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Poems

Mark Tredinnick

Lou Smith

Jeremy Cronin

Stephen Gray

Rabindra Swain

See next page for additional authors

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Poems

Abstract

The right life

I am my beloveds and my beloved is mine

Angles of repose

This morning

Migration

In a sea fog

Penguins

For comrades in solitary confinement

Greater flamingoes

snipe

Oystercatcher

One sooty falcon

Lesser kestrel

Two ravens

The nest in tatters

That pair of pigeons

Over a cup of tea

And gathering of swallows twitter

The speech of birds

Early morning May

Bird brigades

Authors

Mark Tredinnick, Lou Smith, Jeremy Cronin, Stephen Gray, Rabindra Swain, Chris Wallace Crabbe, Sean Murray, and Nina Shevchuk-Murray

Mark Treddinick

THE RIGHT LIFE

Today the wind is shameless
and unfettered; she strips
leaves from the poplars
and lifts letters from the words

of the phrases in one's mouth.
Do the right thing; live the right life
pied flycatcher shrills
in the winter grass.

But one is, oneself, damned
by self-awareness to essay —
all the better days of one's life —
a thing the bird does

just waking and surrendering
to herself. She dances
herself true in the shapely
pursuit of breakfast.

I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE

*For Rohan, my brother, and Mariza,
on their wedding, December 2007.
And with a bow of respect to
The Song of Solomon*

I

Each afternoon two black ducks
land in the grass and lodge by
the watertrough through the dusk.

II

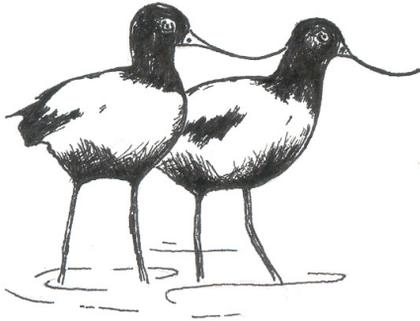
The silence between them is
deep and it's most of what they
share and they would be nowhere
else and with nobody else,
and there is something beyond
hope, and this is how it looks,
fallen on the lowly grass,
she, the rose of Sharon, he
the apple among the trees
of the wood. And from my shelf
the clock repeats its old lie,
and he drinks and flares the green
in his wings and says rise up
my love, and come away. Or
something like that. For lo, she
replies, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone;
the time of the singing of
birds is come. And they rise and
eat from the seed of the hens
and return and lie down in
each other's delight until
night finds them out and he says
come, my beloved, let us
go forth into the field, or
something like that, and they do.

III

There are seven virtues, at least, and some of them are small as blue wrens and some as great as silver poplars, but none matters beside, and none counts without, what visits us beyond reason and outstays its season and makes the world a garden again. And two birds.

IV

Love is strong as death, I think, watching them articulate eternity in their flight.



Lou Smith

MIGRATION

Currawongs, perhaps the most advanced member of the family, are adept scavengers and tree-living gleaners which spend much of their time roaming when they are not breeding.

I struggle
to keep upright
as branches
twist and crack
in blustering
winter winds.
Should your hair
smell of cut lime
your skin of tamarind?

The wattle is beginning to bloom.

When you crossed the Atlantic
and crossed the Pacific
did your bones splinter in chill?

The Pied-currawong
calls in flight,
arboreal, strong.

Your history
was posted in airmail letters
to friends and family we never knew,
Christmas correspondence our mother
now fulfills.

... contact calls can be quite soft and yet keep a family or a flock together as its members forage ...

like your fingers swiftly
tattling thread after thread
of coloured cotton
I'm weaving knowledge
of your migration.

The most obvious altitudinal migrants ... are the pied-currawong, the gang-gang cockatoo, the king parrot, the crimson rosella, the golden whistler, the crescent honeyeater and the red wattlebird.

On summer nights
sticky like rum,
the smell of bananas
and castor sugar frying,
of freshly mowed lawn
and suburban quiet
the call of *curra-wong curra-wong*.

