

Old-School

Season 1, Episode 5

“Migratory Habits of the Soul”

Chi: For years, I’ve loved Robert Hayden’s poem “A Plague of Starlings” without thinking too much about the actual birds. Haden’s poem describes the starlings on the Fisk campus as “noisy and befouling,” and I thought that was an overstatement...until I had my own mini-plague of them descend on my backyard bird feeders and drive all the other birds away.

[starlings noisily chirping]

Chi: There was a lot of noise, and infighting over who got to eat where, and a TON of droppings to clean off the birdbath and the porch railings.

[starling noise fades out]

Chad: Robert Hayden’s poem tells a story about a college campus that’s exterminating birds. But “A Plague of Starlings” is also about Plato’s book *Phaedo*, which tells the story of the death of Socrates. And it’s a history poem that uses its classical references to talk about violence during the 1960s Civil Rights protests and the Vietnam war. Sounds intriguing, right?

[theme music: “Who Dat” by Amber Spill]

Chi: Welcome to Old-School, a podcast about African American studies and the classics. I’m your host, Chiyuma Elliott.

Chad: And I’m your other host, Chad Hegelmeyer.

Chi: Today, we’re devoting the *whole* episode to one tiny history poem by Robert Hayden.

Chad: Because “A Plague of Starlings” is amazing. In 45 short lines, it ties together 1960s America with Plato’s writing about the soul and it makes some interesting claims about race and belonging.

Chi: Plus, we talk a little bit about Hayden’s life, which was extraordinarily interesting. So stick around! It’s Black + Classics, folks! Robert Hayden style, here on Old-School

Chad: Here's Robert Hayden's poem

Chi: [reads poem over the noise of starlings]

"A Plague of Starlings"
(*Fisk Campus*)

Evenings I hear
the workmen fire
into the stiff
magnolia leaves,
routing the starlings
gathered noisy and
befouling there.

Their scissoring
terror like glass
coins spilling breaking
the birds explode
into mica sky
raggedly fall
to ground rigid
in clench of cold.

The spared return,
when the guns are through,
to the spoiled trees
like choiceless poor
to a dangerous
dwelling place,
chitter and quarrel
in the piercing dark
above the killed.

[sounds of footsteps in snow]

Mornings, I pick
my way past death's
black droppings:
on campus lawns
and streets
the troublesome
starlings
frost-salted lie,
troublesome still.

And if not careful
I shall tread
upon carcasses
carcasses when I
go mornings now
to lecture on
what Socrates,
the hemlock hour nigh,
told sorrowing
Phaedo and the rest
about the migratory
habits of the soul.

Chad: Okay, so on one level, this is a poem about a college teacher hearing the school's grounds crew shooting nuisance birds out of magnolia trees at night, during winter. And then, it's the story of the shooting's aftermath.

Chi: In the mornings, walking to class now means stepping carefully between all of the "frost-salted" bodies that are left on the frozen lawns and streets.

Chad: It's a quietly ironic poem: masses of birds were shot because they were a nuisance. But they're *still* a nuisance now that they're dead! Killing bunches of them didn't solve the problem...So that's a literal reading.

[“Black Horizon” by IXVI]

Chi: On another level, people read this poem as a commentary on 1960s America. Partly, that's because of context. “A Plague of Starlings” is from a book called *Words in the Mourning Time* that was published in 1970 and dedicated to two recently assassinated political leaders: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. (The book also has an extraordinary poem for Malcolm X, who was also gunned down.) Hayden was living in—and writing poems about—an era of civil rights and anti-Vietnam war protests, and violence against political leaders, and massive race riots in cities across the country, including in Watts in Los Angeles; Newark, New Jersey; and his own hometown, Detroit, Michigan.

Chad: Also, he was Bahai, and deeply committed to nonviolence. And I think that faith commitment shows up in this book as a whole (not just in “A Plague of Starlings”). Fritz Oehlschlaeger writes about how Hayden was distraught by the thought of his former students fighting in the war back then, killing Vietnamese soldiers and civilians or being

Chad: Yeah, Oliver’s starlings are these amazing, improbable “acrobats / in the freezing wind” who inspire the speaker to want to fly. And to want a bunch of other “dangerous and noble things.” That’s how Oliver’s speaker describes them.

