

Stories From the Wing



By

Matthew James Friday

To my wife Jill who gives me wings.

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1. Spring

The Kestrel

She appears born of the Elbe,
river wings, eyes curled on
currents, commented on by
elderly castles, vineyards.

Ignoring cyclists and walkers,
she bobs up to the height
of her performance, then fans
the air, wafting amazement

out of molecules, a quantum
flyer she is in two places at once
Eyes scanning for an edible
audience, she applauds herself

with light-speed appreciative
beats, so even the lofty eagles
and speeding show-off falcons
have to nod beaks, cup claws.

The Roadside Hawk

Little Emperor of human cut hills
posing on wooden posts, back turned
away in contempt from the road

with a wood-brown body carved
out of G-forces, flecks of flint,
the hooks at the end of the horizon,

yellow eyeing the bulbing fields,
furry woods shivering in mouse skulls
curving up into the cloudy cranium.

For one daggered second, she is frozen
stiff, tensing for the tug of tendons.
We drive away on the Ides of March.

On Course

Blown way off course
a white butterfly buffets low
over the buttery sea, soupy
green with plankton. Heading east,
from Phuket to the crocodile coast of
hill ridges and smirking sandy jaws.

Blown way off course
this little Odysseus struggles
to survive each gust of wind,
bouncing on a string of wavy fate,
flapping so hard Amelia Earhart
would tip her wings and wish her luck.

Blown way off course
beyond the *why* or the *where from?*
Just one false flap would make
her exotic fish food. How
she got here is irrelevant now;
only survive the sea and find a flower.

Panak Island Performance

Nothing tacky about this tourist trap:
at Panak island the tour guide has the whole boat
clapping and singing to bait the red-backed
sea eagles. Suddenly they swoop down,
weave around the boat, diving each other
with quickening tugs of quick-hook wings,
white heads and the dark red backs,
dark like congealed fish blood. Taught by swifts,
these nimble eagles eat up every space
around the boat, showing insect acrobatics,
cutting across and under each other,
skidding down to claw at the wave tops,
at scraps, the glimmery dream of a fish.
One bold eagle comes along side the boat
keeping pace with my face, a bulging side-eye
rolling my whole world in its view, suddenly
turning towards me, dragging its claws through
my memory until I was applauding with bloody
hands. A rare visitor glided down to see
all the fuss: a white breasted sea eagle,
a huge clot of cloudy feathers and imperial
calmness. But soon blurred by the throng
of lessor raptors gobbling up gasps, and then
just a glimpse of white between red feathers,
talons gripping fresh, flapping memories.

Singing Birds

Wake up early in Karlovy Vary,
to a surprise: the Dawn Chorus,
a daily voice from my childhood
of climbing trees, wandering woods,
holiday sun stretching into inky infinity,
unheard for several deaf years. Why?

Last two springs spent in Guangzhou,
living twenty stories high in a concrete tree.
The only birds were scraping sparrows
scavenging off balconies, splattered pavements,
little arguing tweets barely audible over
honking cars, screeching bars, pecking vendors.

In the haze-hugged parks the birdsong
piped in through recordings hidden
in shrubbery, warbling spies whispering
musical pretense. The *Thought Crime*
to question Nature's digitalization -
traditional music added as anesthetic.

Sometimes songbirds found in sealed cages
down side streets, sing-song in prison,
not enough room to open their wings,
banging bones across the rusting bars,
the percussion of the pent-up, from street
to the high-rise penthouses, all imprisoned.

Now free of the bars I listen, drift to sleep,
wash back up to wakefulness and shudder
with sadness, a released inmate wondering,
thoughts from Czech Republic to China
back to boyhood sitting in oak trees,
singing birds.

The Woodpecker

Awake early, dreams swirling
in the weak yellow light.

A drumming sound, brief
but urgent, switched on and off

like Morse code by a prisoner
tapping out spring's release

from wood capped by compacted
snow and ice, ponds glazed

over, ducks scuffling the edges.
I am in the Czech Republic but

a hole opens in the trunk of time
I am a boy again, in bed in Epsom

listening to the woodpeckers
wondering what secrets were sleeping.

The Nuthatch

After thirty years of blurs
doubted by noisy blue tits,
pencil hovering over the page

of my RSPB Book of Birds,
boyhood never migrating
despite gathering crows,

I see you: an inverted
triangle on the tree trunk
in Dresden's *Grosser Garten*.

Pastel blue back by Monet,
belly of creamy chestnuts,
beak borrowed from wood-

peckers, you probe the trunk,
relegated to sinew secrets;
branches belong to songbirds.

