

Birds

Michael Taylor *poet*

Dennis Letbetter *photographer*



The Right Distance

Too near, too far
we see them
as streaks
out of the corner of one eye.

We do not hear them

or half listen
as if their chattering and flitting
were only a far-off school recess.

Dusk falls
too soon after daybreak

the day's
too brief for their needs

yet they fill the air
with the flurry of existing.





My photography of birds was born of happenstance really. Isolated in Michigan trying to get my parent's affairs and new living situation sorted had me there for a couple of very trying years.

Having never been a photographer of wildlife and only occasionally of birds, I happened onto this rather exhaustive pursuit while there, needing/seeking some kind of creative outlet and consolation hoping that I hadn't simply gone there to die. My parents are decent people but remote emotionally and virtually uninterested in what I do. But that is another story.

I have not pursued bird photography since returning to San Francisco. My images of birds require an exacting permanent backdrop and use of a hidden camera which I've not been able to realize here. In Michigan I created the perfect arrangement with a camera trained out of a win-

dow, something of a blind, with feeders set up and a painted wooden backdrop. It was a steep learning curve technically to capture these swift and tiny birds in flight using natural light. I have a surfeit of these images, but there has been a wealth of revelation in such a deep dive into seemingly similar imagery.

Truth is, the images keep me involved in exploiting the visual world with a camera while I'm sorting other things out in my life and work. It's something of a mantra. It will end. But the pictures remain. I'm very fond of many of them.

Dennis Letbetter

I met Dennis many years ago when I was living in the Bay Area. At the time he was collecting pebbles and stones smoothed by Pacific tides. I thought his photographs of these inanimate minerals were stunning; they seemed to bring them to life while preserving all the dignity of their stillness. But they were not just marvellous images: they invited one to look more closely at sea stones, all stones. A couple of years ago Dennis and I collaborated on the Arion Press edition of my translation of the second book of Horace's Odes. I was, and still am, proud and grateful for the presence of Dennis's photos accompanying my renditions of Horace, and see a logic in the pairing of poems of an ancient civilization recaptured in a contemporary idiom and his images of a very old geological order polished into fragments that can be held in the palm of one hand.

In 2020 Dennis began his series of birds in flight, stilling their movement, catching it in images that were at once moments of an activity that we seldom watch, yet were somehow expressions of the essence of birdness. That the birds his camera captures are exclusively house sparrows makes no difference: they are all intensely, inexpressibly avian. They could be wrens or jays or thrushes or swallows or nightingales. The fact that they have feathers and wings and can swoop between and above branches makes them very different from earthbound creatures, including and perhaps especially us. For reasons that have more to do with our sensibilities than with theirs all birds make us dream, fill us with wonder, joy or sadness (as when we see them depart for distant destinations), and generally enrich our lives even though most of us know less about them than about trees. (We count ourselves

experts on wildlife when we're able to identify half a dozen species.)

Like Dennis's sea stones, his birds remind us to use our eyes. They alert us to what we cannot fully understand, urge us to pay attention to what surrounds us; in a sense they tell us to be more of what we can be. So I thought it only natural to suggest a new collaboration to him, for just as his photographs invite us to open ourselves to creatures we tend to take for granted, I hope that the reader of my poems and translations and short prose pieces will not just stop at the printed page but will want to reach toward the lives, or at least the emotions, that inspire my words. Words and Dennis's images: both are ways of probing the reality of beings that seem at once to meet our eyes and ears and perpetually to escape us.

Michael Taylor



Evening

The moon is as cold
as the wind on my fingers.

Walking to the woods
between high hedges
I hear a flutter of wings.

Are they following
or watching where I am going?

Perhaps the moon knows.
A crow flies over the hills.
A lone leaf spirals

earthward. The sound of wings
fills the evening.

No Longer There

There are those that stay in the air
those that keep to the ground

hopping on elastic legs or pacing
back and forth with a senator's gait.

A sound
or shadow behind a window

and all
fly off

as if one set of wings
could fit all sizes

leaving us to name
what is no longer there.



Birds 2

20 March is

World Sparrow Day

Since 1970 nearly 3 billion breeding birds
have disappeared from North America

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Elegy for a Wren

Its eyes do not see.
Its wings do not breathe
the space between trees.