[source: Mary Oliver, *Owls and Other Fantasies: Poems and Essays*]

Chi: Stars, lightness, and frolicsomeness are not *at all* like Hayden’s picture of starlings in winter! [Chad laughs] In his picture, when the guns start firing, the starlings’ terror is “scissoring.” That word connotes sharpness and cutting, but it also feels small and domestic, like a pair of scissors.

Chad: Hayden’s birds aren’t sympathetic or inspiring like the starlings in the Mary Oliver poem. The first thing we hear about them is that they are “noisy and befouling.” They’re bad neighbors, right? At least, if you’re a student or a teacher or a staff member who has to walk under those magnolia trees...

Chi: The poem never says directly that the small and icky menace of being pooped on is the reason so many of the campus birds get exterminated! It’s more reserved than that. The poem is more dignified and formal, and uses words like “befouling.”

Chad: Do you notice how impersonal the guns in the poem are? Hayden writes, “when the guns are through,” As if it’s the objects—the guns—that have the agency to shoot and stop shooting, not the people wielding the guns. We never see the faces or bodies of the workmen who shoot down all the birds.

Chi: “The guns,” “the spared.” Yeah, you’re totally right. The speaker is hearing the killing happen from his office at first, not watching it. And violence is also formal in the poem, and parts of it are weirdly beautiful if you step back from it a bit (I’m thinking about the simile, “like glass / coins spilling breaking” to describe the shot birds. Coins are small things, and glass coins...

Chad: [laughing] When are there ever glass coins?! It’s such a strange image if you slow down and think about it...

Chi: But the poem doesn’t encourage us to slow down! Each line is short; most are only three words long! The longest line, “When the guns are through” has five words. So it’s easy to look ahead and want to keep reading. Okay, so yes, most of these really short lines are syntactically complete—each one feels like a whole unit of thought, even if the sentence keeps on going on the next line. You don’t have to speed through to make sense of it. But the lines are so short, you want to keep reading...

Chad: I'm still thinking about the coins thing. Sorry! Glass coins are inherently fragile, so it seems almost normal that they'd break. Which makes the birds' deaths feel inevitable in the poem, or at least kind of expected. And the sky is mica, which is also a silicate...

Chi: Yeah, the world where the birds spill and break and explode is a mineral world of inert substances, not a world of blood or poop or flesh.

Chad: Plus, we get a slant hint of messy bodies when Hayden describes the birds' fall: they fall "raggedly." But it's just a hint.

Chi: "Like glass / coins spilling breaking / the birds explode / into mica sky / raggedly fall / to ground rigid / in clench of cold." I love that these lines describe the *motion* of falling (not the bodies themselves).

Chad: And that it's the ground that's in the "clench of cold," not the dead birds who fall on it. Though, by proximity and association, I think we readers are meant to connect the cold of the ground and the cold of death.

Chi: So everything we're noticing in this poem so far is pointing to the fact that the descriptions of the dead and dying birds at the beginning all focus on small objects and on physical trajectories.

Chad: But it's not a clinical description of death! It seems a little distant, but not in a mean or amoral way; it's more observant and meditative.

["GUNSHOW" by BLUE STEEL]

Chi: I think this poem's evading the dead bodies in the first part. Even though those bodies are its main story! I also think the overt way all the people (including the speaker) are trying to step around the frost-crusting bird bodies at the end of the poem relates to its classical allusion to Socrates, who talked about the separation of bodies and souls in *Phaedo*, and also about the journey the soul makes after death. At the end, Hayden's poem focuses on the awkward, distasteful, and thought-provoking journey to the college classroom. Its images are deeply congruent with the philosophical text the professor is about to teach. That is, if he can get across campus without falling on the ice and spraining his ankle or something while he's trying to sidestep all the dead starlings!

Chad: In Mary Oliver's starling poem, the speaker declares their feelings overtly. Hayden's poem never does that; it just builds up its scenes carefully so we readers can

infer what it must feel like to be the person who sees and experiences all these things. It's a subtle strategy.

Chi: Plus, there's something going on with the verb tenses: have you noticed that it's an entirely present-tense poem until the end. Saying "I hear" and "I pick my way" and then, finally, in the last stanza, "if I'm not careful, I shall tread" – and then the speaker repeats the word "carcasses" so we don't get away from the fact that that's what "death's black droppings" actually are. No more euphemisms or pretty images: carcasses carcasses.