WORK CITED

Frith, H.J. (ed.) 1976, *Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds*, Reader's Digest Services, Sydney 1976.



IN SEA FOG

In koropun
where rocks fall
from human voice
fog horns sound

you left Jamaica
where you were born
then from England
you came here

where Coquon flows
through the valley
to the sea
and swamps spread out to
Tirrikiba-place of fire
where steelworks of tirriki
blast the skies with steam

and as you passed the singing cliffs,
Yirannalai,
this far-off place
coal seamed
and metal-grey water leeches
the river flowed on strong
to the sacred songs of tel-moon

but as the fog yaralkulliko,
the wind the scent
of honeysuckle
the Doctor Bird's
black tail whipped

the Doctor Bird
called your name
Doris Butcher

the Doctor Bird
sang you back
to Jamaica
where this poem
summons you to return

NOTES

The Doctor Bird, or Swallow-Tail Hummingbird, is the National Bird of Jamaica. The Arawaks, the Indigenous people of Jamaica, believed the bird had magical powers. They called the bird 'God Bird' believing it was the reincarnation of dead souls. See, Jamaica Information Service, 'National Bird — The Doctor-Bird (Trochilus polytmus) or Swallow-Tail Hummingbird', *This is Jamaica*, October 2005, online http://www.jis.gov.jm/special_sections/This%20is%20Jamaica/symbols.html.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS FROM THE AWABAKAL LANGUAGE

(Sourced from Maynard, John. Ed. *Awabakal Word Finder and Dreaming Stories Companion*. Keeaira Press, Southport, 2004.)

koropun: haze, fog, mist

Coquon: Hunter River. Coquon was the name as recorded by Dr J.D. Lang. The Awabakal word for water was Ko-ko-in. The origin/translation of Coquon and Ko-ko-in are likely connected.

Tirrikiba: place of fire (later the site of the Newcastle Steelworks)

tirriki: flame, red in colour, red hot.

tel-moon: the sacred bird of women — the Australian Woodpecker. Still to be seen in the mountains around Newcastle. Women would strongly protect this bird.

yaralkulliko: move away, like the clouds.

Yirannalai: cliffs between Newcastle and Bar Beach.

Jeremy Cronin

PENGUINS

You've heard the alarm clock a second before it actually went off?

i.

Waddle, bray away
 Shuffle down your dune
 Grunt, grunt again
 Head looming over tummy
 Short-sightedly to check
 On your own clown-footed step

Flop

If you must
 Into water, flop, letting your bandaged wings unwind their
 Sheer

Flippery

Pirouette, porpoise-like, flying the inside of a green-hearted wave
 Torpedoing the loop-the-loop, wizarding a thrust, bringing the ocean's immense,
 in short
 Orchestras
 Speechless
To hush

ii.

I imagine hearing the alarm-clock a shade
 Of a second before it actually goes off

Is the weak vestige of that in-built capacity
 In penguins

To swim home
 Across hundreds of miles open sea
 Guided by the thinnest electro-magnetic map-work
 Like that which radiates above my head from
 Two-and-a-half volt
 Two Eveready
 Alarm-clock batteries

Or is this

Retrospective to soothe the desperation of being
 Wrenched awake from dreams?

iii.

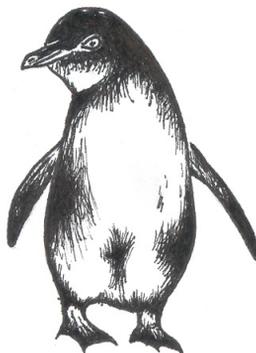
Imagine these words dropped off in remote bays
Swimming with uncanny instinct
Towards the end of a poem

Like this fascination for penguins
(Easily dismissed)
(People are starving, why give a damn about birds?)
A fascination that, nonetheless, presses on, seeking some hint of compassion in
chaos
In this too often cynical place with its oil spills
And nature's alarm clocks going off

These words want
To splash, home, waddling ashore
With that bewildered, blinking, hesitant
Out-of-element
Air, is it wrong, they seem to wonder
To feel wonder
For penguins?

