

Jed Myers

Call Them Swifts

My first sunset in Venice, impressed
with the elegant wreckage, no fresh
coat of paint anywhere in the maze

to diminish the rose-gold light
pouring in off the terra cotta tiles
onto the wood of the ancient ornate

window frames, and the panes dark
this late down here on the water-lanes,
I picture the robed and gowned skeletons

under those pointed stone arches. Look
west and the standing ruin's a hint
bluer than to the east, the worn brick

and its long-torn bandages of stucco
all in part shadow under the pearl glow
swath of sky. Island city

of clay and stone, its own mausoleum,
Venezia must remember itself
so well, it can let itself go,

magnificent in its layered abrasions,
welcoming souls in by its veins,
knowing we'll try to get lost

looking for dinner in Cannaregio.
The murky green water will turn silver-
rippled ebony, showing us ghosts

whose whispers we hear in our depths,
and into the night we'll dream
our own ancestry's mirrored right here.

Here at our canal-side seats,
we'll ask for the cuttlefish and a bottle,
and we'll have briefly less trouble

forgetting ourselves. But for the moment
I've stopped on a small stone bridge
to witness some sleek silhouettes,

sparrow-size, who dart and arc
in and out of view. They're fast
but I catch sight of their dagger wings,

their notched tails, as they thread
the dusk to the world with their speed.
Takes me a few seconds to notice

that screech in the air, a high whirr,
takes me back to the Delaware
Valley, the summer nights' crickets'

incessant chorus of chirps
to which I'd watch the miraculous
yellow blinks of the lightning bugs.

And it isn't a flash but a waking
between the ears. I'm listening
to the summary cry of these birds

feasting on the fly and sounding
ecstatic to harvest this evening's fresh
insect hatch I can't see. Swifts,

I think, as their call echoes off
the walls and the water. But they sing
my memories, squeal of a shopping cart

wheel on its rusted axle, shriek
of the subway in a fast curve, scream
of the dentist's drill. Dozens, in twos

and threes, streaking across the canal,
together emit my history's whistling
buzz, and how do they know

the old acid rock in my cochlear wells,
the thousand frogs in the creek
by the golf course we'd trespass at night,

mosquito's thirst song in my ear
as my hand flies down, my grandmother
lifting the kettle to pour our tea?

High whining hiss of the swifts,
it has me back where I thought I'd left
years ago. This Venetian magic,

it's not forgetting. The earliest
senses find new masks here and dance
in the air with these evening acrobats.

I'll call them swifts. They may be
swallows or martins, for all I know.
I'm a kid in my city, wherever I go.