

THE WHITE BIRDS (1892)
William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!
We tire of the flame of the meteor, before it can fade and flee;
And the flame of the blue star of twilight, hung low on the rim of the sky,
Has awakened in our hearts, my beloved, a sadness that may not die.

A weariness comes from those dreamers, dew-dabbled, the lily and rose;
Ah, dream not of them, my beloved, the flame of the meteor that goes,
Or the flame of the blue star that lingers hung low in the fall of the dew:
For I would we were changed to white birds on the wandering foam: I and you!

I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore,
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more;
Soon far from the rose and the lily, and fret of the flames would we be,
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!

Yeats composed this poem for Maud Gonne in 1892 when the pair went for a walk along the cliffs of Howth, a seaside village near of Dublin. The poem was written three days after Yeats had unsuccessfully proposed to her for the first time. Gonne said that she would rather be a seagull than any other bird. She was a fiery Irish actress who shared his interest in the revival of Irish folklore, so it was natural for Yeats to incorporate folk elements.

The composed melody honors this folkloric tradition – it is written to sound as if it has been sung for hundreds of years. The Irish Whistle in D (or optional flute) traditionally doubles the melody an octave higher and ornaments the singer's line. The bodhran, Irish frame drum, accompanies the "dance of the birds." The bass often sounds like a choral bag-pipe and frequent grace notes invoke the tradition of a cappella singing called "sean-nos." Some of the harmonies pay homage to contemporaneous composer, Ralph Vaughn Williams, who sought to honor the traditions of the British Isles. The melody is harmonized in the antique Dorian mode. Verse three employs the technique of keening whereby the soprano soloist wails in grief.

The "Danaan Shore" refers to Tier-nan-Oge (Gaelic), an imaginary land where mortals live as long as do fairies. Danu was the queen of the fairies that inhabited this land. Yeats interpreted Gonne's wish to become a seagull as a wish for freedom from sorrow and time. He wishes, in vain, that they could escape the political and social circumstances that keep them apart, whether on an isolated island, in a mythic environment, or by becoming white birds.

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