

There's a hovel of swallows beneath our eaves,
And a hover of alarms about our rented air.
The little bursts of bird-complaint abridge
The peace like asterisks. These birds
Have tenanted the place since April, may-
Be, months before we came to key this door.

The green hills hunch on every side,
The clouds pass over all, and the sun
Comes down on each one equally;
The air's too clean to lease, too quick
To be owned by anything at all.

Yet every time we slam the door
Beneath their home, they're out ahead,
Decoying us with the first chandelle,
Then strafing us with scold. Aloft
With tiara-ed tails, exhibiting
Between bright sickles the lesser flash
Of bodies birded perfectly, they wheel
To home, those fencers at the dusk
Who parry the lonely dark at the last
With a simple dip, and drop into the nest.

So we've rented the cottage out from under
These birds who slash the breeze that blows
Beyond the cottages of both of us,
And chivvy us on radii of instinct,
Just as we shout our children in
At evening from the wonders of beyond—
Past the wattled swallows'-nest
To rented beds, beneath blankets pulled
Up smooth by habit, tight by love,
To chin of child or bill of chick.

From blossom, egg or womb, we're all
Far carried down this voyaging wind,
Under the whirl-willed sun, all equally
Bereft of deed or tenure. All belong,
As much as all trespass, on
This ownerless globe. The reasons we
And swallows propagate, or flowers—
Make, seek or find a sheltered bed—
We none of us know. We do it because we do,
In fury, fear or tenderness of love.

Side by side we sleep
In the dark above us deep,
In the common cloud of air,
Clung to the steep of a sphere:
Eyes closed against the gape
Of tomorrow, anywhere.

PROGNE AT THE
COTTAGE

Charles Philbrick