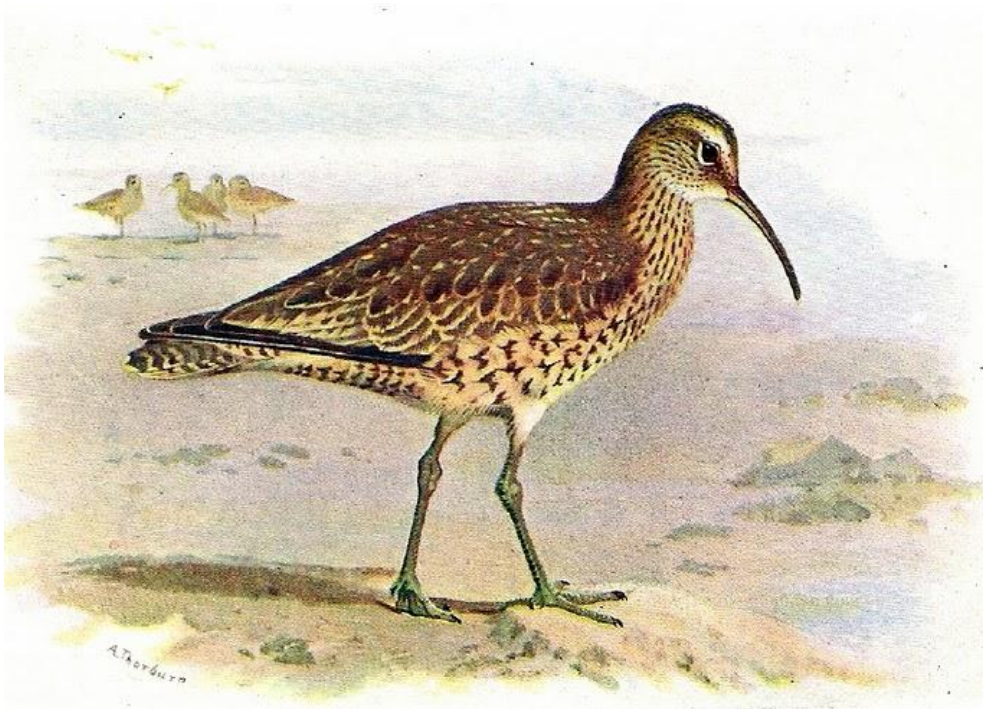


APRIL DOGS



Lorna Smithers

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Cover image Eskimo Curlew by Archibald Thornburn (1860 – 1935),
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'Listen to the call of the water-birds with their loud cries'
Myrddin Wyllt

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Cue

Lapwings
rising and falling
like someone else's
hands clapping

applause spilling

over isles of dream
from black-and-white fingers.
Come shamans come rain-bringers
with your wavy black crests:
pee-wit, wit-wit, eeze-wit.

Come shower us with *pews!*

Come *zee-wit* us awake!

Teach us the *wit-eeze*
of your language,

each of these words
a lap a lapping sound
of black-and-white wings -
a clap in your song.

Widgeon Whirl

Self-willed
whistling enchanters
wild pied-pipers in fool's clothes
with steam-punk hair
red-headed jokers

who ate a rainbow.

Who spin like sticks
whirl in whirlpools.

How did you get into
my washing machine

at 6am loud and shrill

with odd gloves socks
that old torn red scarf?

Why did you tumble
into my arms a frightened
flutter and leave me a-whirl
with a small widgeon-
shaped keyring?

April Dog

'*Cwn Ebrill*, "April Dogs," is a name given in some districts to the curlews, especially when their cries are heard at night in early spring.'

Welsh Custom and Folklore

His cry bubbles up from the river
a beautiful lonely thing.
Lost depths
well.

A bird wanders toward sunset.
The shadow of his beak
grazes mudflats
far away.

There's a look in his eye.
A recalling.
Was there a time
when we were not alone?

The next night he's beside me
licking my hand.

The next night I find out
what he is.

In the Event of an Enemy Landing

Ribble Estuary, Longton, 1915

A violent sky
intimidates plains of silent wheat
not swaying with the run of fox or rabbit.

A pair of lapwings turn like biplanes their *pewit*
mixing with warnings of skylarks.

A helmeted heron departs from the ditch,
black stripe on white face, leaving
a parachute behind him.

The distant wheat moves in sinister partings:
gunpoints, elbow by elbow crawlings, glinting hats
like tortoiseshells, highly polished as grenades.

I fear to climb the stile - a scraggy farm child silhouette
targeted and shot down against the backdrop
of my family's cows and sheep.

