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The Bird-Watcher *by Patrick West*

There was very little light left to see by, and the single cloud on the horizon looked like the underside of a wing, when the main character of this story told his best friend that he no longer took any pleasure in thinking of himself as the man with the strangest hobby in the district. He knew there were many other bird-watchers here and there nearby, but none of them were like himself, for while there was no species of bird that the man I am writing about was not conceivably interested in, he took no delight in the birds of the air, but confined his observations to the birds of the ground. Despite knowing that every type of bird divides its life between the air and the ground, he talked like this—of ‘the birds of the air’ and ‘the birds of the ground’—because he never doubted that a bird on the wing becomes a different bird entirely when it alights on the earth.

The same bird could be a different bird from time to time, he thought. Even those birds described in every field guide as ground-dwelling birds were, in his view, truly ‘birds of the air’ on those few occasions when they did more than merely flit or jump in the course of their creeping over the earth. Likewise, birds of those species of swallows and martins that do as much as mate and sleep in the air would, in his opinion, sometimes pause long enough on the ground to be momentarily a bird other than the one they usually were.

Water-birds the bird-watcher gave no thought to, because there was no lasting water in the district of Victoria where he lived.

The best friend of the main character of this story, whom I will sometimes call the bird-watcher and sometimes simply the man, was pleased to hear what his companion of that late afternoon had to tell him. While the bird-watcher’s hobby was beautiful in a way, there was also the whiff about it, he thought, of something gone to seed. He hoped that, over time, the man would no longer direct his gaze immediately elsewhere at the chance sighting of a ‘bird of the air,’ nor feel his eyes widen, and himself begin to peer, when he was before a ‘bird of the ground.’ It was his earnest wish that such shows of aversion and watching would, in a while, be no more than memories for the main character of this story.

In the evening, when the sun had fully disappeared, the ground outside the bird-watcher’s house seemed to become heavier upon the core of the earth, and the rainy air filled rapidly with night-winds.

The next day, his morning walk overshadowed by a sky of sieved light, the man no longer paid attention only to the birds of the ground, at the level roughly of his feet, or in contact with something that came out of the earth or was at rest upon it. His eyes easily drifted upwards to the birds of the air. The night-winds had calmed with the dawn, until they were no more than breezes and gusts, but when he happened to face into them the man had the impression that he was feeling on his skin ‘the exciting winds of the future,’ and although he knew that this was nothing but a phrase that could have come from any newspaper, still he began to compose a

description of the landscape around him in which it was the most striking line. He felt as if this description were part of an imaginary letter that he was in the process of writing to a loved one thousands of miles away in a hot country.

The bird-watcher of this story had at no time given any thought to joining a club composed of people with interests similar to his own, but he had secretively submitted a number of brief articles on the birds of his native district to magazines with titles like *Country Life* and *The Natural World*, all of which were rejected by the editors of these publications, for reasons that they were always unwilling to share with a man whose writing they considered—fairly or unfairly—to be peculiar or slightly disturbed. So the bird-watcher's rejection slips inevitably consisted of words too few in number to ever be worth very much. When he received such notifications of his failure to be published, his immediate response was never one of disappointment or impatience; he always thought first of all of the readers of the magazine he had sent his article to, none of whom would now enjoy the experience—having allowed perchance the pages of their personal copy to fall open at random—of seeing the inner leaves containing his modest submission suddenly exposed to the light, and he thought of each one of them, with a sort of half-pleasure, as henceforward 'shadow-readers' of his words.

At the conclusion of his matutinal wanderings, with the appearance of the sky unchanged from before, the man turned in the doorway of his house and saw what he thought of as either an 'upwelling' or an 'upswelling' of birds, from the ground high into the air. Such was the impression this sight had upon him that as he entered fully into the house he nevertheless retained the image of the birds in his mind, like a sharp imprint upon a frame of film, as a distinct pattern of movement somewhere between an upwelling and an upswelling.