Delicate as love's wrist
slender as a filament
its talons do not grip
the branch or bark
from which other wrens hang
upside down to feed.

Its nest will be eggless.

It is no bigger than my thumb.

Yet its placeless indescribable sweetness
fills the season
as if there were no other sound
than its voice. Whatever
you're doing—trimming, pruning
nothing in particular—
you stop and listen.

No one can tell
how far that song reaches
what its shape and weight
will be next.



The Parliament of Foules

At some point toward the end of the fourteenth century, several years before writing *The Canterbury Tales* and a century or a little less before Caxton is said to have translated and printed the first book in English, Chaucer composed *The Parliament of Foules*, a 699-line poem in stanzas of seven verses rhymed ababbcc. Fourteen manuscripts of this work have survived but the original has been lost, as have the poem or poems in French or Middle English that may have inspired it. Chaucer would most likely not have been familiar with *The Conference of Birds* by the late twelfth-century Persian poet Farid ud-Din or Attar of Nishapur, even in translation (if any existed at the time), but there may well have been a tradition of poems about assembled birds in early Western literature, as there was a tradition of bird compositions in painting

(several of which are known to exist in seventeenth-century Dutch painting).

The Parliament of Foules tells, and in parts sings, of a dream vision of birds by an anonymous poet simply identified by the pronoun “I,” who falls asleep over an account of the exploits of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who played a decisive role in the conquest of Carthage during the Second Punic War. After being wafted through an enchanted landscape and a darkened temple of Venus, the dreaming poet emerges into sunshine where a huge flock of birds have assembled in the presence of Dame Nature to choose their mates. The birds listen to three male eagles arguing which of them most deserves the female eagle, who is watching from the safety of her perch. In the intervals between the male eagles’ pronouncements the smaller fowl hold a parliamentary debate, full of speech and invectives. There

is much posturing, shouting, arguing. In the end Dame Nature loses patience and asks the female eagle which suitor she likes best. She answers that she would prefer to make her choice in a year's time. The poem ends with the smaller birds making such a noise that the poet wakes. It is a warm morning smelling of spring, perhaps February 14, St Valentine's Day. As they fly off with their mates, chattering more loudly than ever to a "French air," the poet resumes reading in the expectation that he will eventually fall on something better. "I have always been a reader," he says in essence, "I read"

*In hope, y wis, to rede so som day
That I sbal mete som thing for to fare
The bet; and thus to rede I nil not spare*

Only a generation ago it would have been unimaginable that birds should vanish and that their chorus on late winter mornings should be gone forever. Now it is easy to imagine the silence without the banter of sparrows and chickadees bustling among shrubs, the singing of wrens and thrushes, the murmur of doves, the laughter of larks, the cawing of crows far above the woods, the cries of hawks cloud-high in the warming sky.

Michael Taylor



Birds 3



Before Dawn

In the darkest hour of the night
when even the sirens are silent
and the cars on the freeway listen
to the sound of their own breathing
you sometimes hear
a sudden shriek in the distance
followed by a burst of wild laughter

and you know that a gull is devouring
a scrap of civilization

Cranes

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

The tips of their wings
applaud the fingers of the wind.

Slowly

up bay

they travel

unhurried

between

the earth's brightness
and the bright sky



Ducks

Out of the ocean's
endless radiance
they meditate

on immensity
and their own
spindrift existence.

The waves are bigger
than the land.

As water's underside
wavers
on the brink of overturning
they dive

and come out
as if nothing had happened
on the other side



Russian River

Perhaps, in the end, little has
changed.
You look down from your wings.
You feel the wind
on your pinions
the current at your feet.

You see the bulk
of the black herds
against the green hill.

You hear the same notes
the way they sang
in the redwoods
over and over
in a silence so deep
it was always bigger
than the sounds that fill it.

You see the dogs on the beach
you see the waves

the tide coming in
the sea
breaking over rocks
and the light
hardly changing



Sandpiper

Sandpiper sliding
head down
on its own reflection.

There's nothing
so vast as a mirror

or the sea
reflecting the sky.

They skim
on panes of sand
as if

stitching infinity

Birds 4

Close your eyes.

Calls, whistles, cries
songs surround you.



Close your eyes.

Where you listen
they are always there
always within hearing
in another place.