NOTE

A recent oil spill threatened the colony of breeding African penguins on Robben Island off Cape Town. The birds were removed by truck overland several hundred kilometres up the eastern coastline and then released back into the sea. They swam back over the following month or so, but the weeks of grace as they returned provided an opportunity to mop up the oil spill.



FOR COMRADES IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Every time they cage a bird
the sky shrinks. A little.

Where without appetite —
you commune
with the stale bread of yourself,
pacing to and fro, to shun,
one driven step on ahead
of the conversationist
who lurks in your head.
You are an eyeball
you are many eyes
hauled to high windows
to glimpse, dopplered by mesh
how-how-how long?
the visible, invisible, visible
across the sky
the question mark — one
sole ibis flies.

Stephen Gray

GREATER FLAMINGOES

I said: stretch your metre and a half,
 the tip is black for down, stay in the pink —
 do not be ashamed of it, caked blush,
 or you're a dead immature. Fly after father.
 We used to steer by battlefields and the odd DR
 steeple, siloes in the sunflowers, furry mealielands.
 Now it's all Telkom and the Bismillah Store.
 Veer left at Thusane Funerals and the Salon Zelda ...
 There as ripple-free among the reeds, our shining
 pan. I said: unbend your knobby knees
 as you alight. Breathe in, sieve for shrimp,
 lift, breathe out. Stiltwalk. Ignore the plastic
 bags, the old diesel sump and Castle cans.
 I said: eat your carotenoids. I said:
 mucky head beneath your wing. That way
 you cease to exist, wake up clean. Or else
 it's back to the nursery like gawky ducks.
 I said: move over.

SNIPE

Decorator of swamps and quagmires,
said John Clare, along rancid streams.
If undisturbed delves and drills the gelid
mass apart for food, hell on molluscs,
probes the moor's spongy lap.
With the annual liquid into ice may leave
thy mystic nest in crackling reeds, depart.
Whither o shut-legged long-billed zigzag?
Needs pudges, moss, the stagnant flood.
For Africa's estuaries, gorged with mud.
Fly straight for Mthatha's mangroves,
your mate in rendezvous, paddling, probing.
Wading for crabs. With global warming
less and less mud in Africa, drill mud,
split mud, dried out, cracked. Home
again for British damp, little left.
My bill longer than my head.
Romantic poets of the sinky foss,
all let earth breathe. Hit concrete.

OYSTERCATCHER

Gone from this shoreline since wild Joyce
at the Ocean View with her crowbar prised
the last oyster from its bed, pink
in her rolled-up-T-shirt, slimy on her sandy,
salty tits. Evading the Catch Monitor.
Those all-black shorebirds, red-eyed, blade-like
bills. Nesting in tidal debris and washed-up
kelp. Mussels they've reseeded here,
take tropical fish from cosy reefs, netted
the dunes with scrub. But those broken
shells are oyster fossils now, thrown up, no sprays
of sperm, no culch. While the sea still runs
its idle water to the shore, the oystercatchers
of the Indian Ocean have moved on along.
Trying the Atlantic side.

ONE SOOTY FALCON

Along the cliffside a batch of euphorbia
covered in honeysuckle, bringing butterflies,
when in the binocular's clear O,
there: a hook-billed eagle / buzzard / kite —
basically grey as the squall at sea
behind him, yellow cere over black culmen,
eye shining, crest down, a yellow claw
strikes up to scratch his gape.
Flick, turn. Clasp his perch, so his prey.
Raptors are hard to identify, one from another.
Confuses with a juvenile brownish tail.
Must cruise bush. Swivels, avoids drizzle.
And like a thunderbolt at dusk he wobbles.