I stand paralysed
until the ginger flash of a vixen's brush
reveals the hedge-gap I rend myself through,
run until my lungs must burst beat upon
the sturdy door of our farmhouse:

"Mum! Dad! I've seen..."

They say they never found the enemy,
now war is over, keep telling me
everything will be alright.

Yet every night I lie paralysed

as wheat folds then crumples
and soldiers emerge, khakhied waxworks,
guns pointing at their enemy.

Sand Martin on the Radio

'U.S. Drops Mother of All Bombs on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan'
New York Times, April 13th 2017

There's a sand martin on the radio
with a fly in her mouth
beside the river

chattering non-stop like a train

before she swoops white-fronted
into a sandy tunnel

to feed children
clutching teddies in dark caves.

I think of a journalist
commenting on a distant war,
the smattering of gun-fire
like a broken signal

before the boom:

over and out.

Descartes was not a Sparrowhawk

It's dead on the lawn - abdomen scraped raw,
emptied of all but a clutch of guts
and shining red jewel
I can't identify.

My lessons
in vivisection
were limited to games
of Operation -
man a machine
with plastic organs
and no soul whose nose flashed
red with a fearsome
buzzing noise
and electric shock
when I got it wrong.

Kidney, liver, spleen?
I'm really not sure.

I ID the deceased
by the scruff
of brown feathers
and single spindly claw,

bury what's left at the bottom of our garden.

Drawn back
to the site of the kill
I see Descartes as a ruthless bird
killing and glutting without satisfaction,
feeling nothing as his victims scream,
tasting nothing, hearing nothing
but creaking machinery

whilst the hawk
of his soul circles
overhead trying
to call him back

into the chest
of a sparrow.

Goose Flesh

They examine my flesh
to predict the severity of winter.

From the bumps on my forearm
a long lane of traffic stuck in snow.

From my forehead a blizzard
bending trees arms.

From the purple pimples of my thighs
stubble buried in snowy fields.

My eyes are deep frozen lakes,
pupils filled with fish.

Their measurements will be out:

I know it in my goose-skin,
the holler of my brothers and sisters

back from Iceland shouting
"It's getting warmer!"

as I grow cold on the table
in their underground scientific room.

Farewell to a Barnacle Goose

I wish I'd found you at the water's edge,
a barnacle hanging from driftwood
at first like gum,

dark beak kissing the water
before with an eruption of feathers
you burst from your shell fully-formed,

rose up with a wing-beat: handsome goose!

I didn't want to know about the melting ice,
the polar bear's dismal hunger
for your young

so far north I cannot wrap you
in the folklore of this island's shores,
save you from the world's white swiping paw.

Handsome goose as you rise with a wing-beat

I pray for your return
with your black and white covey,
hanging like barnacles against grey skies

with musical triumph back from Svalbard
carrying the new and hopeful story
I long to hear.

On a Swan's Wing

For Sacha Dench

I.

She flies on a single swan's wing,
engine thrumming in her head,
swan's heart beating

like the hammer in Arctic ice
driving wing-beats southward
southward

down flight-ways
over the Rakovie Lakes,
the Taiga, the Gulf of Finland,

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania,
Slonsk National Park in Poland,
Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands,

Belgium, France, across the foaming
Channel to the White Cliffs,
back to Slimbridge,

the mudflats of the Severn
to dip her beak into
home sands.

II.

They say that shaman fly
in bird form,
transform to seek answers,

stake their souls against the winds
of industrialisation,

brave the guns,

return exhausted
with shattered pieces
of the world-soul.

III.

Nine Bewick's swans were tagged,
told apart by the patterns
on their beaks:

Butters, Charlotte, Daisy Clark,
Eileen, Leho, Hope, Maisie,
Pola, Zolotitsa.

We are gathering the pixels
of their data,
trying to assemble a picture.

A story is forming in the electric night
like when the first bacteria
birthed life:

wetlands shrinking like ice caps,
swans plummeting
from the sky,

wings snapped on powerlines,
lead-filled swans
dying.

IV.

She says our destinies are intertwined,
hang upon a swan's wing.
She flies away

at the end of the rite
to join the swans returning
to the Arctic at the call of spring.

A Seaweed Charm

to cross the treacherous path.

You told me
I could walk on quicksand
and be safe.

As the lights go down
at Heysham

I stand alone
twisting fronds
through my fingers
counting spiralling
black beads.

An oyster catcher walks
where ghosts walk.

I carry a cockle shell
on my back.

I cannot ease my burden
because the tides
are washing
in.

Your charm
will keep me safe tonight
when I walk on quicksand
though I cannot leave
this place.

