

Space Songs for Ikeya–Seki, 1965

by April Egan

I.

We followed the star. To Malcolm street, and further on, history hovered in flame, welcomed back to the sky. Uncomfortable to look at, uncomfortable to walk under. Did you know, Newnham College came under siege, once? How long since they were out there, with their pitchforks, effigies, *eggs*? Oh, a hundred years, you say. Probably fifty. Maybe an hour. It doesn't matter, you say, it's long gone now. The sky is full of fast clouds, the evening clunking in. We stand outside St Edmund's delicate red frame, and watch the wind chase it all down the hill. There's a ballroom on Market Square, another on Castle Hill, screaming with old brick and new light, a shabby Bethlehem. Here, the sound of it all picks up your scent and pursues, A mouthful of ivory teeth chasing through a thick night, howling at the window for what they see, but cannot touch, cannot even understand the want for. I push the pillow over my ears, I pin the curtains back with textbooks. It's thin and high and imploring. It's just some stupid abandoned star, warbling on.

II.

Michaelmas shrugs itself over me, a great coat of sleet across the recent past. I wake in the darkness to the choir, snow tending to heavy, twisted prints. The world waits for birth. I am motionless on the student carpet. You pick up my head and read me the news. The comet has fallen over Japan. Hanging is out, for the time being. Separating your eyelashes one by one with a pin, 7300 teachers in training, gone wayward, or biding their time with philosophical pursuits, balancing glasses on the edges of tables and cutting their own fringes with sewing scissors. I can hear them. I can hear the hairpins falling to the ground. It's Friday night. The singing is lying at my feet, standing sentry at my door. Winter drives us beneath our blankets, curled like clefs at the fireside. Festivity is time-sharp, and full of cheery threat. We could go out and see it all. You say:

*don't you know they don't ever take them down? They just
turn them off, and nobody ever notices.*

I feel the thumping of the air, the lifting of lungs, rough and gossamer. Snowflakes borne back along the river, the clouds heavy with themselves. Five silver points lay brittle at the foot of the stairs, fallen from their drunken perching. When I lie on your back, I can see the spot the painter missed, and the shoddily-covered crack of a long-gone boot. It makes me feel tiny, as tiny and as silly as the silver dusting the hallway. It's stuck all over your coat. A fairy, I tease, a sweet wingéd critter. You say, shut up with that, I've got stuff to do. I picture your glittering tail over the

neatness of the lawn. A bedazzled, grumpy phoenix hovering in the doorway, scattering asbestos sparks. *That can't be fantastic for the birds.* It doesn't matter, you say, brushing yourself down into the night.

It doesn't matter, it's just an old star. I have so much to do.

III.

Then, against all hope, it's sunny. I show you shiny pictures in the panelled rooms. Gently-bragging hands holding a pouting face, resting needlessly upon a Bible, caught in an act of confidence. Under your raised brow, he looks black and white and far away from now. He wore a bow-tie and didn't brush his hair a hundred years ago. Suddenly, the room is cringing with tenderness. It seems there was nothing but the present then, as poised on a lit fuse as it is still, the simplest path. He said that music was the stuff of life. Silence is a breath's distance from the next song. *Don't Put It Down*, someone sings. You say, he couldn't be right, the young song-genius, because the poets were wrong. Hope is the thing with claws, dragging you backwards into the darkness. Don't you know, you say? Don't you listen to a thing I say? I watch the needle find its groove. I hear the light rushing from the sky.

Nothing is real. We are made of very old carbon that fell out of the sky, and you're worrying about a supervision?