Knowing exactly what he wanted to do, and being careful not to disturb his wife as she continued to sleep, the man crossed the floor of their dining-room in a direction that would have eventually taken a walker leaving from the back steps of the house, or from any point nearby, to an area of the surrounding district where once, on another morning, the main character of this story had seen birds in their millions. He stopped before a low cabinet placed against the wall that divided the bedroom from the dining-room. Deposited in the cabinet were both the numerous drafts of the articles that he had at one time or another sent away to magazines with titles which tried to suggest an affinity with the things of nature, and also the various rough notes that he had made from time to time during his solitary expeditions in search of the birds of the ground.

His plan was neither to destroy, nor to discard, these pieces of paper, but rather to transport them all—still gathered together as they were inside the low cabinet—to a position flush against the wall of the house that on its outside received the worst of the roughest weather that the district ever had to withstand, which was the south wall, the hard winds of every season coming always from that direction. And in the last moments before his wife awoke this was what he did. Greeting her, he felt that something was now clearer in himself; more precisely, as the two of them embraced—at what was still really the beginning of the day—he realized that a certain emotion blurred in his heart had been replaced by a well-defined image in his mind.

It was a Sunday: the last regular prayer-day of the nineteenth century.

At about the same time as the bird-watcher and his wife were embracing, in a modest building of wood nearby, a group of young adults was praying for the state of the Church in India. These men and women sometimes meditated in a religious way when they were by themselves, but they all believed that those prayers were most effective that were first of all revealed before a small gathering of like-minded people. In a low voice, one man or woman would ask permission of the others to 'present a prayer'—this was the phrase they had come to use, almost without having to think about it—after which all the young adults assembled in the modest building of one room would, for a minute or several minutes, pray silently on the concerning subject their friend had introduced.

A week passed by, of days and skies.

On the following Sunday, which was both the first Sunday of the new century and the first day of another year, three of the young adults who liked to pray together, while sometimes having by force of circumstance to pray alone, were walking back to their homes—from the same modest building of white-painted wood—when they were trapped by a rushing train, tried to escape, panicked, and in a narrow gorge of the earth were lost to the world, under a sky of herring-bone cloud. On the morning of their death, they had spent several minutes praying, along with several others, for the people of Russia, where one-and-a-half winters before a terrible famine had begun, and where the air was so cold that sometimes birds from the shock dropped out of the sky. When they heard the news of what had befallen their prayer companions, the other young adults—as if their hungry minds were flocking together where seed had been scattered on snow—thought immediately of either three doves, or of three individuals of another species of holy bird, rising slowly into the air, each cruelly un-nested from the starving earth.

Happening to be one of the first on the scene, an old woman of the district had looked briefly to where there is no land, and muttered upwardly that the victims' experience of the new century was too brief, not yet aware that in a way it was an experience even briefer than she thought it to be, for it was only later to become known generally that all three of the young adults had been in bed when midnight came (early as their prayer meeting was to be held in the morning) which meant that for a good part of their lives in the hitherto-unknown century they had been asleep, their lives closed off to everything but dreams. The parents and the friends of the deceased, passing feelings through thought, took some comfort from this idea, although a few others not as intimate entertained a more dire interpretation: sleep being so close to death anyway, these people said to each other, so little removed from it, the three young adults would henceforward be enduring something like 'shadow-lives', for the length of the natural course of a person's life, far into the twentieth century.

The bird-watching character of this story went to the site of the accident within minutes of hearing about it, from a man with a voice full of tears. He wanted to see what could have so distracted the driver of the train in the landscape that, as he had babbled in his grief, he did not even see the three people caught between the railway tracks, at an equal distance from each end of the gorge, until he was almost upon

them. Until it was far too late to stop. On his way there, the bird-watcher was again much affected by the strange movements of the air, but on this occasion he thought of writing no letter to a loved one thousands of miles away in a hot country, but pretended instead that he was simply shouting a message to his wife—directly across the Victorian land of his district—through air thick with all manner of birds.

He spent several hours in the vicinity of the gorge, walking from one spot to another, taking notice of this and that, seeking to understand the deaths of three people whom he had not previously known. But when he finally had to leave, towards nightfall, he was no clearer about the circumstances of the accident than before, and as he walked back to his house he felt that even the ground under his feet was suffering pain as he passed over it.

Many skies looked down on the passage of time.

