

## To a Waterfowl

Despite many years of scientific study since Bryant's time, we still do not understand fully how migrating birds find their way. Here, as in many of his poems, Bryant is interested in the connection between his own imagination and a mystery of nature.

Whither, midst falling dew,  
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,  
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue  
Thy solitary way?

Vainly the fowler's<sup>o</sup> eye  
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,  
As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,  
Thy figure floats along.

Seek'st thou the plashy brink  
Of weedy lake, or marge<sup>o</sup> of river wide,  
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink  
On the chafed oceanside?

There is a Power whose care  
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—  
The desert and illimitable air—  
Lone wandering, but not lost.

All day thy wings have fanned,  
At that far height, the cold thin atmosphere,  
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,  
Though the dark night is near.

And soon that toil shall end;  
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,  
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,  
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven  
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my heart  
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,  
And shall not soon depart.

He who, from zone to zone,  
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,  
In the long way that I must tread alone,  
Will lead my steps aright.

5 5. **owler:** hunter.

10 10. **marge:** word meaning "edge or border."

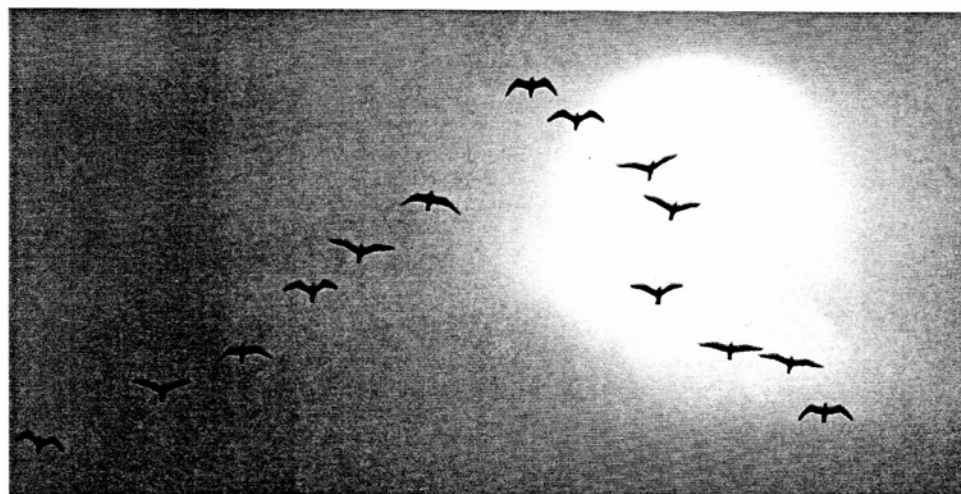
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### For Study and Discussion

#### Analyzing and Interpreting the Poem

- In the first stanza, the observation of the waterfowl in flight is put not as a statement but as a question. **a.** What does this question about the bird's destination suggest to you about the poet's mood or state of mind? **b.** Migrating birds usually travel in flocks and follow a leader. What different effect is conveyed by the poem's focus upon a "solitary" bird?
- In stanza 2, the poet imagines a hunter watching the waterfowl. How does the introduction of this second human observer help to establish the poet's sympathy with the bird?
- In stanza 6, the poet imagines the future homecoming of the bird in images of rest, fellowship, and shelter. Why is it important that the poet should imagine this homecoming for the bird before it disappears? In answering, consider the image of the bird in stanza 5.
- Stanza 7 is a turning point in the poem, moving from observation of the bird and meditation about its flight to a statement of the meaning of this experience. Stanza 8 draws a direct parallel between the bird's flight and the poet's earthbound journey through life. How do lines 25–26 anticipate this parallel?
- The "lesson" of this experience touches the poet's heart. **a.** What inner assurance has the poet gained? **b.** What has provided this new assurance?

### Language and Vocabulary

#### Locating Archaic Words

"To a Waterfowl" contains a number of *archaic* words—words that are no longer in actual use. Sometimes an *archaism* is merely an old spelling of a word we still use, as *shalt* is an archaic spelling of *shall*. In other cases, an archaic word is one that has been replaced by another in ordinary usage. The word *you*, for example, long ago came into the language as a more formal version of the pronoun *thou*. *Thou* had been used to address family, close friends, and children. That distinction disappeared in the eighteenth century: *you* replaced *thou* in ordinary usage, and by Bryant's time *thou* was archaic. Such old-fashioned words, and such contractions as *o'er* for *over*, became part of a "poetic" language that was different from ordinary speech. Bryant's use of such terms reflects the great influence of eighteenth-century poetry, with its deliberate use of archaic words. Pick out the words in the poem that seem old-fashioned, and look them up in a dictionary to see if they are listed as archaic.