You listen for threats, Mum
calling time on summer,
autumn burning every leaf.

Suddenly you flit down to my
squatting trunk, hopping closer,
sideways, staring up at me, eyeball

centre of black Milky Way stripe.
The boy shivers with excitement.
Teach me the language of wings.

Unsure, you forage, tasting
wafer thin leaf snacks, then
shoot off to the opposite tree,

the next pillar in your creation.

You bolt back and forth, squeaking
lessons in blue electron language,

hanging upside down, circling
through time, gravity an after-
thought, until gone in a bluish,

teary raindrop. You leave me
aged ten, RSPB book quivering.
Then Mum calls time for tea.

Insect Destiny

Butterflies on
invisible Nazca lines
drawn by Insect Destiny
or just the wind,
searching, drinking, mating, dying.
Squint and imagine
lacy electric lines
drawn out in the daylight
by painted wings.

The Kingfisher

Perched on a reed
surely too thin to bare
weight, it bobs back
and forth, blue punctuation
in the sentence of wind.
But that staring head
and rapier bill are full
stops while body bobs
between question and
silvery exclamations
sighted in the water below
where paragraphs
are drawn from instinct.

Heron Haiku

Heron stalks the river,
Z legs, beak ready to stab,
spell the end for fish.

God Found

I feel a miniscule movement
on my hand. A tiny fly,
has landed on me. Its legs so fine
they are lines drawn in light.
Here is God on my palm,
probing my Life Line - a trench
to Him. The faint gust of my breath
like mustard gas. God staggers

for grip as I turn my hand,
testing Him. God walks on unafraid,
crossing the No Man's Land
to my Fertility Line, mounting
the contours, rising and falling
in the folds of my skin. I move
my hands together in prayer.
God gets caught in my tiny hairs.
I blow hard. God clings
for a moment. Then falls. See-
through wings panic. In a blink
God is gone.

Fledgling, Alive

Squawking feathery scruff of life
left for dog toy or fox food
on the barren London pavement.

I am an inspired Buddha
leaning down with my divine hands
cupping into an uneasy U,
afraid I will be pecked. Fledgling flutters

forward, escaping so my U
becomes a loving O and encloses
the tiny huff. Raise it up, up

its wings flap but flight fails it.
The beatings wings barely a heart beat
in my hands. Now what to do?

A hedge must be its new home.
It hops into the hidden innards,
to shiver through what's left of its life.

Fledgling, Dead

We find the fledgeling flattened
on the mid-May city park path.

Electric blue feathers shock us
more than the red guts spilt

around curled up claws.
Beak agape in tongued protest,

the ground unwilling to cushion
it's fluttering first leap in life.

Above, the two parents sing
the song of unfulfilled nests.

Fallen Nest

It lay in the driveway for days:
a fallen wooden halo. At first
I thought it a matted filth padded
in by the mid-week night storm.

On closer inspection, I'm drawn
into the closely woven twigs,
sinews of months, two beaks
bent to the same loving task.

We asked the sky if He had seen
who threw down this wreath -
discarded Nature's gift. The sky
spoke only in blue indifferences.

We asked the trees if They had seen
who tossed away their crown, but
they mumbled woody apologies
unaware of fluttering thorn tragedies.

We asked the Earth if She had seen
who had cast away her efforts,
confused by the need for sacrifice.
But She held onto her garland

and a few days later, tidied it away
leaving us wondering where
a lost nest goes, thinking of the pair
in the tree having to start again.

April Evening on the River Exe

Faint white bulbs glide past,
collecting quietly, a crowd
of swans settling into the
evening's noble invisibility.

Quivering candle reflections
of window lights on the water,
the world closing its eyes,
blurring day-sharp boundaries

Black blurs unzip the cooling air:
furry coal bodies of bats, shadow
wings clasping the sun's frayed
edges, hunting the last heat.

A Swan on a Pond in the Evening

A swan on a pond in the evening,
wriggling into itself, ringing
around and around, neck like a noose
around the bright white day, head
burrowing backwards into black
folds of its back. Can't stand the dark;
such a big bird scared: so much
cold water, night-noises, nothing.

The Wren

My parents whisper a story
of a secretive wren in their back-garden
that has built her ideal nest
early
 and now awaits her mate.

Every day she flutters
up to the telephone wire
and sings, trembling and loud:
a sound from beyond her little brown body,

reminding the world she was once queen
riding on the back of an eagle.
Now she sings for her king.
A short distance – for eagles –

to the common woods full of wrens,
singing and feasting; hushed mating
in the undergrowth. To my parent's
garden wren it is a flight beyond

her stubby wings. So instead she sings
alone on the wire; tweaks her crown
and, at night, snuggles inside to dream
of cheating eagles and laying eggs.

