

“Birds Everywhere”  
by Sakena Washington

*an essay inspired by artist and muralist Sara B. Coleman latest work  
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“Is this considered the suburbs?” my friend asked.

“No,” I said. “This is the city. We’re in Squirrel Hill.” We sat hip to hip on the 61B bus, riding outbound on Forbes Avenue.

“But it’s so lush here,” she said.

I looked out the bus window and took in a panoramic view of dense trees, manicured lawns, and birds perched on branches. Birds were everywhere.

In 2009, I returned to Pittsburgh after a sixteen-year hiatus. The last place I called home was Los Angeles, a sprawling metro with ten times the population of Pittsburgh. It was a destination city with Hollywood billboards, palm trees, beaches, and a lot of cement in between. My first Los Angeles apartment was a 400-square-foot bachelor, where an angry crow came to visit every afternoon. It teetered nervously on a telephone wire just beyond my window and squawked for hours. The sound startled me every time, the way it cut right through the constant onslaught of car horns, ambulances, blaring radios, buses, and helicopters that flooded the soundscape of the neighborhood. On weekends, I escaped my cement jungle and took the bus west to Santa Monica where I could stare at the ocean and remember a time when I never lived this close to water.

When I left the west coast and returned to Pittsburgh, the ocean was the first thing I missed. I longed for warmer weather and the option to swim on a November day. But it wasn’t until my friend Angelina came to visit me that I remembered how green Pittsburgh was compared to my former city life.

I was living in a small apartment in Squirrel Hill with no air-conditioning and a back patio that looked out onto a cluster of trees and houses that faded into Schenley Park. Every morning at dawn, a flock of birds began an hour-long call and response. This wasn’t the frightening caw of the city crow; these were whistles and chirps, melodies and songs. It was a full-on symphony of sparrows, cardinals, blue jays, and robins. I wasn’t used to this kind of alarm clock. I had been away so long, I forgot that Pittsburgh offers a different kind of musical score to its residents.

When you’re on the move, racing to your next errand or meeting, it’s easy to forget that nature still thrives within our city limits.

Pittsburgh artist and muralist Sara B. Coleman reflects on this thriving ecosystem in a mural that juxtaposes nature and city through a vibrant, geometric landscape of birds. Adorning two adjoining sides of a brick bathroom wall next to the Schenley Oval Sportsplex soccer field, her latest mural is a reminder that even the most utilitarian structure can extend far beyond form and function and give us beauty. Even still, Coleman’s artwork is so much more than that. It’s a call to action.

A community park tour led by a local park ranger informed her idea and concept. Throughout the tour, she and other community members took pictures and made sketches of birds in the area. “I

was inspired by how many birds we saw there,” Coleman recalled. Despite its location and exposure to pollution, she was shocked and encouraged to see so many birds thriving. And yet, there was a flip side to this discussion. According to the park ranger, more than 40% of Pennsylvania’s birds are impacted by climate change. As weather extremes continue to affect bird resources and habitats, many of our regional birds are threatened by extinction.

These conversations informed the way Coleman illustrated the birds, from their first breath of life to their imagined extinction. It’s a subtle evolution, but one that will impact more than bird watchers and environmentalists. Their absence could change the way we hear and see our own city.

Coleman’s mural ultimately serves as an important reminder to protect our region’s birds and to savor the nature around us.