Chad: Right, the diction is still really formal, but its bearing changes at the exact point when the verb tense changes and the speaker imagines the future in which he's teaching about Socrates and the hemlock and the soul. "And if not careful / I shall tread/ upon carcasses / carcasses" he says. *Shall*. Then it's back to the present tense. "When I go."

Chi: That caution about the body is so appropriate for a speaker who's about to go teach *Phaedo*!

Chad: Which is all about the importance of controlling and containing the body and its unruly passions in order to create a better post-death disposition of the soul!

Chi: (There are no gender markers for Hayden's speaker, by the way, but we're calling him a "he" because Hayden himself taught at Fisk, and this is one of his handful of autobiographical poems. So gendering this speaker male feels appropriate, though it's not required.)

Chad: Robert Hayden is such a genius! The speaker could be doing, or heading to do, all kinds of things in the morning. But he's thinking about teaching...just like Socrates, the main character in Plato's dialogue. In *Phaedo*, Socrates literally spends his last day, his last hours, teaching his friends and students. This is the book Robert Hayden's speaker is thinking about at the end of his poem. And it's a book written by Plato, about his real-life teacher, Socrates!

Chi: One of the things the character Socrates says in *Phaedo* is that the only really good use for money is to use it to find someone skilled in the teaching of philosophy, so you can go learn from them! If you have money, you can look for them in your own homeland, *and* you can travel the world to try to find that worthy teacher. Because, as Socrates says, wisdom is "the one true coin." (I'm quoting Benjamin Jowett's translation, by the way).

[source: Jowett tr. Loc. 820]

Chad: So the search for a good teacher might be its own kind of migratory habit...

Chi: According to Plato, yes.

Chad: I wonder if the teacher in Hayden's autobiographical poem feels particularly worthy. "A Plague of Starlings" never comments on this directly...but the inference is that someone who's teaching *Phaedo* and paying such careful attention to the world around him is probably also leveling that same scrutiny on himself. Or, if he's not, he's aware that he's not!

Chi: Hayden talked at length about self-scrutiny and self-criticism in his parting speech when was the Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, back in 1978. (This honor now goes by the title U.S. Poet Laureate.) Instead of giving a conventional speech to ceremonially close the end of his term in the capitol, he wrote most of it in the form of a dialogue.

Chad: Like *Phaedo*!

Chi: Exactly! And he has these conversations with an imaginary Inquisitor who challenges his creative and personal choices, sometimes pretty mercilessly. Hayden says, "just as Socrates had his inner voice, I had my Inquisitor." Here's part of that speech:

Hayden:

Inquisitor: You've won some awards and stuff, too, haven't you?

Poet: Yes. As if you didn't know.

Inquisitor: Think you deserve them?

Poet: Yes and no.

Inquisitor: What do you mean, yes and no? Explain yourself.

Poet: Never! You want me to have to give the money back?

[audience laughter]

Have the citations canceled?

Inquisitor: You're forgetting something.

Poet: And what's that?

Inquisitor: You're black. A black poet. They wouldn't *dare* ask for their money back.

[more audience laughter]

That's why you got it in the first place.

[Hayden starts laughing as he reads]

Poet: You just had to get that out, didn't you? You really are contemptible...

Inquisitor: I'm a realist.

Poet: You're a philistine, a bigot...

[Source: Hayden, Robert, John C Broderick, Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry And Literature Fund, and Archive Of Recorded Poetry And Literature. How It Strikes a Contemporary: Reflections on Poetry and the Role of the Poet. 1978. Audio. [https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/.](https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/)]

Chad: In the Platonic dialogue Hayden alludes to in the poem “A Plague of Starlings”—the dialogue the professor anticipates crossing the frozen, messy, bird-encrusted campus to teach—Plato describes the last day of Socrates’s life before he’s executed by the Athenian state. Which makes me think of the political violence he points to in the dedication and other poems of this book: the assassinations of American political leaders.

Chi: I don’t think it’s an accident that you’re noticing that. In *Phaedo*, Socrates is a political prisoner, and he’s talking about cultivating detachment from the body and from worldly corruption! He’s in a prison cell, sharing last words with the small group of students and friends who have come to visit him. And also, he’s doubling down on his big claim about death: that it’s not something philosophers should fear.

