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*Drawn to Birds:*  
*A review of*

NANDI  
CHINNA,

MICHAEL  
FARRELL,

GRAEME  
MILES,

PERDITA  
PHILLIPS,

&

NYANDA  
SMITH

*birdlife*

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There's no denying it—Australian poetry attracts a lot of bird lovers. Bird poems abound in anthologies, magazines and journals, and some of our best-known poets are renowned for their feathered metaphor. (It is a good thing I'm not prone to Hitchcockian nightmares of the bird variety). But despite the ubiquity of birds in Australian poetry, there is something remarkably fresh about *birdlife*, published by Perth-based Lethologica Press. As if it were a little aviary, *birdlife* houses the verbal and visual artworks of five very different artist-birds. But while these artists may flock together, they each speak in their own unique tongue; project their own vision.

GRAEME MILES's poetic vision is tinged with a bird's eye view; or, at least, he imagines the potential of that perspective. Indeed, each of his poems in this collection takes us further from the ground. In 'Incubation,' he contemplates the 'head's soft shell' which 'expects heat to wake it/as the walls of the world are an unknown/animal that coos and broods.' In 'An Ash-Wood Ladder/Wooden Wings,' the ladder is a 'surrogate of flight'; his imagination takes him further, indulging his Icarus-like desire to leave the ground behind and reach for the sky: '*This is adventure: rolling over the inside/ of the sky's blue skull.*' By Miles' third (untitled) poem, we see the bird in man, crafty as he is dangerous: 'His eyes were small and precise [...] when his wings didn't curl cruel as talons, / he could think in circles.' The poet's precise imagery conveys the melancholia of an earth-bound existence—only the gods can pull us 'clear of weather' and 'the long dispute of history.'

In contrast to Miles' poetic themes, NANDI CHINNA notes the vast discrepancies between bird and man; in 'Birds and Seals,' a found poem, she channels the voice of Captain Charles Fremantle, in order to depict the devastating consequences of a perspective on wildlife as not worth a hoot: '*Killed 7 gannet, a fine large bird, very handsome/ but not good to eat.*' We are presented with a record of animal and bird massacre, and the implied decimation/obliteration of a species. Chinna's poem 'White Swans' is touched with a similar resentment of man's intrusion on natural habitats, and

the subsequent impact on the animal kingdom: 'Diesel fumes and dust swirl upwards / staining their red beaks, / settling on their backs, / tarnishing their wings to a nicotine yellow.' In 'Manning Ridge,' the bird's cries 'becom[e] a part/ of the recording of history.'

Singing in a different key again, poet MICHAEL FARRELL is playful as a lyrebird, imitating words as objects and depicting a chaotic world beneath the neat order of things: 'little fish birds popping on the lawn; dried gulls on the hoist.' Are we seeing this right? There is something unsettling about Farrell's vision; like David Lynch, Farrell continues to throw a 'sparrow in the works,' or under a rug, to see if we can figure it out; he drops punctuation like feathers for us to pick up and collect.

One of my favourite pieces is Farrell's 'birds and flowers,' with its word-seeds of the naming variety. Naming is an attempt to control the universe; in his poem, Farrell is postmodern Adam, pointing up the absurdity of these navigations through chaos; bird and flower names start to bleed into one another: 'come-here-oftens,' 'ambulance chasers,' 'knockknock nutjobs,' 'born to be alives,' etc. Are names more a reflection of the namers than of the named?

In her short prose, NYANDA SMITH captures brief moments of avian affinity—in 'Nesting' she is a fossiker, a nest builder, a bower bird, collector of scraps, hopping among crowds to gather bits and pieces for her home. In 'Plumage' the tension in her body must be let go like so many moulted feathers. In 'Locomotion' she and the swan 'nosedive' into early morning activity. There are not so many differences between our daily business and the bird's; there is a hint in Smith's lines, however, that such a busy and active lifestyle comes more effortlessly to the bird.

There is something of the bower-bird in PERDITA PHILLIPS, too, whose vast array of visual images adorn the pages of this collection, from photographs of both live and taxidermied birds, incubating eggs and bird skeletons, to images of bird-shaped leaves and simple

sketches of swans and ducks. Bright rainbows of feathers contrast with black and white images—Phillips playfully catalogues the avian world through multiple lenses. It is interesting, too, that these images record both life and death—there are no angelic aspirations here; birds live and die as we do, and are eventually grounded. The two images that flank the book—a stuffed owl on the front cover, and a skeleton on the back—are reminders of this earthly groundedness.

Each of the artists in *birdlife* complements as much as contrasts the others—like the competing calls of birds in a forest, such variety is not a clash of harmonies, but rather, provides a diversity of voices. *birdlife* is a welcome companion as you wait for the train, have your morning coffee, or read in the park—this little book offers an unexpected counterpoint to much of the predictable poetry on offer today; it leaves you dreaming of a life more spritely.