I wonder if you knew that we turned up with the young prince, the cameras, the politely turned faces. Flashes like explosions, subtle as a storm. I tried to make you a crown. My glue-gnarled hand tenses in its pocket. I still haven't picked up the plastic gems, a sharp constellation littered across their cheap stained sky. I wish I could make like you could, like you don't. Carbon hands, I think, and flint. A grain of sand is an embryonic pearl, or the microcosm of a cathedral halo. Right now, I want to tell you that I think you are brilliant. The sun behind you lights you up like a manuscript, arcane evidence of erasings, bored sketches of arrows and lemons, and love. Don't put it down. I swear, I could be good enough for all this beauty, all these footsteps I can hear, right now, falling further and further, the still-warm seats, these idle hands, and the effigies they yet remember pulling from the pyres. There's words for children who wake up staring into space. Wooden dolls. Glass bowl children. Indelibly beautiful, without question. There are words, new words, new songs.

I don't tell you anything. I look down at your handwriting.

I watch the time pass, and I wait for the permission of the dark to think of the singing.

IV.

Quiet, can you hear Friday approaching? I might see a tapestry woven in the crosshatch of Silver Street, a kind face and a yellow rose. Try not to bay, to cry, to rejoice. If you're very lucky, the song has words. He sings:

in the town where I was born. In the town, where I was born.

Her hand poised to turn him, held high, an offer of shelter. The hopeless genius holds his hand quietly over his eyes, I remember. The faintest glimmer of an open curtain, the flood of horizontal light. Crouched beneath it in the dark, holding the sill. Her yellow dress is a torch, twirling to comet-glimpses up silent, siegeless Newnham Hill, until next Friday. The ice is picking itself up from the ground. I've taken off a thermal. I've left you a cup of tea, just outside. Could you see it, if I were to hold your head still? Quiet, can you hear the wishes falling to earth?

V.

Then, somehow, happiness came up through the ground. I know warm winters bring armours of wisteria. There are no sieges now, I know, just bright purple immortality, ecstatic, terrible. Easter softens us all over again. Jesus wood, undemolished but for a dream. Saved. Still, I want to remember if there were mountains here, once. Look, there are owls in the broken tree-hollows, and their strong arms in the roof of the dining hall. Can you hear the earthworms outliving the magnificent falcons? The Christmas grit glowing in the spring soil? When asphalt turns sparkly, do you remember? Can you hear the draughty singing, now that peace is waiting, like a friend who still waves once you've turned the corner?

They say, at last, they're planting gardens. There is luck in the world again, glinting, freckling the eaves. Peace at last, Grantchester in song. Touch the sunlight, look out the windows. Forget to look for real revolution here - there is little chance in these scowl-shaped stones, rejecting newness with every crooked step. *Keep Off The Grass*. The chapels, flat with angels, cowed by stars.

Mill Pond, if you just ask, slips her green coat down a shoulder, winks, shudders like a tail disappearing downstream. The river wanders about as light as ash, its breath turning the leaves lazily, like pages of a half-read book. Temperance's soprano soars over us and buries itself deep in the cool, sweet earth. You left your scarf on my bed, still warm. I remember paper stacks. I remember that I got enough sleep. I remember the sound of yesterday. I remember the shoes. I remember the clatter as the wind cut the ballroom's shabby sign down. I remember the leaves, and the glitter of the asphalt. The new decade is rising like incense over the heat.

VI.

I remember being afraid, and smiling.

VII.

On the last day, it rained. The even cobbles drowned, and the strange shoots thrived. Your hand over your eyes, standing up straight against the sky. Lush and arid with what fens remember: the Gonville faces, the immortal shape of a man's nose and the way his hair fell into his eyes the morning the sculptor knocked. Trinity's shadow falling the same, ignorant of centuries. Newton's apple halved with a friend and a princess in her windy Girtonian tower, watching the ripe red trees burst. The queen's pet alchemist laying wood upon water and drawing up earth. And before even that, before ink and before preservation, the Wake braced vengefully atop a flowered hill, fletched and twisted and borne up by the wind, cloaked in summer shadows, waiting on the same soil, watching the same sky. I can hear them:

Wait for me. Wait for me, sing for me. Look for me. I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.