Chad: I love how Hayden never says explicitly that this poem has anything to do with politics, or mentions that Socrates is talking about death in this dialogue! Instead, the poem says the book’s about “the migratory habits of the soul.” Meaning that, in Socrates’s account, the soul exists before we’re born, and migrates into the body, and then migrates out when we die. Migratory habits!

[“Remote Presence” by Baron Grand]

Chi: Okay, Chad, here’s a challenge: can you list ten things that Socrates says about the soul in *Phaedo*? Or how about this: you say five things about the soul, and then I’ll try to add five more things. So listeners who haven’t read this almost 2,400-year-old Greek book get some sense of what it’s like, and what it’s arguing?

Chad: Ok, let’s do it! Five things about the soul in *Phaedo*. Okay...gimme a sec. I’m writing while I’m talking so I can keep count...

Chad: Okay, here’s one: some superstitious ancient Greeks thought that the soul was a fragile thing, like a vapor, and worried that it would disperse if it was really windy on the day someone died.

Chi: Yeah, but Socrates was like, “Don’t be afraid of that, it’s irrational!”

Chad: Is that thing number two?

Chi: Maybe? [both laughing]

Chad: Not just that the soul’s way more durable than the body—but that it’s irrational to fear the soul’s dispersal. I’m calling that fact number two. I’ll come up with four more now, then you only have to come up with four.

Chi: Good deal!

Chad: Okay, fact number three about the soul in *Phaedo*. It’s gendered female. Socrates always calls the soul “she.”

Chad: Fact four: after we die, our soul migrates to the underworld. And what happens to our soul there depends on whether we’ve been disciplined or dissipated. The really dissipated soul might spend a year in a chasm of the earth that streams with fire and water and liquid mud before getting a reprieve (and maybe the chance to be reborn into a new body). That’s fact five.

Chad: Fact six: the true yearning of the soul is for wisdom. Which, according to Socrates, can only be imperfect while we’re alive because the body is corrupting. Or, I should say, according to Plato’s *account* of Socrates (since Socrates himself didn’t document his last day’s conversations in writing). Ok, you’re up, Chi! Four more things about the soul, ala Socrates (as written by Plato).

Chi: Okay, here goes. Fact seven: you can injure your soul by studying the wrong things or studying in misguided ways. Doing it wrong is like looking directly into an eclipse.

Chad: (laughs) Okay...

Chi: Fact eight: in *Phaedo*, Socrates says that the souls of some simple and virtuous people who are afraid of death are allowed to pass into gentle and social animals or insects—like bees and ants—and are really contented there. But the souls of people with more sensual or violent habits might end up migrating into the bodies of more aggressive or indolent animals after a painful period of purification in the underworld.

Chi: Fact nine: it doesn’t seem like animals have souls in *Phaedo*. Which also seems to be something Hayden might be playing with or hinting at because of the way the beginning of his poem seems to aestheticize and discount the starlings’ deaths.

Chad: One more fact! It's the home stretch!

Chi: Okay, okay. Fact ten: souls can talk to one another. Socrates was like, "I'm happy that I'm dying soon because it means I get to go talk to cooler people in the afterlife."

Chad: [laughing] Yeah, that's kind of a blunt thing to say to the people who are keeping you company on death row...

Chi: Yes it was. But Socrates wasn't going to mince words! It was his last chance to convince his community that he was right about a bunch of things. And he really wanted his friends and mentees to come away from that last conversation with the knowledge and the firmness of purpose that would help them make good choices with the lives they had left.

Chad: So their souls would be strong enough to swim out of the lake and into the heavenly part of the underworld if they got sent by that route.

Chi: To the realm of the gods. The part of the underworld that's gem-colored and beautiful and glistening and interesting and timeless and full of truth. And it's probably worth mentioning that Socrates wasn't 100% sure about his descriptions of the afterlife being accurate, but he *was* sure that something like them were true.

Chad: He was like, *that's the gist of it. So get ready!*

Chi: Yeah. (laughing) Exactly.

Chad: The last word of Hayden's poem is "soul" – which gives it special emphasis. The soul is really important here, too!

Chi: One idea that the poet Stephen Dobyns has about the endings of successful poems is that they catapult us back to the poems' beginning and make us rethink everything we're read in a new light. Great endings are surprising, but when we look back over the poem, we can see the ways the previous lines lead up to—and prepared us for—that exact ending.