The Mandarin Duck

As if Kandinsky wanted to draw a bird
made out of orange rind, fortune cookies,
the lines of Chinese calligraphy pens,
bars of snow, shyness of a new Geisha,
boldness of the Great Wall, freshly built.

Hidden amongst limp, dripping bracken
bare silver birch trees, the winter swamp
ponds of Epsom Common - an exotic jewel,
the male Mandarin outrageously dressed,
the Dandy of damp British woods, dainty

movements on the water, keeping an eye
on the female, herself an abstract display
of browns, creams, a strike of white. Such
a pair should be strutting Lord and Lady.
They take cover in their own muffled myth.

I Missed the Moment A Hero Died

Under the hot Greek Sun I watch a hero dying.

For a few seconds the wasp seems fine, Hercules
swaggering around the sun-drenched patio stone
as if the sun and the stone were afraid of his sting.

Then a violent kick - some invisible trigger
bullets the quick-stab garden-spartan.
It's on its back twitching, legs contracting.

Then flick - it's on its front and fine,
strutting around, proud of its enduring
sting, this half-son of an Olympiad hive.

Then a quick jerk, the wasp's dancing,
a panicking puppet - the gods playing now.
Lightning strikes - on its front and forgetting

the labours that just made its point so small.
I look away - why? Aphrodite made a promise
or Hades wanted to hide His abduction?

I look back and Hercules has fallen: a withered
bag of upturned legs and leathery wings.
I feel stung. In the shimmer I hear laughter.

Butterfly Landing

Twitch
and she panics away.
Sit still. So.
Be a karst hill,
unmoving time
and wait
for her panting wings
to slow, slow.
This is a special trust
or she mistakes your
leg for a flower.

 Either way,
you are blessed
by this silken
gift. Her probing
mouth-
piece kisses
you a thousand
thanks. She is so
delicate, a single
word could snap
up the orange bands
on her velvet brown
wings and
send
her flying back
into the breath
of the wind.

2. Summer

Swallow Play

This is how children would play
if flicked by late May brushstrokes,
built of lace triangles and angles
of air sliced in jet-fighter swerves.

Swallows make a green, shaded belt
of the city park their playground,
unmoved by human obstacles,
they dance around mathematics,

feathery electrons never seen
in the same place until observed,
marvelled at as they nip grass tops
and give still trees reason to gasp.

Watch Swallows

To watch swallows flying over water,
weaving in and out and around
each other, lacing the air,
skating the corners, cutting
the finest lines between air and liquid,
a cloud of flick-bodies photons,
fantastically quick, snatching
the fastest flies from the water. Such
agility is the luckiest accident
of evolution; an acrobatic show for

no one.

Silk Lesson in Cambodia

I am still so soft, even as an adult
I have a Comfort Rag view of the world.
Take silk, for example. I had no idea

the silkworms are slowly cooked in the
sun, roasted in their transformative
coffins like pitiless peanuts, not living
weavers deserving of their own wings,
finding mates dying as Nature nurtured.
Instead discarded and their beds
boiled into softness and unwound
by the human weavers, all mothers,
to make pleasure for the undeserving.

I had assumed, with Teddy Bear logic,
that the gentle, richest of fabrics
was borrowed from the caterpillar;
teased from it's spitting mandibles,
taken in return for endless mulberry
leaves. At some vaguely adult point
the bloated caterpillar would be allowed
to pull up its miraculous bedsheets,
die its own way and be resurrected
as a beautiful, well deserved escapee.
A fair deal completed and Mankind
relieved of another adult abuse.

The Bats of Ping'an, China

It starts at 7.30pm
as the evening shadows the mountain
and the sun pinks the slab of fudged cloud.
For twenty minutes the patchy eaves
of the leaning wooden long houses
and half completed hotels held up
by bamboo shoot out bulleting bats
in spurts of five or so
comically quick wing beats
giddy with just-woken hunger.
Suddenly sonar makes them cut
the air and dive down, then onwards
to the Ping'an rice terraces angled
out of hills seven hundred years ago
to hunt insects with wings
hundreds of millions of years old.
Some come back, ears twitching,
squeaking happy summonings
to the hesitant babies. Others swirl
around in a tide pool of nightlines,
stretching their long skinny fingers.
as the gloom gulps the view
and they all achieve invisibility.