LESSER KESTREL

At least with dusk she had the wheel and screech
of their flypast, a stop-dead spectacle:
spotted brown like khaki rags hovering ...
'cast' is the collective word, a cast of thousands
rotating in the vast failing sky, before
they sink and roost in the same village gum
or pepper-tree each summer. Cleaning out
the insects of the Great Karoo. Her slender
rufous falcons of Hanover, tumbled all the way
from Jedda and Turkmenistan, their Palaearctic
breeding grounds, migrating half the world away
to feed above politics. One night a hailstorm struck
and stunned the advance guard of all the lesser kestrels,
flapping and gaping — worse than bloody Kitchener.
She gathered them in her apron, nursed them right —
Olive Schreiner I mean, under house arrest,
confined to domestic duties and quite unable
to escape herself.

TWO RAVENS

Sheeny. All black, except for the white
nape we flash you below only when wheeling.
In pairs we prospect. Larger even than
your pied or plain black crows. Omnivores,
but for choice a lamb disabled, peck
out its eyes ... a blind baby Jesus:
in the snow they stagger, fall into
crevasses, strip off soft parts before
they freeze. We're falsetto — easy
to tune into from other kraaks, stay
paired for life. Scavenge, yes, eye
your dirt and dumps and disembowel.
Mostly we glide glossily and alight
only on our dark shadows.

Rabindra Swain

THE NEST IN TATTERS

These lines came
with the birds already perched on them.
Before I was aware of it.

they have hung themselves upside down —
thin, tiny substances, self-effacing,
were it not for the bright
yellow spot on the neck
and that of white on the male's belly.

I did not have to play host,
nor give in to them to weave
out of my lines a nest.

They came
before these lines came.
They did not have to pick
twigs and straws of my thought;
they had their glue, of course.

The way they fluttered
above my head, it seemed
I did not exist for them.
Or maybe, they accepted me
as a part of the landscape
they had come to inhabit.

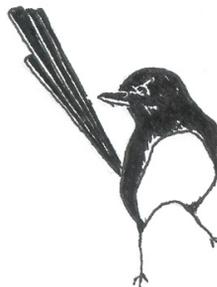
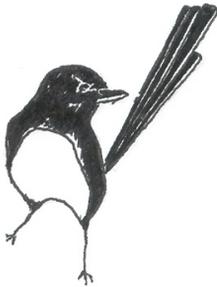
Laying eggs
the mother-bird prayed.
I joined her:
Let the chicks see the light of day.

Only one of them survived.
I watched them feed it
from their tubular beaks,
watched the fledgling grow
day by day but failed to see
when it learned
the art of flying.

I never saw
it touch the ground on its tiny feet.

Once they were a threesome
they were hardly to be seen
till they disappeared
in a windy night.

They are gone.
The nest, now in tatters,
taunts me to retrieve from it
the lines they wove.



THAT PAIR OF PIGEONS

This humid afternoon
a pigeon fell at my feet, bleeding,
cut by the blades of a revolving fan.

While I cleaned my room
I found another pigeon
on the skylight.

I do not know
which one of the pigeon pair,
male or female, died.

But the other pigeon on the skylight
still glowers at me
seeking an explanation I cannot provide.

OVER A CUP OF TEA

Our house is without a fence.
All that is there are only sparse hedges,
a few trees of jasmine and a *kanjar*
(of late I discovered this funnel
of a yellow flower is dear to our lord
Jagannath). Here sleep comes late
and leaves early. Still drowsy
you come out to the balcony
with the morning tea
and with an accumulation of
days of doing nothing. You imagine
the balance the days, emptied,
would make
were they to be placed
one atop another, and on top
of them all you sitting
with a cup of tea and letting
yourself flutter horizontally —
a 5'4" temple banner.
Breaking the spell
a small gray bird comes hopping
towards you and picks worms
and seeds — the dawn is
so quiet you could hear them cracking
inside its beak. Then it goes away
without bothering to look at you,
making you realise the flimsiness,
the transparency of your being,
your being inconsequentially there
in one sunny morning with a
cup of tea, and your inability
to say something like
I let a morning with a bird go by
for sheer fear that the other bird
will soon be here somewhere
on electric wires or eucalyptus tops
with its too familiar note,
tu tuu, tu tuu,
which, in your mother tongue,
sounds like 'the end of you'.