Open your eyes
you still don't understand
how they sound so distant
so close.

Birds 5



Dawn Chorus

At first light
they sing too loud in a tangle
as if anxious to keep pace
with the shadows of trees
about to dance on the edge of the field.

At sunrise
a single thrush
sings from a single thicket
as if having the day to fill
with light. Light
is its song and its singing.



Starlings

The whole day they chatter and laugh
at the top of their lungs
to silence perhaps
the nightingale, the cuckoos
the orioles and doves
the fluting and muttering of thrushes
the almost unbearable sweetness
of wrens
even stridulating crickets.
Then suddenly toward sundown
they stop. I look up:
a falcon gliding between small white clouds.
For an instant the world falls still.





Song

if songs were tiles
and tiles were as protean as clouds
even a roofer couldn't tell
where such a roof
begins or ends
 from first light to sundown
they celebrate light
the occasion for
praise and praising
that they are part of yet apart
the light
 they sing
each minute
 each modulation of
radiance slipping
between branches
between grass and air
always brimming
spilling over the land
something you can't unravel
song or roof
to keep the rain out

The Days of Repetition

These are the days of reiteration and sameness
when every being proclaims

I am, I am, I am:

a dove rehearsing an old refrain
a cuckoo repeating another cuckoo
a million leaves unfurling
to turn the world green

yet each moment is different.

These are the days when everything shouts

even our silence is unrestrained.



God's Envoy

I'm sitting in my garden in the middle of LA
thinking God may be a manure factory
that despite His flamboyant Divine will
to feed in equal measure
bindweeds and dandelions, lilies and orchids,
He still stinks to highest heaven.

Just then

—and I swear this is true—
a green-neck hummingbird swoops
down, settles into air inches from my nose
like a hovering sword, so near
I think it has come to pluck out my eyes.

It lingers long and close enough for me to know
that of all hovering spirits,
this tiny ferocious ballerina in a frozen brizé
has been chosen to set me straight.

Here's to your theology, it seems to say.
Here's to your spiritual coup d'état,
you Solomonseal,
you Sholeh flower,
you pollen among others.

Sholeh Wolpé

Birds and Passionflowers

In an essay in his book on the reproductive strategies of garden animals and plants, *L'Amour au jardin*, the French writer Jean-Pierre Otte considers the strange and wonderful case of passionflowers and birds. Passionflowers got their name because they reminded early observers of the instruments of the Passion: the dark red filaments at the center of their blossoms like a crown of thorns, the nail-like pistils, the hammer-shaped anthers, the ovary like a sponge, the lance-shaped leaves. However, Otte has a very different scenario in mind. The flower's "extravagant" blossoms make him think of a "Creole beauty." "Far from the guilt-inducing" imagery of the Catholic version, he writes, we should read into the passionflower's elaborateness "more exalting passions." He describes the blossoms as an "intimate and richly-endowed emblem of the female body."

Then, blithely ignoring the peril of all-too-human analogies, he conjures up the plant's tropical origin, its luxuriant colors. "You fancy a Creole immigrant who remains multicolored in her attractions, full of voluptuousness and moodiness, rich with bright hues, open in shadow, in sunlight, with the combined blues of sky and sea . . ." Yet despite the profuseness of its attractions, the passionflower is practically without scent. Compared to other flowers, it draws few or no insects: "those delicate creatures, made for pollination, are, so to speak, led by their nose". Otte concludes that the flower's lack of odor is a strategy, "perhaps because insects seem to it at once too busy, metallic, indigent, interested, servile and cold . . . Above all, they are deficient in fantasy, in sensorial lushness, in a subtle sense of fun and festivity. With its Creole moods, the passionflower believes its allurements deserve other approaches; it destines itself to other select visitors."

Thus the odorless passionflower, according to Otte, luxuriating mainly in its color, expects more substantial and thrilling “suitors.” The latter wait and keep watch and chatter elsewhere in the garden. The “light-hearted, bustling, and gluttonous” activity of birds may recall the “exuberance” of the plants’ ancestry. The flowers “seduce their visitors with a nectar gulped down to the verge of drunkenness,” nectar that glistens deep in a vessel protected by the filaments tucked safely to one side of the ovary. Their pollination is thus an almost accidental by-product of birds sipping their “splendid intimacy.”