Black Kite Dreams

Nobody notices her.
Too busy shopping, on smartphones,
hiding away from Hong Kong heat.
She swoops down from the thermals,
as sudden as a Jumbo Jet
landing at old Kai Tak airport.
Hunting, perhaps, or showing off
how her tail feathers scoop air
like a knife wielding hand, slicing
left, right, low over a tree,
up and around the trunk
of a tower of concrete nests,
She spirals three times,
amazing the hazy air.
Nobody notices. She disappears
into dreams of trees.

What the Spider Knows

It hangs on a hotel window,
over a still canal reflecting
the dough-rolled Dutch sky,

It knows nothing about
the gander guarding goslings
feeding on the canal bank,
neck arched, head flicking.

It knows nothing about
ducks clapping through the air,
the planes landing at *Schipol*
a constant thread of steel.

It knows about its web which
it painstakingly threads, tightens,
to catch all those who fly.

The Blackbird

He sings one evening in late June from atop a tree in the village centre of Montagnola, a few wingbeats away from the former home and museum of Nobel prize winning German poet, author, nature lover and painter Hermann Hesse.

The blackbird's voice is one of clear trills and triumph, of watery music and melody. He sings boldly and beautifully as if there is no such thing as climate change, ocean acidification, deforestation, the sixth mass extinction, plastic contamination. He sings and I feel forgiven. Though not the first bird of the famous hymn, he certainly sings as blackbirds have sung for thousands of years.

He sings and time is torn away, for it is almost an identical song to the blackbirds of my childhood: those boisterous, proud singers from atop trees where Epsom Common woods fringed a few brief meadows ringed with roads. Every morning and evening, a blackbird sang.

One in particular sits conducted into my memory. On the far corner of Bracken Path road there was a tall conifer tree, the stage for one especially trembling blackbird. From this perch he broke mornings and molded evenings; his singing was the herald of the day, permission for all other birds to begin.

I could hear him as I crossed the meadow to my friend's house and as we set off on exploratory woodland walks. Always heard long before he was seen, but he could be spotted: a black prophet of happiness with a sunshine yellow bill.

He has become a mythical bird who sang all the notes of my endlessly short boyhood summers when there was no future, no fear, no causes for alarm, just time to plan the morning's adventures. No adulthood, no time passing, no loss.

I can still hear him singing, and it's his genetic cousins that sing here in Montagnola, Switzerland. A slight variation in notes here and there, a more operatic range, perhaps, as suits this region. But he sings and I am reminded, and then I realize how much time has passed with the fracturing mornings and evenings of middle age. I wonder how much time we have left to listen to his songs.

Ospreys Hunting

A pair of osprey hunting
over the Hood river and marina.

Working together, squeaking calls,
battling a wind that wants to keep

them slicing up origami air,
searching the water for that give-

away flash of scales, driving away
occasional competitors, other

lonely ospreys. They lord over
the waves, laugh at all the bright

kite sails, unfold the sky and fill it
with the claw-scraped river.

The Bald Eagle

After two weeks of searching the skies,
mistaking her for those lesser lords of the air:
turkey vultures, osprey, red tailed hawks,
we find her American majesty, enthroned
atop a douglas fir on Kingfisher Loop
Drive. We're high above Pacific City,
but she is the highest – perfectly still,
not a feather flickering. She is generous today:
we are forgiven for thinking less of her;
we have permission to observe her
to appreciate the difference. For how long,
only she knows.

She sits facing, no, daring the view -
the stretched-out span of golden coast,
unruffled grey-blue sea - to claim
it is longer than her wing. The feathery
line of white cloud on the horizon recedes
rather than rival her white crown.
River Nestucca knows that it's cutting,
curving estuary and fluffy fringe of yellowy
grass cannot compete with the imperial
beak. So the whole view bows to her,
caught in the claw of her god-sharp eye.

Our time is over. We are dismissed
in the stretching out of wings
that makes the sun shiver. She pushes off
and the air shudders under her weight
but lifts her up, honoured to lay hands on
such a trophy to winged achievement.
The empress glides silently over
the forest of firs, scattering seagulls
and other noisy pretenders.
Her throne is safe.

The Cuckoo Stopped Singing

Early July and I am stunned by the emptiness of the air. The cuckoos have gone quiet, have gone. Why didn't I realise sooner? Too busy locked inside hiding from heatwaves and vengeful evening storms. I suddenly miss his confident bell ringing, his reminder that nature persists despite our best efforts.

He started in early May, an unmistakable nursery rhyme song, complete and faithful. I live in a small village atop a wooded hill outside Lugano in Switzerland. Enough of the woods nestle the apartment blocks and villas to give the cuckoo a choice of stages for his repetitive posturing.

