takes the form of a narrative conversation.

• Stanzas Six-Ten

- on a stump, deep in Zealandia Forest
(...)
silence collapsed.
- The poet takes readers out of the coffee shop and into the Zealandia Forest in Wellington, New Zealand, which is also known as the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary. It's a protected area that the speaker visited and said "sun-syruped Kauri trees / and brazen Tui birds," referencing native species in the area.
- These images are bright, easy to imagine, and are clearly meaningful to the speaker who can't stop thinking about them. The area, he notes, was so noisy that he had to turn off
- on a stump, deep in Zealandia Forest
(...)
silence collapsed.
- The poet takes readers out of the coffee shop and into the Zealandia Forest in Wellington, New Zealand, which is also known as the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary. It's a protected area that the speaker visited and said "sun-syruped Kauri trees / and brazen Tui birds," referencing native species in the area.
- These images are bright, easy to imagine, and are clearly meaningful to the speaker who can't stop thinking about them. The area, he notes, was so noisy that he had to turn off
- Stanzas Eleven-Fifteen
- The forest spat all the birds back,
(...)
to a young Māori woman.
- In the next few lines, the poet digs deeper into the experience. He notes the trees and their "endless / brown and green trunks of sturdiness" and wonders what they "would say about us?"

- He's so interested in the trees and clearly has a lot to say about them that he can't help but wonder what they might say about him/the human race if they could speak. They, he thinks, would have a unique perspective to share. On this same train of thought, he mentions that it would be interesting to know what "books" they would "write" if they cut "us down." This connects back to the image of the man in the cafe reading a book about trees.

- Stanzas Sixteen-Nineteen

- She could tell which bird chirped,
(...)
the Gods they can't hold.
- In this conversation, he learned that this woman has a unique insight into the environment. She spent so much time there that she could tell "which bird chirped." It was a skill that was passed down from her grandfather, and it's something the poet seems to envy. She has a connection to this beautiful place that he does not.
- It's in the next lines that the poet utilizes the poem's title. It's part of what the Māori woman and the speaker discuss. She feels that "with birds, you're never lonely." They're ever-present in a way that the woman feels is uplifting and powerful.
- The poet moves away from this moment into a reference to the trees in London, which are far less vibrant and numerous than they are in this wildlife sanctuary. The trees are sparse, less colourful, and unable to flourish in the same way.

- He feels sorry for them, he indicates, as they are alone and without “family” like that which the trees in the Zealandia Forest have. In London, they’re in a very different world, one that’s entirely removed from the intense freedom of this sanctuary. This creates a separation from how they should truly exist in a way that’s deeply sad to the speaker.

The poem ends with the poet noting the trees are far from “the Gods they can’t hold.” This evokes the trees’ true nature and liveliness that doesn’t exist on a London street. It’s also a way to further personify the trees and make them easy to empathize with.

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