Michael Taylor

God's Envoy was first published in the Spring 2022 print issue of *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Sholeh Wolpé is an Iranian-American poet and playwright. Her latest book is *Abacus of Loss – A Memoir in Verse*. She lives in Los Angeles and Barcelona. Excerpts from her translation of the twelfth-century Persian poem *The Conference of the Birds* will be forthcoming here in the future.

Birds 6



An Egg

Is anything as perfect as an egg
as smooth as water
or the underside of a wrist?
One end rounded like a folded knee
the other pointed
like a child's elbow
yet still as a sea stone
it lies in the palm
filled with life.
Is anything more perfect

than its ellipse?
The way it resists
jolts then cracks
to reveal a fledgling
struggling to breathe
light and the air
rocking the nest
from which it will fly
leaving fragments of shell
as reminders of absence?

It would take
millennia of patience
a home to return to spring after spring
journeys across deserts and seas
speeding swifter than a swallow's cries
in the setting sunlight
the stillness and silence
of an afternoon doorway
for a thing to be
as perfect as an egg.



The Conference of Birds

Several early poems refer to talking birds as if this were the most natural thing in the world. It seems obvious to the poet that the human ability to make words sing is analogous to the ability to sing among feathered creatures, and this capacity may be at the origin of all songs, all languages. In the second half of the twelfth century, around the time that the troubadour Arnaud Daniel wrote of hearing the twitter of birds speaking “in their Latin,” hundreds of miles from the hills of the Périgord a poet known as Attar composed, in the mountainous country of northeastern Persia, over 4,000 lines of an epic initially translated as *The Speech of Birds* and, more recently, as *The Conference of Birds*.

Attar gets his name from his father, an apothecary who distilled and sold rem-

edies and perfumes, including attar of roses. Attar, or essence, seems appropriate for a poet who wrote about the journey of the soul toward perfection. He was born in the walled town of Nishapur, where he grew up and evidently carried on his father’s trade, between studying at a theological school attached to the shrine of Imam Reza at Mashad and traveling – perhaps as far as Egypt and India. Little is known about him other than that he lived in troubled times. There is a tradition he was put to death when the Mongols sacked Nishapur in 1229. Of the many works he is credited with composing, some in prose, some in rhymed couplets, a number still speak to us today, especially his most famous poem, *Manteq al-Tair* (The Conference of Birds) which relates the Sufi aspirant’s progress along the arduous path to a mystical, selfless love.

The poem begins with a conclave of birds. Among them are a hoopoe, a finch, a partridge, a falcon, a nightingale, a peacock and a turtle-dove. The hoopoe, a beautiful bird who had the reputation in Antiquity of being a sort of philosopher-king, perhaps because of his crown-like crest, steps forward to speak. He is immediately perceived (by the poet if not by the birds themselves) as a master in the approach to enlightenment. In answer to their clamor, he tells them, in the most recent, most idiomatic and fluid translation, Sholeh Wolpé's *Conference of Birds* published in 2017*, that though they have the impression they have no leader he knows of one and wishes to set out on a search for him, but cannot do so alone.

*There is a leader for us, I tell you,
Who lives over there, in Mount Qaf.
Simorgh is that Beloved's name, the leader
of all birds,
Who is closer to us than our own blood
veins...*

But, the hoopoe warns, the voyage is long and perilous: "A hundred thousand veils of darkness and light" hang between them and the mythical Simorgh, a winged beast who figures in a number of classical Persian poems.

*Don't presume the road is short!
Many oceans and deserts lie between that
Beloved and us.
Only the brave can be Wayfarers in the
Path,
For the journey is long and the waters deep.*

The hoopoe concludes his speech by inviting his listeners to put away their selfish needs and join him on the quest. "Go ahead, be brave, discard your precious life."

*If you are willing to give away your worldly
existence,
The Beloved will reward you with Eternal
existence.*

Initially, the birds respond enthusiastically, but then, when they realize how hazardous the journey will be, they start to make excuses for not embarking on it. The nightingale, for example, declares that his love is so all-embracing that he cannot bring himself to abandon his beloved, the rose (a traditional metaphor for earthly love). For me, he says, “the love of a rose is quite enough.”