Sea Monument

Far out to sea
where waves crash
over the Ocean Boulevard
235ft of blue steel girders
support the red track
climbing, climbing
to the peak.

On still nights
the click of the chain
and thirty mighty screams
vanishing into the sea
can be heard by
good ears
as ghosts sail
blue and red cars,
faces drawn back
by 80mph winds.

It's Grade I listed
but we're not allowed
to use the unstable
viewing point.

Forsaking the billboard
I climb across the rocks

when I need soul flight,
when I need to scream.

Seahorse

When we met you were pregnant.

You could not conceal it from me:
I who could not give birth
and you a man
with a belly full of little seahorses.

You let me rest my hand on your abdomen,
through your navel feed them

plankton and tiny fish
until the time came
to take them down to the sea.

I held your hand as you cried out
as they broke your waters,

swam away perfect,
upright with flippers,
curved tails, dorsal fins, already
hypocampii: 'horse-like sea-monsters'.

They often visit me but I never saw you again.

Big Wheel

A woman in a long skirt with a knapsack
walks the beach as the big wheel turns
and a seaside town prepares
to fall into the sea.

I am lifted a hundred metres.
Gulls pull chips from my newspaper hands.

Waves crash and crash
against the pier against plastic faces
awakening a fun fair I do not recognise.

I drop the chips through newspaper fingers.
Wings beat about my head.

My co-walker throws down her knapsack,
lets down her hair, kicks off her shoes,
tucks her skirt into her knickers
and heads for the sea.

I fly with the scream of a gull,
crashing into windows of stuffed toys,
claws, yellow aliens, slot machines,
crying over the chink of coins
and gaming chips

where a psychic stares into her crystal ball.

“Stop! Don’t go without me! Don’t forget your soul!”

Vanguard

'Most of the 150 crew never know where they are or where they have been'

Trident Nuclear Programme

You are lost at sea
wondering whether to push the button.

The radio went down four hours ago.
You did not hear the end
of *The Archers*.

No message was relayed
from Whitehall.

You feared the worst.

They took the keys to the safe,
gave you the Letter of Last Resort.

You read with captive eyes
the decision is yours:

to fire from who knows where
at who knows what,

never to return from anywhere,
to be forever lost.

You are not lost yet.

I am calling you back to Loch Long.

Divination with Eel

'Ffynnon Elaeth...was regarded as having healing qualities and providing a method of divination. A nearby priest would interpret the behaviour and activities of an eel kept in the well; on some occasions, the eel would remain out of sight and those seeking answers would have to wait for its re-emergence.'

Wikipedia

At Elaeth's Well I wait with the patience
of a saint until in the deep something stirs -
a little prophet who is one long muscle,

each umbral undulation - thrash, wiggle,
twitch, relating to the cardinal directions;
Gogledd, Dwyrain, De, Gorllewin, movements
clochwedd, gwrthlochwedd, fyny, lawr.

How long has it been there? What does it feel?
What does it see and is it lonely without its family?
Does it long to ride the gyre to the Sargasso Sea?
What is it like to live alone in the dark feeding
on prophecies and offerings of pilgrims?

My eyes fill up with lectocephali – glass eels.

Something moves within me as the prophet
disappears – *lawr, lawr, lawr* – into the deep.

Bittern Goes Shopping

A distinguished gentleman
pushes his trolley from the reeds.
What will he pick from the aisles?
Fish wrapped in cellophane?
Jellied eels? Will he turn
up his nose at plastics,
retreat into the invisible chamber
where he plays the boom-box of his ancestors?
How can we entice him back into existence?
Bring back his hidden magic?
He walks behind my binoculars
tutting at shrinkwrap and calorie counts.
Out on the lake, maybe, just maybe,
he'll dive for a lively fish.

Landfill oh landfill

They're digging a mass grave for our ancient dead,

lining it with a polymeric geomembrane,
linear low density polyethylene;

a shroud woven from
the remnants of the Old Ones

like a cell membrane
separating packed engineered clay
from death and decay.

The pipes for the leachate are being fitted.

I can smell it already, taste it percolating on the tip of my tongue.

I am not an eater of the dead but oh they will come!

Escorts of gulls following the funeral trucks
not unlike battlefield scavengers,
white-winged Valkyrie,

as the burials begin,

track-type tractors spreading the waste with shovel blades
and landfill compactors with steely teeth
on wheel drums pass, pass, passing
again and again.

I will speak a blessing over the winding sheet of each daily cell.

I will sit and weep then listen as my tears seep down
to join the slow work of glycolysis,
hydrolysis, acetogenesis,

methanogenesis.