Chad: I think that's true with Hayden's poem. It's only at the very end that we learn that the professor is anticipating teaching classes about the *Phaedo*...and talking about "the migratory / habits of the soul." But, when you look back at it, the whole poem is a meditation on death. And it's a really subtle meditation because, at first, it focuses on deaths that the world doesn't take very seriously. Really small deaths. The deaths of nuisance birds.

Chi: And if you know the historical backstory, you know that in real life, Robert Hayden was a teacher who worried for and about his students who were being drafted and enlisting to fight the war in Vietnam. He worried about them inflicting callous, needless violence on Vietnamese people. In other words, about not taking death seriously. And he worried about them being killed. And not having the chance to grow up and reach their potential.

Chad: Chi, I'm going to pitch this question to you: what does Hayden gain by talking about Socrates? By layering ancient Greek philosophy onto this deeply solitary reflection about the starlings at the very end, so it's the last thing we readers are left with? What's he accomplishing here?

Chi: I think one of the things he accomplishes is making the point that the classics are meaningful to Black people—or, at least, to one Black person (himself). That he sees Western Civ as part of a universal human heritage that's available and worthwhile to everyone. Which is a kind of counter-cultural thing to say in the '60s and '70s, when the Black Power movement was focusing on ways to de-colonize the mind, and either find or create distinctively Black literary forms and traditions as a form of cultural repair. Hayden wasn't naïve about this; he knew that Great Books could be used to make people feel inferior, like they didn't have anything worth contributing. He agreed with that part of what Black Nationalist artists and activists were saying. But he quietly and consistently insisted that it was *misuse* of the classics that was the problem, not the works themselves. Here's one time he told a personal story related to this:

Hayden: ... a vulgar old woman I once knew...said to me, "Boy, what you messing around with all that poetry stuff for? Ain't no percentage in *that*." Quite often, this devil's advocate looks and sounds like certain acquaintances of mine who feel it is their duty to see that I keep both feet on the ground. Or like certain professors I've endured who have tried in vain to convince me that Shakespeare said it all, and therefore I should accept the fact that I was born with too little, too late.

[Source: <https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/> Hayden, Robert, John C Broderick, Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry And Literature Fund, and Archive Of Recorded Poetry And Literature. How It Strikes a Contemporary: Reflections on Poetry and the Role of the Poet. 1978. Audio. <https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/>.]

Chad: It seems like he was saying that everyone could have that experience of being silenced, regardless of race.

Chi: Yes. I think that's accurate. *And* he was saying that African American artists face specific kinds of stereotyping that are destructive.

Chi: You don't have to talk about race to make sense of the main classical allusion in this poem. But I think it helps! Because it deepens the stakes of what Hayden's doing with Socrates. Like pointing to the universality of suffering. And the ubiquity of political violence: "Selma and Saigon."

Chad: Hayden didn't write a lot of autobiographical poems. Mostly, he wrote about African American historical figures and events, and personas, and myths and symbols and allegories. "A Plague of Starlings" is one of the few poems about his own life. And that's moving to think about.

Chi: I think there's a second important thing that Hayden gains by talking about that particular Platonic dialogue: it underscores the importance and the precarity of the work the speaker of the poem is doing on those late nights and early mornings on campus. In Plato's world, a bad teacher can do real and lasting harm *as well as* real and lasting good.

Chi: My husband is a recently-retired English professor who studies medieval literature. Back when he was still teaching full-time, Steve would joke that if another professor did their job badly, a plane might fall from the sky, or a patient might die needlessly on an operating table. But if *he* did a bad job, it just meant that a student might come away with some erroneous ideas about Chaucer. The thing is, if you're Plato, you probably can't even make that self-deprecating joke!

Chad: Yeah, imagine that you're Robert Hayden, watching your students protest the war and go off to war, and protest against racism here at home in ways that literally put some of them in the firing line (like the students at Kent State who were gunned down by Ohio National Guardsmen). And you're teaching this book that says, don't be scared of death. Think about your soul, and what you're doing to your soul. It's a hard sell, right?

Chi: Yeah, to the students. And probably to the teacher himself sometimes.

Chad: I think the poem gets that and says that. But really subtly and quietly.

