

Review of *birdlife*

Eds. Nyanda Smith and Perdita Phillips
Lethologica Press, 2011
ISBN 978-0-9758334-4-5



*I took to myself as pleasure,
the gannet's noise
and the voice of the curlew
instead of the laughter of men,
the singing gull
instead of the drinking of mead*

Birds. Eternal subjects for artists and poets. The choreographic abilities of birds to rise above the earthly, their elegant weathering of the airs, their enchanting songs—these are some of the enduring, alluring qualities of the avian. As an example of this age-old fascination, the Old English poem ‘The Seafarer’, quoted above, relates to birds through the longing and loneliness of the speaker’s exile. Further along in English literature, Shakespeare mentions the ornithological more than six-hundred times, and alludes to over sixty different British species. And in contemporary poetry, Pablo Neruda’s *Art of Birds* is a spiritual meditation on

Chilean species, whereas, closer to Western Australia, *Lines for Birds*, a collaboration between painter John Wolseley and poet Barry Hill, celebrates the antipodean sky messengers of our region.

Images and words & images in words & birds and words... In simple terms, da Vinci linked painting to the sense of sight and poetry to the bodily senses and to the emotions. In reviewing *birdlife*, I recall his aphorism: ‘Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen’. For da Vinci, the relationship between image and word is essential. It strikes me that the rapport between visual art and poetry, which is explored so beautifully in *birdlife*, is rare in today’s publishing world. Poetry in print seems, for most writers and readers, the domain of small presses, academic publishing, ephemeral zines or online journals or blogs.

Visual works, in contrast, exist in exhibition spaces, in public galleries or as shiny table browsers—lives typically estranged from (though spiritually companionable with) poetry. I am often disappointed when, too freely, snippets of art are used to accessorise poetry; or snippets of poetry or short prose are used as addenda to visual works. Rarely is there a purposive synergy between genres and an amplification resulting from the arrangement between words and images. But, *birdlife* offers a stimulating counter-example. Carefully blending art and poetry, this attractive, wispy collection presents an intriguing interpretation of Australia’s winged wonders—and subsequently taps into this lineage of birds in art and poetry.

birdlife is a multi-genre collaboration between poets Nandi Chinna, Michael

Farrell and Graeme Miles, short fiction writer Nyanda Smith and visual artist Perdita Phillips. Edited by Smith and Phillips, *birdlife* was published in 2011 by Lethologica Press, an inventive, small and relatively new initiative based in Western Australia. As their website states, the name Lethologica is derived from Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Yet a stated aim of the press runs strongly against the current of forgetting: 'to increase the visibility of contemporary artists in Western Australia and encourage analytical dialogue with their work via art catalogues with a critical writing component'. It seeks 'happy relationships to be found between art and text'. One of Lethologica's projects for 2012 is Art/Text/Clearinghouse, which unites artists and writers through creative projects resulting in a series of publications and exhibitions around Perth.

birdlife reminds me that birds naturally inspire. Visit any gallery bookshop and in all likelihood you will come across a different avian book, Judith Wright's *Birds*, published in 2003 by the National Library of Australia and illustrated with works from the NLA Pictures Collection. While a striking work from a well-loved Australian poet, Wright's collection offers a fairly predictable descriptive, lyric approach to the ornithological. What excites me most about Smith and Phillips' *birdlife* is the diversity of styles employed by the five contributors, and the book's capacity to deal with avian matters without being tagged as a nature writing work *per se*. Structured by the twin themes of birds and lives (that is, their lives, our lives and the enduring connections between), *birdlife* goes beyond the literal, taxonomic portrayal of the ornithological—beyond natural history alone and ecological observation solely.