Landfill oh landfill for forty years I will mourn.
Landfill oh landfill for forty years I will celebrate -

are we not all proteins, lipids, carbohydrates,
to be broken, buried, reincarnated
in some bright new age?

Potion

I need a potion
much stronger than the one
Alice saw the label 'DRINK ME' on.

I need to shrink much smaller than ten inches
because we don't use inches any more.

I need to shrink into micrometres
to speak with the microbes
who came to life 3.5
billion years ago

because they have all the secrets
you scan the Petri dishes for.

I have nothing to trade but desperation,
the lines on my palm as we make this handshake.

We both have the feeling of predestiny
when our thumb-whorls
brush like lipids.

I do not mind the acidic taste.
I have been drinking from test tubes for a while.

Hermes Trismegistus, Albertus Magnus, Nicholas Flamel,
do not have the answers for this day and age,

but it's possible these strands of RNA,
like Rapunzel's hair,
might lead to something,
unspiral my being
down those plaited ladders to where
spheres, rods, spirals, plates, writhe like snakes.

I don't know if we will meet again
or whether you will recognise me so small

(I assume this potion, like the rest, is non-reversible?).

If you live to see your grandchildren grow up
assume I have been successful

(if not some part of us will meet again
in this earth's chemistry eternal).

Let us make a toast to

methanosarcina bakeri
methanobrevibacter smithii
methanoculleus marisnigri
methanococcus maripaludis
methanosarcina acetivorans...

You grow large as I spiral small.

The Island of Lost Faith

I awake tasting salt. My lips are dry from fasting
on sea foam, sea weed, barnacles, barnacle geese on a Friday.

I count the days on an abacus clicking by like a rosary.
I recite the days of the week like the names of forgotten gods.

Although the end of a world has passed the sun continues
to rise in the east over a plain of plastic water bottles

and set in the west between the hills of waste.
The winged ones go between bringing back

those who lost faith in shrouds of freshly ironed lab coats
with grave goods – safety goggles, pipettes, electron microscopes.

In silence with great solemnity I weigh their organs on a set
of kitchen scales preferring to use pounds and ounces

because it reminds me of the old ways.
I preserve them in brine in tupperware boxes,

snapping each lid shut with a prayer and stick-on label.
No-one told me how heavy a human heart is or how light the soul.

The bodily fluids I drain into separate bottles,
the flesh to the birds, the bones I pack into ice cream tubs

carefully labelled or grind down to join the microplastics.
The skulls we use as drinking vessels when we're out of cups.

How did we come to this? I wonder on the days when I recall
how I was shot like an albatross and hung on the neck

of the figurehead of the ship of reason sailing to

its death over an ocean growing saltier than my unshed tears

rising to flood the world. Ahoy! Ahoy there! So many ships
heading to the same place – so many dead albatrosses.

We keep our temple by arranging the skulls and classroom skeletons
amongst Florence flasks, centrifuges, light the bunsen burners

with words of prayer, reciting Newton's laws of motion,
Ohm's law, Maxwell's equations, keeping quiet

about relativity, chaos theory, the discovery of dark matter.
Here we keep our faith, the old way, forever and ever.

Kingfisher in Flight

For Brian Taylor

An unexpected kingfisher.

I might not have been there
in the hide if it wasn't for you,
your teachings on the agency of birds,
the transformations of souls,
auspices of sapphire-blue.

The sad news was unexpected too.

It took me back to our brief meetings:
how you always wore binoculars,
showed me my first goosander.

I thought I'd never see a kingfisher
let alone a halcyon wonder so close
whistling from branch to branch.

You'd have called it 'a showing'.

I emailed you to share the news.

Another email flash from the blue
jolts me back to your careful records
on *alcedo atthis* and 'the best views'.
You wrote of death with such beauty
citing Ovid's resurrection of Alcyone:

a kingfisher in flight - 'a departing light'.

Coots on a Misty Lake

Foghorn voices call from little ships
across the foggy sea.

I am sinking.

Men with white ties in business suits
approach to shake my hand.

*I drop my briefcase,
my letter of consent.*

Scarecrows in barren fields
point in all directions.

I cannot find my way.

How did I get so lost?

*Where are the birds,
my coat of feathers?*

Island of the Dancing Cranes

On the island of the dancing cranes
where the light never fades
on the shore

you don't need to pretend
to be happy.

You don't need to pretend
any more.

Let your life be a pirouette.
Let the tender ounce
of your soul

leap, pivot, untwist.

In the abyss of your chest
find the red sun of joy
and bellow!

Here you can be happy.

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