Chi: I have this suspicion that the classical engagement in this poem might be even more meta than that.

Chad: How so?

Chi: So, in *Phaedo*, one of the things Socrates tells his friends is that he's spending part of his last days and hours writing poems! Because he's trying to fulfill this ambiguous, recurring command he's heard in dreams for many years. So he makes these poems praising Apollo. And he writes other poems, too. But he explains that because he's not a real poet, he can't invent out of whole cloth. So he riffs on Aesops' fables instead.

Chad: So you think Hayden is linking the work of the philosopher and the work of the poet together through Plato's dialogue—even though Plato says in the *Republic* that because poets are liars, they should be exiled from the ideal city?

Chi: Yes! And I think he might be pointing us to the Aesops fable with the farmer and the starlings in it...and saying that, like Socrates, he too has made a poem that's riffing off an ancient fable.

[“Brooklyn” by Chronillogical]

Chad: As you've probably guessed by now, Hayden's engagement with the classics was non-trivial. These works were part of what shaped him as a poet, and he used them as models and touchstones and resources throughout his career. His classical engagement was really innovative!

Chi: “A Plague of Starlings” is just one instance when Hayden turned to the classics to help him write about violence and power. Another instance is a poem called “Zeus over Redeye” where he reflects on the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the ways we talk about and name them. This is one of the poems he shared at the Library of Congress when he read with Derek Walcott back in October of 1968. Here he is talking about it:

Hayden: I went out to the Redstone Arsenal and was, uh, impressed, overwhelmed. Let's face it, I was disturbed by what I saw. [laughs] One of the streets on the base, or at the arsenal, is named Zeus, after one of the missiles, and another is named Redeye. After one of the first missiles developed out there. And, uh, these two places intersect, and of course the signposts or the street, the street sign, Zeus, is over, is over Redeye. Well that's one, that's one kind of things poets like to do sometimes. It also has other meanings, which I think you will gather from the poem, so I need not, I need not say much about it. Zeus, as you know, the father of the gods, the chief of the Greek pantheon, and uh, almost, almost any poet would feel that it was ironical that the names of the old Greek gods are being given to the rockets and so on. So here is “Zeus over Redeye”:

Enclave where new mythologies

of power come to birth—
where corralled energy and power breed
like prized man-eating animals.
Like dragon, hydra, basilisk.

Radar corollas and Holland tulips
the colors of Easter eggs
form vistas for the ironist.
Where elm, ailanthus, redbud grew
parabola and gantry rise.

In soaring stasis rocket missiles loom,
the pampered weapons named for Nike
(O headless armless Victory),
for Zeus, Apollo, Hercules—
eponyms of redeyed fury
greater, lesser than their own.

Ignorant outlander, mere civilian,
not sure always of what it is
I see, I walk with you among
these totems of our fire-breathing age,
question and question you,

who are at home in terra guarded like
a sacred phallic grove.
Who offer answers that assure
me less than they appall.
It is as though invisible fuses were

burning all around us.
Heat-quiverings twitch
danger's sensitive skin.
Sunlight itself seems flammable, explosive here.
And multimillion shadows give
no restful shade.

[Source: Hayden, Robert, William Jay Smith, Derek Walcott, Archive Of Recorded Poetry And Literature, and Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry And Literature Fund. Robert Earl Hayden and Derek Walcott reading and

discussing their poems in the Coolidge Auditorium. 1968. Audio.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/94838917/>.

["Remote Presence" by Baron Grand]

Chi: Let's come back to "A Plague of Starlings" for the last few minutes of the podcast and talk about violence and politics in that context.

Chad: There's that great quote about the actual colors of birds that you found when you were researching starlings for this episode...from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Chi: Yeah, that quote's kind of amazing: "starlings look black at a distance but when seen closer they are very glossy with a sheen of purples and greens." It's true about starlings, and it reminds me of how we Black people aren't actually black, most of us are some shade of brown... Which also reminds me of that super funny moment in the first episode of Michael Apted's documentary that follows the British kids from different social classes, where one little white girl is like, *why do we call ourselves white? We're actually kind of pinkish...*

[source:

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/starling/>]

Chad: [laughing] If thinking about these birds is meant to make us readers think about the plight of people, then Hayden's really cunning in making the birds so weirdly relatable. But I can't overlook the fact that it's black birds that are being killed. That seems intentional.

