# At the End of a Day

*by* Howard Freeman

We have a few trees in the courtyard behind our apartment. Two silver maples and a Chinese elm.

Though they are luscious during the summer, they also carry for me the association of seeing them next to the highway on the rare occasions I would leave Manhattan by car many years ago. There—it seemed always to be in the 1970s—they stood humiliated behind wind drifts of plastic grocery bags and pieces of tarpaulin. Old shoes and cardboard boxes.

But on these July days, their verdant canvas and moist sheen and birds beckon our fourth-floor terrace into acting more like an Upper West Side tree-house. We have morning doves. Sparrows. And these orange-beaked birds that Karen spotted one afternoon and which gave her dreams that night about wild toucans and macaws and about two parrots—white and red—that adopted her as their mother when she said, “Polly wanna cracker? Rawwrr!”

When I was maybe five and spending my summers at Point O' Woods on Fire Island, Mom told me about the “drink-your-tea” birds, known by adults as Eastern Towhees. (Known by mature adults as *Pipilo erythrophthalmus*, a dangerous name that if tossed out mindlessly at a cocktail party may invoke questions on whether you're taking antibiotics.)

Because I first heard Towhees there, their three-part song has always been evocative of that magical place, where it seemed that all we did was drink tea, ride our bikes, and play in the surf. Also, it was Mom who first mimicked the bird's invitational call as she stood on the front porch of the two-bedroom white cottage we rented. It was early in the morning for a boy, perhaps seven o'clock, in July, and after waiting first for the Towhee she proclaimed while looking down at me: “Drink your TEEEEEA!” Then she squinted and tittered. She would hunch her shoulders at me as she laughed, to let me know that this was a delicious moment shared just between us. A short-lived flower of time.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/howard-freeman/at-the-end-of-a-day»*
Copyright © 2009 Howard Freeman. All rights reserved.

Two nights ago as Karen and I sat in our tree-house at the close of a workweek, I saw a morning dove. It perched on the brick wall at the edge of the roof about seven feet above our heads. It gazed quietly to the west, toward the Hudson, its head barely moving, its right eye fixed. The slightest of evening breezes left its smooth brown feathers unruffled.

My bride and I sat across from each other, eating olive tapenade on melba crisps and table wafers, white cheddar cheese, salami, fresh sliced green, yellow and red peppers, and a date-walnut cake. Her Pinot Grigio beaded on the outside of her glass. Since the early evening air was below 70 degrees, she wore a cream, long-sleeved, v-neck knit top and a flowery scarf fastened with a playful knot around her neck.

She would chirp about this and that, her knees pulled to her chest to stay warm, and I would smile. Zinnias in flower boxes and arborvitae in planters surrounded us. The sun dipping to the west of Riverside Drive illuminated the top five floors of the pre-war buildings on West End Avenue. We ate and talked, and sometimes were silent.

We stayed this way until it was time to go inside.