*My beloved's many folded petals calm my
heart.
How can I bereave myself of such joy?*

To which the hoopoe replies:

*Your love for the rose leaves you
torn and frayed by its thorns.
You are debased by it
as much as you are obsessed by it.
Yes, for now the face of a rose is beautiful,
but give it a week and look again.*

To each of the birds who voices an excuse for not going on the quest, the hoopoe answers with an argument that silences its fear or desire. The hawk is told that its love of power is vain, the finch that its trepidations are baseless, the peacock that the beauty it is so proud of is but a selfish delusion.

*Fanciful desires live in the house of the ego,
but the only home for sincerity is the heart.*

A small band of birds brave enough to face danger and the unknown sets out.

At this point the poem, which up until now had been modeled on a formal parliamentary or court-room debate, becomes the narrative of a multi-level allegorical journey. As the hoopoe explains, the seekers will need to pass through seven symbolic valleys (representing the seven stages of their quest). Among other things, they will have to abandon their striving for worldly love and reason; they will have to experience detachment, the realization that everything is connected, astonishment at the wondrousness of the universe and, ultimately, the annihilation of the sense of their own uniqueness as they merge into the whole.

*Desire all, be all, become all.
Choose everything.
Choose everything,*

the hoopoe insists. On the way, many of the birds are devoured by wild animals or succumb to their weakness—the account of their pilgrimage contains often humorous parables of

the failure of will—but in the end thirty of them stand on the shore of a lake in the waters of which they contemplate their reflection merging with an image of the Simorgh. This revelation is further strengthened by a word-play on the fact that they are thirty (*si*) birds (*morgh*), which sounds like a caricature of the not-so-hidden meaning of the poet's words but is actually an expression of the message toward which every line has been tending: the seeker and the goal of his quest are one and the same.

Each bird, each individual, is a spark of the whole he or she seeks.

Michael Taylor

*All quotes are from Sholeh Wolpé's translation, *The Conference of Birds*, W. W. Norton & Co., 2017.



Birds 7



Hedgerows

The blue sloes ripen. The hedgerows
on either side of the path come alive
with the syllables of squabbling
rustling, scuttling, the chatter of birds
scattering
so fast you can't tell
what they are.
Only the berries remain, rounder, darker
each day.



Summer Swifts

They burst
 from behind rooftops and trees
shrilling like kids round a pool.
They break
 the long afternoon and are gone
only to return the next instant.
They breast
 the wind
above whispering leaves and the dry grass
above the turtle doves
and their perpetual
complacencies and complaints

high
 and higher
above the moon
high as the clouds
idling in the fathomless blue
then down
diving into shadow.

Sometimes
two or three
sweep over the garden
as if this were their home.

When their cries grow louder
we look up
 wondering
what it might be like
to glide on the summer light.



Birds 8



Swallows Departing

All day they congregate
on overhead wires
twittering what cannot
be contained

information advice fear the exhilaration
of traveling away from where they
were hatched.

They will fly over forests turning
yellow and bronze over the brown
of ploughed fields.
They will fly over rivers.

They will skirt mountains. Through
layers of air look down on village
streets and upland streams twisting
like wounded snakes.

There will be the blankness of clouds
as huge as cities. There will be
storms and night.

They will know where to go
by stars by the moon and
the wind.

They will come to the coast and the
mystery of waves throwing themselves
on rocks as though they had always
been one.

They will come to an island where
their brains will brim with odors
never breathed before sea grass
and spindrift and the scent of
oleanders the fragrance of flowers
too unfamiliar to name.

They will sense the air
cooling toward evening.
They will hunt gnats in
slanting opal light.

There will be oases palm
fronds skimmed for a single
season.

In the emptiness they leave behind
we begin to recognize the voices
of other birds.





Sunt Quos

There are those
that flit from thicket to
thicket
those that inhabit
hedgerows
those that haunt the
shadows of leaves
and you see only after
they take wing
those that seem to know
where they are going
across the emptiness of
the fields
those that sing to the
clouds
those that circle above
everything else
and sweep down
leaving a bundle of
feathers on the ground.

Birds 9

Sharp, Liquid Syllables

Sharp liquid syllables
greet me as I push the gate
leaving the garden.

As I walk down the lane
I try to remember its song.



Egrets

For Irina

Scraps of paper in the field
blown by no wind
except the blankness
of their own windless
blankness.