When he first sang, I was a boy again, living on the edge of Epsom Common woods where cuckoos were a distant, tree-suffocated sound; a promise of something fleeting and stranger amongst all the wary resident songbirds.

Here in Montagnola this African migrant proudly calls a partner in the famous crime: laying eggs in smaller songbird nests, kicking out the existing eggs, fleeing from the scene before the first mother returns to cock a confused head at an outsized egg. An egg that reflects back our own nature for aren't we being cuckoos to the Earth?

They are secretive birds; tricksters afraid to be uncloaked, the confidence scam revealed. I caught a glimpse in late May as he bolted past: part pigeon, part sharp-bodied hawk with a surprisingly large spotted body and short, hurried wings. He fled to the depth of a tree.

Throughout May and June, a cuckoo was always nearby whether we were at home, high up in the Alps, on the edge of Italian lakes. Always the same herald of summer from a select number of prominent trees, the song deliberately changing in pitch as the weeks wore on. He was the loudest sound of the evenings, perhaps to keep the lazy evening at bay as Midsummer exposed the moon.

Butterflies in Longji, China

Two yellow butterflies chase
each other up their own tornado,
a pursuit of passion, past my eye line,
higher than the tree-sized bamboo,
higher than the green mountain arm,
muscled with forests, veined in paths
bleeding through ancient rice terraces;
higher than that ragged cloth of cloud
that grumbles hungry June heat,
then gulps up the loving pair.

The Hornet

Hornet hovers
held precise
still air
examines me
eyes excellence
of evolution
nudge left, right
wing technology
lands on
white chair
tastes it
probing mouth
part animal
part punctuation
leaves questions.

The Bat

Night starts with trees
dressing in silhouettes
and the sky leaking depths.

A bat zips around the space
outside the side cottage,
flying the perimeter of

its constellation, tiny black
hole of fur and skin wings,
crescent like the moon.

It is master of this moment,
hunting months and photons,
dark matter made mammal.

Tree Swallows on a Golf Course

Two Tree Swallows cut out contours
of the golf course, roller-coasting
over every dimple, dip, manicured dell,
rising up ankle high in a swish,
smoother than any golfer's swing;
driven across the fairway faster
than the shot balls cursing through
trees. They are summer spirits
come to tickle blades and branch,
arrow around us, spinning, stitching
up smiles made of our amazements;
that there is more to life than golf.

Tree Swallows in White Salmon, Washington

Pairs curl around the house,
chased by the breeze shivering
the douglas firs, flecking waves
on the Columbia river.
They flit between trunks,
scuffing space,
skid
impossible arcs
to come
still
on telephone wires,
roof eaves, July. Bellies
bolts of white, as white as
the unfurling splutter of cloud.
They shoot off chirping, scimitar
wings slice under a crescent moon
shyly slivered in a milky blue sea.

Swallowtails

As big as hummingbirds, they seem to struggle
with the light winds, or perhaps applaud with
their hand-clapping black-rimmed yellow
wings and false-swallow point – no swallow
is ever threatened by these beautiful drunk
butterflies, staggering from flower to flower,
tipsy on nectar. They try to reach trees,
inspired by the birds but always drop
back to the flowers, sails outstretched for
 lazy
 gliding.

For a few seconds a sniggering pair wobbles
around each other, dancing over the
decking, deliciously confused and
spiralling higher, back towards
the birds. Second thoughts. Wrestled
back from the ambitious air, they
drop down and flutter their own paths
back to the flower, back to drinking;
their wings clapping the Herculean effort.

Wild Turkey Gentleman

08.30 am and the gobbling gives it away:
a wild turkey is chewing up attention.
Outside the bedroom window where Strawberry
mountain's scruffy fringe tickles well kept habitation,
a male wild turkey is passing, Slowly like a top hat
and tailed English gentlemen at the races,
showing off every filament of finery,
the long legs taking luxurious strides. Taking his time,
and in obvious denial of his prehistoric appearance:
scraggy bald head, ragged feathery garments.
The wild turkey passes by in slow-motion,
making the most of the cat-walk. Then he turns
up into the woods where he is quickly
suffocated back into green invisibility.
The show is over. Time for morning tea.

The Turkey Vulture

How can the turkey vulture know, wobbling
on cathedral wings between unsteady countries
and a darkened soul, a tightrope of tears
and hunger, riding invisible buffets, eagle-
envy, legend of bleached bones and ugly truth,
always overhead, red head scanning, claws tense,
hunting space between abandoned and beyond,
between emptiness and the joy of soaring.