Chi: I think so, too. Because it's the 1960s, and America, and Civil Rights were on everybody's mind. Especially at a historically Black college campus in the South, like Fisk.

Chad: I try to be careful about reading race into the poems because Hayden was really outspoken about how much he hated being racially pigeonholed as a writer. But in this case, I think racial considerations deepen and broaden the work this poem is doing.

Chi: I agree. It's like the poet Peter Campion says: "[p]oems are not secret analogs of their historical situations." That said, Campion's open to instances when a particular "historical situation seems...an undeniable atmosphere of the poem, soaked into the boards."

[Source: Peter Campion, *Radical as Reality: Form and Freedom in American Poetry*, 3]

I think this is one of those atmospheric instances. So another overtly political interpretation of Hayden's poem, and its 1960s context, goes something like this:

The black birds in the poem are like Black people in 1960s America who disrupt the ordinary course of work and schooling through messy mass assemblies and civil rights gatherings in spaces not designed for that. And the speaker is expected to be indifferent to their suffering because cracking down on them seems reasonable or logical on some level (since they are "noisy and / befouling" presences). At the very least, shooting the birds (or cracking down on Black demonstrators) is business as usual; it's what's expected.

Hayden describes the suffering of the birds: their "scissoring terror" when the shots ring out, and the fact that their bodies "explode" when hit, and raggedly fall to the cold ground. The speaker also notes the birds' limited options by overtly comparing them to poor people: "the spared" (meaning the ones who evaded the bullets) have to go back to their dangerous homes in the trees because they can't afford to live somewhere safe. Like Black people in 1960s America, many of whom were kept in rundown neighborhoods by racist real estate practices like restrictive racial covenants and redlining (which tightly restricted which homes Black people could buy by refusing to make home loans in predominantly Black neighborhoods). None of that is explicitly in the poem, but maybe it's hinted at so we readers who know the social context will make those thematic connections.

Chad: Chi, you and I are not the only people who suspect these birds might be racialized. The poet Amber Flora Thomas writes about this exact poem by Hayden, and also one called "The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches" by Audre Lorde, as examples of racial symbolism: She says, "the point is that I am not the only Black poet using animals and insects as a convenient subject to pursue an imagistic portrayal of race relations in America."

[Source: Amber Flora Thomas, "Confessions of a Pseudo-Nature Writer."
Callaloo, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Summer, 2011), p. 779]

Chi: If we're right, the choice is reminiscent of the subtle political critique that the poet Virgil levels in book four of the *Georgics*, when he describes bee society.

Chad: Hayden's superficially straightforward poem is so *mysterious*! I feel like we could talk about it for days...

Chi: I agree! But we've gotta end somewhere. So let's close this episode out with a few more of Robert Hayden's words. Here he is talking about poetry and what we can and can't know:

Hayden: I feel that Afro-American poets ought to be looked at as poets first. If indeed that's what they really are. And, as one of them, I dare to hope that if my work means anything, if it's any good at all, it's going to have a human impact. Not a narrowly racial or ethnic or political and overspecialized effect. But, as Fats Waller said, and said for all time, 'one never know, do one?'"[audience laughter]

[Source: Hayden, Robert, John C Broderick, Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry And Literature Fund, and Archive Of Recorded Poetry And Literature. How It Strikes a Contemporary: Reflections on Poetry and the Role of the Poet. 1978. Audio. [https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/.](https://www.loc.gov/item/91740837/)]

["Who Dat" by Amber Spill]

Chad: Old-School is brought to you by the Berkeley Institute and the Department of African American Studies at UC Berkeley. The podcast is funded by gifts from Boyd and Jill Smith and the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education. Thank you to our sponsors and funders!

Chi: Thanks to Amber Spill for our theme music, and to the Library of Congress for sharing incredible poetry recordings with *everyone*. Here's to great libraries!

Chad: Check out our show notes if you want some more Old-School reading recommendations. You can find them at the African American Intellectual Traditions website: aaiti.berkeley.edu.

Chi: We'll see you online, and later back at the podcast. Our final episode of the season is about Yusef Komunyakaa and Homer...

Chad: Thanks for listening to Old-School!

Chi: Yeah, thank you! Bye for now.