Then one moves
and they could be written
on the edge of stillness.





A Shot

Past the chirping of small birds
a shot in the distance
perhaps it missed, perhaps it killed
perhaps the creature crept into a thicket
to wait for night.

The leaves keep falling
beyond
other leaves falling.



Pigeons

Silent
save for the creaking of their wings
they slide through the light
as if they had little faith
in our indifference.

All summer
they perched on the wires above our home
repeating the same three notes.

Now it's as if
it's a question of getting through
a season of gunshots
and sudden frost.





Fays

All day
they keep streaking sideways
shrieking.

Shouldn't we get used to them
not being used to us?





Crows

Even flying into the wind with eyes closed
and the smells of the earth
the sounds of living
reaching too little or too late
they know where they're going
another meadow
another field
another thicket
another stand of trees
from which they'll rise
filling space with restlessness and cries.

When they return
will they be the same birds?



Owls

The back of the moon doesn't
belong to us, it belongs to them.





Cranes

I hear them at night
calling in darkness and rain.

At first light
I'm going nowhere.
I lie in bed
listening
to dripping rooftiles.



A Heron

Stillness is everything.

Not even the creatures that live underwater
hear the murmur of its living
blood entering and exiting the heart
thoughts in the mind.

Then one by one
its wings extend
stretch
and lift

only to settle again
in stillness.



Birds 10

After Catullus

Little bird, little bird, how you delight
my not so little girl who guides you to her breast.
You nibble her little finger
and she shrieks as though you'd bitten--
only it's a ploy for solace.
If only I could play as earnestly as she does
and make light of my cares!
Miming shyness, the sly thing unties
the ribbons of her lovely shift.



The Eagle & the Magpie

After Jean de la Fontaine, FABLES, 1668

As unlike in character and dress
if not temperament and speech
an eagle and a magpie met by chance
in a spot the magpie didn't recognize.
The smaller bird tried not to shake.
The eagle who was feeling generous
offered to show him the way.
"If he who rules the universe
sometimes yawns, I who am known
as a king can do likewise," he said,
"Entertain me but not with flattery."
The chatterbox promptly obliged,
gassing about this and that
like Horace's bore finding fault
as though gossip really mattered
and hopping about made a difference.
The eagle soon had enough.
"Keep still," he yelled, "your drivell
is driving me round the bend!"
Whereupon he lifted his wings and
left.

Dining with the gods
can be a trial, especially
for the bowing and scraping kind
whose gift is for spite.



After Baudelaire's ALBATROSS

From time to time bored and idle sailors
catch an albatross, companion of crossings
that follow a ship on long lazy wings
as it glides over appalling chasms.

No sooner is it hurled on deck than
that king of the skies, awkward
and humiliated, drags huge white wings
like oars trailing pitifully at its side.

How clumsy that traveller of the sky!
How ugly, whose flight was sublime!
One fellow teases its beak with the stem of a pipe
another hops around, miming its inability to fly.

Poets are similar to those princes of the wind
who slip through storms and scoff at baleful constellations.
Exiled between mockery and incomprehension
they're crippled by the weight of their own wings.



After Colette: A MOROCCAN DAWN

Birds stuttering in the darkness. Thunder. Then nothing.

At first light
they start again.
Then another lull.
Then a nightingale
unfolds its song
like a scrap of starlight.

At sunrise
a swallow's cry
fills the day.
An oriole's syllables
wakes up a thrush.
The voices of passerines
are pebbles washed by the tides.
The kiss, kiss, kiss of sparrows
never cease.



At noon
a single dove
reiterates its endless, invisible
half-whispered tirade against the heat.



This is the Time

when daylight banks its embers behind the woods
and the moon, a universe away
hangs above the clouds, awaiting
darkness and the cohort of stars
and the birds of night that begin to fly
back to the caves of darkness

I am divided
between their calls and going home to a warm fire.



Birds in the Mist

This misty winter morning, birds
fill the half-hidden trees
everywhere at once like air, like light.
One can't count them.
The meadow is theirs. When the fog lifts
they'll be gone, calling from other boughs
perhaps not.
Why then do they seem so definite?