A couple of days later, the Victorian bird-watcher read with mounting interest one of the few articles in the local newspaper that was about neither the official celebrations for the ‘turn of the century,’ nor the tragic death on New Year’s Day of the three young adults described as active members of a local church group. The central figure in this article was a bird-watcher from the most populous city at the top of the east coast of India. The article included the text of a telegram that this bird-watcher had sent from the port city of Fremantle in Western Australia—where he had arrived on the morning of the first day of the twentieth century—to the president of a bird-watching society in the port city of Calcutta, from which he had departed over six weeks earlier, around the middle of November.

The bird-watcher had written in the telegram that when his ship was just out of sight of the bluish coast of India, a crow of the same type as those most common in his native district, a place far to the west of Calcutta, had quietly alighted on the rearmost deck. There to settle itself down. As the ship crept over oceanic lines of latitude and longitude, the bird-watcher had been able to watch this crow day after day: wondering almost until the very end when it was going to suddenly stretch its wings, and fly back over the water to India; wondering during which of his morning promenades he would notice it missing.

He admitted in the telegram that on several occasions he had found it hard to resist the temptation to encourage the bird, with scraps of food and a container of fresh water, to remain aboard the ship.

With less than an hour to go before he and his fellow passengers were due to disembark at the port city of Fremantle, the bird-watcher had watched the crow jump into the air, without any thought (what imaginings!) of India, wheel above the rearmost deck once or twice, and start to fly ahead of the steaming vessel, over the tip of what he referred to as its elegant prow. Thus, and here the telegram concluded with only the merest hint of triumph, the traveller from Calcutta was able to report the existence in Australia of a species of bird not previously recorded in that country: the Indian Crow (‘*Corvus splendens*’).

In its final paragraphs, the article went on to say that, despite their best efforts, none of the Fremantle bird-watchers had been able to identify the bird from across the ocean, probably because—as even the man recently arrived from India might have admitted—it was virtually indistinguishable in both its appearance and its behaviour from a very common species of Australian crow. Different birds must

have been seen as the same bird, mused the main character of this story. But this thought did not haunt him. What the person that I have sometimes called the bird-watcher, and sometimes simply the man, pondered over long after he had finished reading the article in his local newspaper—what stayed fixed in his mind like a hovering bird trapped at the end of a cave—was the thought of the thrilling feelings that the bird-watcher from India must have experienced as he watched the Indian Crow, with strong and regular strokes of its black wings, fly across the narrow strip of salty water between ship and shore, until it was well and truly over ground that was Australian.

The beginning of the twentieth century coincided with the onset in Victoria of a stretch of unsettled weather the like of which the main character of this story had never experienced before. Storm after storm came from the direction of India, hung overhead for an hour, then disappeared into the east. The very air felt unsafe. The south wall of the bird-watcher's house was plastered one morning with sodden feathers of the Forty-Spotted Pardalote (usual range: Tasmania and King Island).

The main character of this story began to dream at night of the same Indian Crow that he had read about in the article in his local newspaper. Sometime during the hours before the bird-watcher woke, invariably he saw it, dropping through the base of one of the frequent summer storms, plummeting to pause on the land only for an instant, a thing momentarily still, which next went running through the rain until it reached the darkness at the edge of the bird-watcher's dream, where it disappeared, wings never more than half folded, leaving a trail of marks in the wet earth like those of a bird of the ground.

With the eventual return of calm weather, his dream of the Indian Crow began to come back to the bird-watcher more and more infrequently. When he was almost an old man, years and years later, he realized that it had finally left him forever, at about which point he decided that he would—until the day of his death—act just as a man should who had once secretly enjoyed having the strangest hobby in the Victorian district of his birth, and for the rest of his long life he paid no more attention to the birds of anywhere at all.

Patrick West is a Senior Lecturer in Writing at Deakin University. His research interests include: moving image texts; scriptwriting; literary journalism; and creativity. Patrick is also the Reviews Editor of *TEXT: The Electronic Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs*. He is widely published in academic, creative non-fiction and fiction genres, has received many awards for his short fiction, and has a PhD on the work of Julia Kristeva from The University of Melbourne.