Out of the Cave

Long spindly legs slapped
the side of the shower
for grip. The great grey bulk
skidded in the damp, slowing

down like a man fighting
a tide, giving up. I scooped

it out. It weighed nothing,
yet felt Prehistoric. I waited
for the bite. My mum's allegorical
reassurance: *house spiders don't*

bite. It pulsed on my palm,
drying out in the hope.
I opened the window and raised
it towards the light, escape.

Reluctant to believe, I eased
it out. It stumbled out
onto the ledge, early August sun,
birdsong, Fates gathering dice.

It staggered forward and reared
up on the two largest legs, surveying
the bright truth around it.
Like Man coming out of the Cave.

I forgot him for a moment, looked
away, prepared to shower. A sudden
scuffle. A bird on the window ledge.
I looked out and saw the bird launch

into the sky, the spider in its jaws,
legs protesting the Buddhist betrayal.

The Caterpillar

Caterpillar dangling several metres
from a tree, hanging from the thinnest

silken fate. It squirms with urgency,
hauling itself up as the cruel wind

flicks the line, hornets criss-cross.
Surely there are birds watching.

Wriggling for agonising minutes,
it climbs only a few millimetres.

Metres to go. The wind spins it.
I look down for a few seconds, then up.

Gone. No caterpillar. The silk hangs
empty, just whispers in the leaves.

Make a New Nest

Fresh from leaving Germany,
we summer retreat with my wife's
parents in White Salmon, resting
broken wings before the next take-off.

The first three stumbling days
my father-in-law takes us to
the Historic Columbia River Highway,
to the secret spot handed down

from friend to friend: sixth white
fence, flattened grass, exact gap
in the treeline to find what most
passing bikers and runners miss:

an eagle's nest, the champion
of tree homes, a huge hand to hold
one metre tall overgrown fledgling,
late to leave, leaping between

branches to balance, wobbling
in the hot winds, unfolding
sedimentary wings to practise
tidal pumping of air through earth

feathers. The currents call her but
she's not willing to let go, claws clinging
to mother wood, folding wings back
under water. Bald white head four

years away. Instead she sits, stares
past the suspicious absence of siblings,
over the groaning State highway,
the white flecked river, bankside

lumber and fruit factories, sewage

ponds and pipes, and peeking
over the high yellow hills the bald,
ancient white head of Mount Adams.

A week later, with talk of our departure
we ride the River Highway again.
Rumour's she's left but there she is,
treading the nest while a parent

looks on from a higher branch, wise
white head still. Suddenly her wings
open and she leaps, leaving the nest,
estuary wide wings flattening out.

The parent looks on, unmoved,
knowing the reward is the empty nest,
chick growing distant. We are jealous
and hesitant to leave, find our new tree.

Rich Waters

A Saturday evening in late August;
the prolepsis of summer has begun.
Under inky rain clouds stream ragged V's.
of quiet seagulls, the first to probe inland.
Why so early this year? Are you lost, or
like me, just looking for richer waters.

3. Autumn-Winter

Costumes from China

A chunk of triangular wood
drops out of a blue Ikea bag
full of school storytelling props
and dressing-up costumes. All
the way from China in a tanker
via Hong Kong and Bremen.
Not wood. A beautiful, speckled
moth, dressed up in its own costumes,
stunned after its three month voyage.
It flaps to a table and then, with my
customary hands trying to catch it,
to the window. It's papery wings
are a collapsed fan until I open the
window. Freedom for the immigrant,
a lonely, foreign end of its story.

My wife reads the poem and suggests fiction has fluttered into the form. She remembers it differently: the butterfly definitely dead, just shivers of coloured paper falling onto the table, and then me throwing it out of the window with just a brief poetic pause.

Boy Chases Crow

across Tooting Common,
hollering at the sudden summer sun
that has flapped into autumn.
Highly evolved bipedal mammal screeching
after a small but clever Jurassic ancestor.
Boy's green t-shirt striped like sediment rock;
crow's wings as dark as the millennia between
them – a few metres of sun-tanned grass.
Crows flies out of boy's range
and settles again to walk, head nodding
as mammal learns.

Crow V Seagull

A crow battles seagull,
protecting its nest.
Black and white bobbing,
tiny boats on an invisible sea
stirred up by dirty sky,
moody late morning rain.
Crow dives at the seagull.
Seagull shrieks, arcs away.
Crow tugged back to
its croaking nest. Seagull
slips off guiltily into ink.

Mosquito Myth

It must be made of myth,
this mosquito that can make
a meal of me even in mid-September,
in the middle of the night,
mocking my ear with its buzz,
defying my sleep-drunk swatting
raging hand dragging up the duvet
to cover almost every inch
and yet still somehow squeezing
between a tiny lifespan and summer's
Death to find succulence in my hands,
arms, neck, nowhere is safe
from this God amongst parasites.