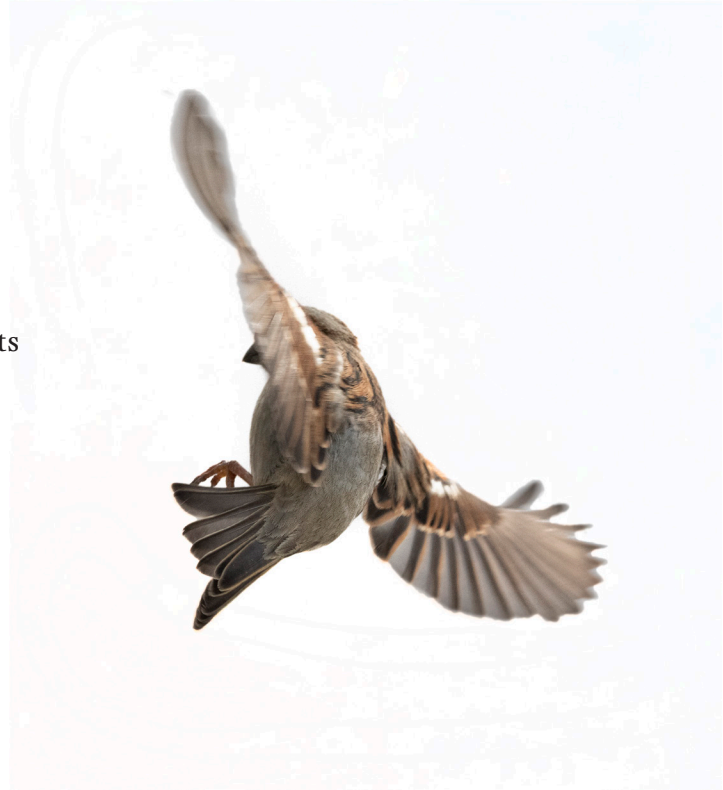
A Cry

Invisible behind the trees
a cry splits the morning sky
a warning or claim or call or simply
the delight of being alive in the first light

a far cry
from radio rantings and the ramblings of pundits
assuring us this is the end
but not quite.

Silence.
One almost hears
the air slipping through its wings
the stillness of leaves.

As the wind drops
the forest whispers.
A distant cry. Behind the trees
a hawk wheels in the morning sky.



Birds 11

A Peaceable Kingdom

Imagine a scene like this
viewed as
a glimpse of paradise
or at the very least
a page from an encyclopedia
at once educational and uplifting.
There is no obligation here
no tyrannical king
or if there is a monarch
it's that regal swan idling
at the center of
a rippleless semicircle of lake.
Observe how natural enemies are perched
side by side on boughs
reflected in the water
sparrows and a hawk
doves and blackbirds that belong in an orchard
and an eagle from the ridges
where no small creature ventures
each rendered
with such a passion for exactness
you could count the feathers on its wings.

Others wade or stand
tranquilly going about untroubled lives
painted birds on painted banks.
On the other side
a hill climbs
to a small house
releasing its thread of smoke
into a cloudless sky.
Perhaps the viewer inhabits that house
gazing at each particularity
each detail

and dreaming.

Birds 12

They don't see like us
and we don't see like them yet
our lives intersect

Sometimes we listen
and call their cries songs sometimes
we think we understand





Sometimes they dive as if
space were a wave
and they had no wings

Mostly we don't listen
seeing them only
as they flit past our lives



Perpendicularly
One of them skips up a tree
to where it looks down



How are things upside
down no different or
seen though other eyes

They loop in thin air
You imagine they're playing
Perhaps at times they

Angling its head first
one way then another
as if at another fate

really are mostly
words like deftness speed delight
are our attempt



to match words to wings
but are never feathers
to embrace the air



They sing in the wind
but their singing always escapes us
Words are so empty



Legs foremost one alights
among thorns no hand would touch
and flees in a flurry of white



through open spaces
crazily as though dodging
routine or a hawk

At times they fly straight
through a tangle of branches
other times they dart

Strange this silence
but when you listen
their calls fill the day like light



Head held high wings spread
it hovers in mid space as if
dancing in stillness

High winds this morning
pigeons gliding among gusts
small children playing

At times I glimpse them
but when I look once more they've gone
and I stand alone



Sometimes they're distant
sometimes they glance inside
before going on with their lives



Oh where do they go
when they go from our eyes
Slowly a branch sways