

ALBUMS

# ***The Birds Outside Sang***

Florist

2016



**7.3**

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**GENRE:** Folk/Country

**LABEL:** Double Double Whammy

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*The Birds Outside Sang* is an unassuming, deeply personal record that manages to shoehorn some big ideas into three-minute pop songs. It's an album that invites us to appreciate the mundane, to look out at the world and be awed by the majesty and fragility of it all.

Emily Sprague is barely of drinking age but she can come across like an old soul, perhaps because she's accomplished a great deal in the last few years. At the age of 17, she released

a series of folk scribblings under her own name and began writing and recording with bandmates under the name Florist. Shortly after relocating to Brooklyn in 2013, Sprague was the victim of a hit-and-run cycling accident that left her in a neck brace and unable to use her left arm. Arriving two years later, Florist's debut full-length, *The Birds Outside Sang* reads like a record of Sprague's brush with mortality and slow recovery. It's an album that invites us to appreciate the mundane, to look out at the world and be awed by the majesty and fragility of it all.

Most of its first half chronicles the misery and isolation of convalescence; its often claustrophobic sound evokes a bedroom full of stale air. Many songs are corporeal in their fixations—blood, bones, and body parts make frequent appearances, while the world outside remains fixed behind a pane of glass. "Morning birds sing songs like Mrs. Robinson/ Inside my head I'm a child again/ But there's a pill for that," Sprague sings on the title track, the interior and exterior blurring into a medicated haze. Sprague is skilled at drawing us into her perspective with just a few words: She tends to state things plainly, in a manner that suits her often stoic delivery. Even the recounting of her accident is detached ("The rain is falling at the perfect speed/ The cars are driving at the perfect speed/ My legs are moving at the perfect speed/ My arm is moving at the perfect speed"). When she adds emphasis, it carries real weight, like the way she draws out the phrase "It's painful" before following up with "But I don't feel pain at all" on the haunting "A Hospital + Crucifix Made of Plastic."

Sprague wrote mostly on the keyboard while her arm was healing, and many of these songs consist of skeletal arrangements built around a single organ or synth line. Despite their simplicity, some of the album's more minimal songs are among the most memorable: the spare opener "Dark Light," the slow-burning dirge "The Birds Outside Sang," and the plunky fever dream "Thank You." Warmth creeps into the album's second half, which leans on reverb-soaked guitars and looser arrangements. There's melancholy here too but also a much-needed goofy playfulness. "Please come quick, I've stuck my head in the banister again," Sprague sings on "White Light Doorway," before admitting, "I

just wanted to know what it would feel like/ With one part of my body alive."

As the album's sound thaws, Sprague perspective broadens, taking in the beauty of "tall trees," "cold lakes," and a "stone, skipping slow"; by observing the vitality around her, she learns to appreciate her own. "Thunderstorms, a friendly thing that reminds me I could be dead," Sprague sings at the outset of the record's denouement, "Only a Prayer Nothing More." By the song's close, she's able to sum up the entire album neatly in a couplet: "I thought that I saw the other side/ But it was only sunlight in my eyes."

*The Birds Outside Sang* doesn't break much new ground nor does it aim to. It's an unassuming, deeply personal record that manages to shoehorn some big ideas into three-minute pop songs. In so doing, it recalls some of indie's turn-of-the-millennium high water marks: Sprague's reverence for the natural world recalls Phil Elverum's work under the Microphones moniker, while the album's shut-in, confessional feel owes a debt to early Bright Eyes. Even so, *The Birds Outside Sang* quietly announces the arrival of a young songwriter whose voice is very much her own. It should be interesting to watch it develop.