October Bee in Arno

You visited our table drowsy
with October's late curtain call.
Hive work done, you're exhausted,
sighing search for the last sugar.

We're in the Piazza del Popolo
in Arno, soaking a few rays of sun.
You're probing the sweet i-Phone
So I gently blew you away.

You flopped down onto cobbles,
staggered over the smoothed hills.
I watched in horror as feet
clipped you, threatening to crush.

Every shoe and paw came closer.
Unable to fly, crawling slowly,
your fate was scrawled on stone.
One shoe flattened you but still

you pulsed, wobbled on, unable
to give up the taste until trampled
flat and still. The spark of summer
gone to the eternal honey cone.

Baby Hanging Out To Dry

A sudden flick snatches my eye.

Against the spilt ink of night,
a spider's web is vibrating.

A fly stroked dozy by the cold
has fallen for the fine net. It kicks

and gets sticky. *Zim! Zim! Zim!*
See-through wings getting stuck.

From the dark corner a spider awakes
from a Jurassic sleep. The web trembles.

The spider skates down its line.
One last struggle from the fly. *Zim!*

The spider arrives and wraps its legs
lovingly around the bobbing blue body.

It's fangs bear down to kiss the prize.
The fly shudders and goes limp.

The spider wraps its kill in silk
swaddling and skates back to its cot.

I look again in the morning
and see baby hanging out to dry.

Three Pigeons

For months, the bird net atop
the courtyard has hung in rags,
open to the elements, hideaways

from the hustle of the Old Town.
Tonight three pigeons line the fire
escape banister. One squats,

leaning in a sugar-drunk dream:
the second showing one leg, model
Zen; the third needs both legs

to prune its wings. No wings
can save the three pigeons.
They have fixed the bird net:

only one exit. The days pass,
we peck glimpses: the male hungrily
courting his starving conquests.

By the end of the week, silence
in the empty courtyard, silence,
guano and a mystery.

Brandenburg Phoenix

From Berlin to Dresden by train
slicing across countryside flattened
by fields, copses, lines of wind farms
saluting a sky stretched leaf thin.

The setting sun bleeding orange
into a darkening, purple bruised sky,
smoky clouds of brushed fingers
unfold and evolve as the sun sinks,

the sky lights up into feathery flames,
yellow tongued excitement, a phoenix
filling the famous flatness so many
ignore, dismiss as boring, until the

darkening blueness, the clotting
evening clouds choke up the flames,
smothering the phoenix within
minutes, the indifference of evening.

The Unspilling

Late October evening in Dresden
a wintry darkness descending
suddenly seagulls, cries everywhere.

Look up, see spots of white milk
on a grey-black cloth, unspilling,
backwards, a galaxy of stars spinning

in reverse, drawn into the gravity
of a high crane, the roosting spot
away from cold Elbe currents.

Gulls dropping, jostling for place,
milk resetting and the accident
of Dawn waiting to happen again.

Buzzard in Winter

A buzzard, emboldened by hunger,
glides low over the glittering grass,
mottled wings buttering the churned
sky, eyes scanning for evidence that

this reveal, this flurry of feathered
cape and regal body, this sudden
knowing of need and claw, is not
mocked by the leaf covered meals.

She swoops up into sniffing trees
their coloured clothing strewn on
splattered ground; she shivers down
into the bare wooden background.

Christmas Rooks

Rooks over Elbe at ten to four
trying out a murmuration,
having seen starlings *ooooh*
the flocks of 2-legged feeders.

They flow in uneven rolling
arm waves and clumsy cutting
hands. The black birds as big
as hawks as they try to land

on tram line posts but smack
back into the rollercoaster,
bicker the air, snapping at each
others' flight feathers. After

ten minutes they gather over
the Japanese Palace, clotting
the sky in wheeling, oily drops.
But some sniff out the festivities,

flying low over the old town,
packed Christmas markets,
easy pickings of pork, bread,
gluhwein glued throngs. They

settle noisily on a crane building
an apartment block in mock
historical style, complaining
of food not shared, Christmas.

Late Train to Mexico

It dropped out of the tree
on New Year's Eve
and sat in the air, plump
angel, wings cutting
smug smiles, then shot
off, insect impersonator,
leaving behind a gasp,
pointing. *Did you see that?*
West Coast wife nodded,
knowing this miracle proof
in San Francisco was a
southern-bound hobo
hitching a ride on disbelief,
the late train to Mexico.