To begin with, Nyanda Smith's sense-rich, short piece 'Nesting' with its 'feathered warmth' and 'percussive bursts' employs nesting playfully as a metaphor for human home-making. But the ecological drama here unfolds at Bunnings and IKEA (rather than a jarrah forest or heath dune) and involves birds-by-proxy: 'birds of paradise are squished into the back of the car, orange fronds bent angrily'. Adjacent to the poem, Perdita Phillips' black-and-white representation of twisty string is of the common materials sought after by both people and birds for the making of home, hearth, heat.

Smith's short narrative pieces balance the incisive snapshots of Hobart-based poet Graeme Miles. His untitled poem beginning 'A vagrant lake' bears an ecological message and leads to a kind of melancholic turn away from emptiness of 'the white field' and the sudden violence of 'a gunshot that can't connect'. Home, for the poet, is located outside of this disturbed history, home is somewhere else, but we are left wondering 'Where?'

*An ibis picks the sole-marks
of its footprint, scribes into its traces
inquisitive as a historian.*

Phillips' photo of two plastic yard owls, opposite the poem, is of ersatz birds available for purchase in today's venues of consumer culture, halogen lights beaming and ceiling fans whirring in the background. The two owls might be used to scare off smaller birds in a suburban garden, for the protection of lettuce heads, even with their bar codes left intact.

The keeping of history and the question of who keeps history permeate Perth poet Nandi Chinna's 'Birds and Seals – A found poem', based on the 1829 diaries of Captain Charles Fremantle, and

'Hydrology'. Chinna's activist politics and poetics are unmistakable here. The latter poem begins:

*The wading birds remember
the hydrology of the oval.*

*A lineage concealed from us as we walk our dogs,
kick a soccer ball, practice golf swings
across the superficialities of this hollow*

As with many of Chinna's writings, this poem connects ecology and memory. In a place where human recollection might fail or might be limited by typically human timeframes, birds become the real historians of settled environments, such as suburban damplands where mowed grass is the dominant ecosystem:

*The oval is mown and fertilised,
bore holes spit rusty mnemonics
early on summer mornings
as the ibis return
to probe this dampland
with their sharp beaks.*

The fourth *birdlife* poet, Michael Farrell, who I would be reluctant to call a nature poet by any means, does have something to say about the ecological. As usual, Farrell's pieces are experimental, ironical, linguistically fresh, at times playful and clever, at times pretentious, distancing and centred on the urban. An exuberant collusion between birds and words especially plays out in two places, 'the becomes with/river birds edit' and 'word seen from a bus'. The latter ends:

*Feels like glass,
A name,
Lifted by a crane,
Word post-card,
With without wings-amen.*

Binding *birdlife* together, Perdita Phillips' artwork is deft and evocative. It ranges in form from watercolours, sketches and photographs of living birds in habitats to dead birds preserved in ornithological collections. Renderings of bird heads seem like the field drawings of a naturalist, while images of a domestic chook behind the steel bars of a cage are those taken by an animal ethicist. Images of two preserved birds labelled with specimen tags and bearing the scientific moniker *Alcedo pusilla* assert the ironies of the natural sciences and how taxonomic practices sometimes reduce lives to objects. Phillips' photographic eye is astute, and captures a range of realities, from a window painting of Coolabah, the exquisite and delicate details of bird skeletons and the iridescent plumage which accompanies Farrell's poem 'bird eating a rainbow'. Her black and white photographs of plumage particularly interest me. Without colour, the feather patterns glow in an intriguing way.

What I appreciate most about *birdlife* is that one needn't be an ornithologist or naturalist to appreciate it. *birdlife* does include some astute detail about actual birds in real places. Its chemistry lies, however, in its blending of perceptions of the natural world with broader avian metaphors; in the intersection of bird and human lives in urban, suburban and country areas; in its timeless theme of our longing for transcendence, as projected onto birds and carried out in their native places with the strangest of ironies. And within all this, a convincing conservation message resounds: we need to consider seriously the welfare of our feathered compatriots and their ecologies through various forms of expression and the complementary voices of artists and writers.

-Review by John Charles Ryan