Chris Wallace Crabbe

AND GATHERING SWALLOWS TWITTER

(for Paul Carter)

You might think the world is being taken over
 by those properly-named rainbow lorikeets
 whizzing over like fighter planes that squeal
 but a couple of magpies have moved south into our square,
 reasserting the musical verities: a square in which
 seagulls assemble late every morning
 to be fed with crumbled bread by the old Greek woman
 next door. Sometimes we see a raven or two
 hoeing into dry sandwiches; and feral pigeons,
 oddly so-called, given they live in cities,
 and not at all in a secretive way like foxes do.
 Mudlarks, peculiarly at home with traffic
 are generally called peewits in New South Wales,
 although their yelp is far more piercing than that.
 Red-rumped or grass parrots will start up under your feet
 as you cross the far larger park, where softly spoken doves
 and unwelcome starlings are also grazing: Ted Hughes
 likened the latter to blowflies. They have a nasty sheen.
 Sparrows abound where concrete and crumbs abound,
 with a particular fondness for the stylish outdoor café,
 while Indian mynahs can well look after themselves.
 Wattlebirds are aggressive and lithe: according to Cayley
 they produce a sound much like pulling the cork
 out from a bottle of wine. At other times
 it's the loud repeated effect of a donkey braying.
 Once I saw a bloke in nocturnal pyjamas
 beating a streetside tree with a furious broom,
 attempting to quell the din. Attractive greenies
 with their sliver of white carol from treetops
 in the most pleasing way, keeping it brief.
 All of them belong to a geographical culture
 that both underlies and overlays our own,
 and will no doubt be glad to be rid of us
 in God's good time or that of the ozone layer
 or some other card in the genetic casino.

THE SPEECH OF BIRDS

That there should now
be red berries down there
to the left of third-big-tree
will concern me later

for now I know
plentiful grass-seeds are eating-ready
near fence and far enough
from cat

and even before that
I'll pick up
those excellent lengths of straw
just the shot

for home repairs
 a bit closer though
 to big cat prowling ground

Four legs more dangerous
two more or less benign
but upstairs in our tree

those bloody wattlebirds
and squealing gangs of lorikeets
could drive one crazy

Some days I can't even hear
a melodious lovesong
from down the way

nor the clamant warning
that sparrowhawk is hovering now
somewhere above leafless
riding the breath of death

Sean Murray

EARLY MORNING, MAY

The birds have come again.

They are insufferable, so thick in the trees,
so near the windows with their hollow bones,
their loud songs gaudy and erudite.

The trees are not so much complicit as helpless.

The beans, planted in the old strawberry pot last month
look the other way, tend to their roots and new blooms.

I know. The racket has woken you too early.

Nina Shevchuk-Murray

BIRD BRIGADES

Lines of blackbirds march across
the lawn every evening after grass is cut.
Today, they came walking uphill,
but I had seen them do the opposite.
The birds cannot be random, though.
They are meticulous,
methodically coordinated
in their bending and picking,
their straight-legged advance from left
to right.
They come in brigades, platoons
like India. They know something
I never will learn about
walking on grass.

THIS MORNING

birds sing like the memory of paradise
lost on Sunday, when summer came
to town too early and too hard,
like all our futures come at once.

On Saturday, when it was the present
yet, but already warm, I walked
out to find a home and found,
instead, two wrens returned for spring

And making that old mistake again
in the branch of a bottlebrush down the lane,
already outside the garden fence
and hell to pay forever more.

But today the sky has caught his blue
and the morning's caught her voice,
and my neighbour's sinking footings in stone as though
eternity hadn't been blown apart

And had a place for us yet. And the wind's
in the south and the road's a mess
of fallen limbs, and the wrens are gone,
but what they brought sings on at the end of the road.

—Glebe, 25 September 2006