

LAST NIGHT WE HAD A VISITOR
(written in prison, December 1972)

And through the bars
it fluttered in
with a cold December gust,
its feathers soaked
with cold December rain.
Too young for flight
in inclement weather,
it sought shelter in a cage
built for men.
It vainly clung to the air
as hands shot up to catch it –
exhausted, its frail wings failed,
it dropped breathless on the floor
in a forest of feet.
The feet stood still for a moment
and moved softly away.
Now no one tried to catch it
that it wasn't struggling to fly free.
Someone chirped something
about beer and bar-b-que,
someone suggested a more exotic menu.
A cardboard cage was made
from an old shoe box
lined with an old sock,
crumpled strips from an old paper bag
and a towel that ended up as a rag.
The youngest scooped up the bird
with trembling hands
and placed it gently on the towel.

Somehow,
it looked like a manger
this December.

The guard barked lights out
and everyone rushed to his cot
leaving the box on the ping-pong table
uncovered.

Where would it go in a state like that?

Now and then, through the night,
above the whine of the cold north wind,
we heard tweets from the box. . .
which grew fainter and fainter
as sleep became thicker
and heavier.

At sunup,
as soon as the guard gave the signal to get up,
we gathered 'round the box
on the ping-pong table.

There were ants in the manger,
and the bird was not there.