February Pigeons

It has been trying to snow all day. The rushing clouds spat down swirls of white blobs that whirl around for a few minutes and then flutter away. A cutting wind cries out, *snow, snow, snow*, but it does not come.

In Café Nero, a five year old boy points up to a speckled rooftop opposite where a blizzard of grey-white pigeons are taking off.

‘They’re going, Mum.’

‘Hmm.’ She’s consumed by her mobile phone, rapid fingers tapping out a text message.

‘The pigeons. Look! Where are they going to?’

‘Eat your muffin.’

The boy watches the pigeons whirl around in snowy confusion and then flutter away.

The Time of Owls

Throughout the quickly darkening evenings and the reluctantly lit mornings of winter, a tawny owl was our companion. The owl had several regular hooting-spots in the trees that triangulated our block. Never seen, this night-ghost cloaked in the blur of the night and the silhouettes of trees.

When I heard the owl from our third floor concrete tree house, the space around shrunk, turning everything into *tree*. Time reeled back to boyhood; the thrill of such rare sounds that hinted at something secret and hidden in the woods of childhood.

The tawny owl's hooting is different to what you think you know. It's not the recognizable *too-wit-too-woo* of storybooks and cartoons. The call is strangely strained and fast, scared, even, scared to reveal the secrets.

One unusual February evening, our hooting friend suddenly had a rival. In the darkness he began his normal declarations only to find, a few moments later, a distant reply, a rumour of the trees complaining of dusk. Over the next thirty minutes, the reply grew stronger as the rival male moved in. I lived intensely in between the hoots, hesitating to breath, conscious of the seconds being counted in feathers.

Almost exactly at eight, the owls were in competition: a flurry of calls, a race to see who would win to summon that great milky eye from behind the eastern mountains.

As suddenly as they started, one stopped, then the other. By eight-thirty there was an odd, exhausted silence and the gloom of adulthood returned. Questions hang in the air and the moon demanded attention.

The last owl for the winter was in the Piedmont area of Italy. I opened the window and heard a sad screeching scarring the early March night. Somewhere close on the *langhe* hills a barn owl was calling, moving, calling, clawing out its night's territory, terrorizing the vineyards with ghosting wings and merciless beak.

On the crests of hills stood illuminated castles and churches, constellations of village lights as if upturned towards a grape-speckled sky. I closed the window,

surrendering to the unknowing of the frosting night, grateful all the owls reminded me of the magic that can still be found.

Kestrel over Concrete

What can she see,
hovering above a moment,
moving on, hovering again,
staring down on tarmac and pavement,
car tops and roof tiles,
patios and burnt grass.

She searches hard
the grey ground of this town;
sharp glances don't slice open concrete.
Driven by a bitter hunger,
she moves on, deeper into town,
wondering where the fields went.

Not Wood

The sand seeps through the crow's claws.
It kicks out in anger, scattering fine
granules, adding its own sooty feathers

to the debris on the beach. The crow
hops in and out of the footprints, trying
to stamp them out, but craters swallow

his hungry boredom. The crow looks
around, wondering where that *swooshy*,
swishy sound comes from, and notices

for the first time the sea. The crow
blinks. Mind numb. Cannot comprehend
something so big that's not wood, not

solid, not something it can sit on. The
waves wash closer, the bubbly water fills
the footprints and laps over the crow's

claws. Croaks in anger and jumps up,
black wings blocking the sea, suffocating
the sun. Crow flies away, looking for wood.

Myths of the Fireflies

At night a single tree
in the Puting Najing National park
lights up with buzzing magic:
the fireflies gathering to tell stories
as they dance the darkness
sparkling like a shower
of fizzling stars filling up
the spiraling black holes of night.

The true stars rise above Borneo,
souls of ancestral dancers, elevated
to delight Mother Moon
while she shies away from
The King of Flies, her bright
suitor, so bright, no fly can dance
while he owns the heavens,
searching for her, east to west.

All night they dance, playing
at being Stars, Mother, Father
in their home on a glue-green river
in a forest of rain-drenched diversity
being hacked into tinier and tinier
chunks by palm oil plantations.
During the day they hide in the reeds
while trees fall and Mother weeps.

When the Blackbird Stopped

We opened the doors to the balcony,
turned off the lights and listened
to the invisible blackbird rejoicing
evening's arrival over snow laced

mountains in the east. All of a sudden,
the descending veil fell. He stopped
singing and we were left gauping
into the emptiness, the darkening

of blues, the awakening of village lights
winking like flirting fireflies. He knew
it was time to nestle down into secret
leaves and tree-cover while we

sat and watched the last light flee east
over the white ridge, tumbling down
the other side into Lake Maggiore,
to sink for a night and sleep.