

Bird of paradise: poetry. 2011

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Bird of Paradise

GEORGE YOUNG



A Parallel Press Chapbook

Bird of Paradise

Poetry by
George Young

Parallel Press

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"Two Ways Of Listening To A Meadowlark" in *Chiron Review*;
"Conversation With a Great Blue Heron" and "The Others" in *The Literary Review*; "At Bosque del Apache" in *Manzanita Quarterly*; "The Sparks Of Creation" in *Mobius*; "To A Garter Snake" in *Off The Coast*; "Birdskin" and "Heart Attack" in *Plainsongs*; "A Dream Of Wings" in *Potomac Review*; "Ode To The Algorithm" in *Southeast Review*; "South Texas" in *Sou'wester*; "Bird Of Being" in *Superior Poetry News*; "The Ornithologist's Confession" in *Tiger's Eye*; "Poem On A Mountain Bluebird" in *Westview*; "To A Blue-Throated Hummingbird" in *White Heron* and *Bear Deluxe*; "Audubon", "Kingfisher", and "Wings" in *Willow Review*; "Abyss" in *Winging It*; and "The Bird Of Paradise" (under the title, "God's Bird") in *Yarrow, A Journal of Poetry*.

Cover illustration by Barry Roal Carlsen

To Peg, my wife, and to Greg, my son,
for all their love and support, the best birding
companions any one could ever want.

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The bluebird carries the sky on his back.

Henry David Thoreau, journal

The Bird Of Paradise

(from notes found in Linnaeus's desk
after his death, 1778)

This rare avian species is footless
but unimaginably beautiful:

its head a satiny yellow,
throat a patch of iridescent green,
breast, back and wings russet...
and emerging from under its wings, long gold plumes
fanning out behind like streamers from the sun.

The Dutch explorer, Van Linschoten,
has made extravagant claims:

that having no feet this bird cannot roost
so lives only in the ether of heaven,
perpetually on the wing...

the female breeds by laying its eggs
in a pink cavity on the male's back...

it drinks directly from clouds,
catches high blown insects from the air...

and the only time it ever comes to earth
is when it dies, then its body falls
and is sometimes found by natives on the jungle floor
of an island called Aru.

We have seen the skin of one here in Sweden,
badly mangled, at the museum in Uppsala,
and would pay dearly to see more.
The devout sometimes kneel and pray to it.

I have assigned it the Latin name, *Paradisea apoda*.

To A Blue-throated Hummingbird

(for Sheri Williamson)

Galvanic bird, gorget of blue,
you sit quietly in the palm of her hand.

Once, skins of your kind were shipped to Europe
to decorate hats,
were dried and sold in Mexico
for their magical powers.

But today you were caught alive
in the remote-controlled
drop-net
that encircles her feeder. And she has put
a tiny bracelet on your foot.

She's tall, with long brown hair
hanging in a single braid down her back, talking rapidly
to us, her students,
about *iridescence*,
about how the granules in the feathers of your throat
are like the droplets of mist in a rainbow.

She wrote the book on you.

"Blue-throats aren't like the others," she says.
"When you let them go
they like to sit in your palm for awhile."

So we all wait, staring at
your dark needle, your glittering black eyes—

for you to fly.

The Ornithologist's Confession

(for G.M.H.)

Can birds be a religion?

O Vermilion Flycatcher, O Living

Fire—

this morning the forest is coruscating with eleven

kinds of green, and I'm climbing

into its raucous mist

looking for you—

my Chevalier.

I have a mystical itch.

Two Ways Of Listening To A Meadowlark

There are two simultaneous songs, a pearl-
colored one, new,

and the other one,
ancient, fashioned by Darwin's hammer.

They go back and forth
in your brain

like that picture of two black figures
that can be

either a white vase or the faces of two women
facing each other.

There now, on a fence post
with its head up,

its long beak
open—watch the yellow throat

throb,
listen as one song shimmers into the other—

a meadowlark
singing to a meadowlark, and

pearls of sound, the best
poetry around.

Abyss

(for Greg)

Owlwise into owl-light one day
you came,
sauntering beneath a giant cottonwood,

and looking up
surprised its presence
sitting on a branch looking down at you.

Your eyes locked. Someone threw away
the key. And in that forever
you stared

into, that black abyss of owl-space, you found
no moon,
no stars—only cold infinity.

And what did
the owl-other find in your eyes to make it dive
off the branch, glide, silent, away?

Wings

A poem is not a bird until it flies in the mind.
And a poem about wonder may not fly at all
if the mind is weakened by sickness, cold, lack of love, hunger.
It may just crouch down with the frost-
ruined daffodils by the fence.
Yet wonder is sometimes the last thing to go.
Take a pale-purple, freezing evening in December
when an old man, near the end, in Central Park, looks up
and sees a Great Blue Heron lift off from the icy reeds
and flap away through the black bones of bare trees.

Audubon

is searching today
along the Natchez Trace, carrying
a crayon and paper, his gun, a small bottle of spirits—
the high cedars above
blue as smoke, the riverskin below brimming
with light—when

there's a flash
of white by the marsh: a Snowy Egret,
its plumicorn
erect, still, waiting for the sense of its presence
to travel to the man before it flies.

At the tavern last night
he boasted of being the *Lost Dauphin*.
Within a year he will sit in the glittering outer parlors
of London, the *American*
Woodsmen, waiting with his pictures.

Only now a simple yearning
goes out of him
and stretches toward this one shy bird in the marsh,
a longing
to hold its memory, its total
beauty, the array of its white feathers in his head.
But it is not from memory he will paint it.

Later, he wires its body.
And then, as always, under the point of his brush
it becomes a languid, odd thing,
its neck stiff, a dead
thing, not a live thing, never the vision he held
for a moment—which was

a radiance
and which died with the bird.

Where Pheasants Go

Sailing up
out of the blond grass
in a lazy arc
to where a cloud of multi-colored feathers

constricts to a bird—

then flying backwards
straight down
under the wild plum, crouching—

then passing back
over the gold bead, along the ribbed
barrel
to a glint in the black

pupil of the eye, watching—

then electric
over the nerve and into the brain
of a man,

a grinning man,

who has just whispered the words—
“There’s one!”

South Texas

A Great Blue Heron is fishing on the salt flats
that stretch inland from the Gulf.
It stares down at its own reflection in the water, silver
as a cut, polished meteor, and spears
a huge fish; then calmly wades over to the shallows
and drops the flopping fish in the mud.
Enormous clouds of steam are rising
from the oil refineries across the river
where gleaming flames burn eternally.
The heron stabs at the fish
repeatedly with its sharp beak and waits.
There is a deep stillness. The spinning earth
slows and stops. The heron lifts the fish
and swallows it headfirst in one gulp, a huge bulge
visible in its snake-like neck. A siren wails
on the interstate. The earth starts spinning again.

Poem On A Mountain Bluebird

The Navajo stones never managed such a blue as you,
nor the lips of the man
pulled from an icy river last winter.

You are a grace
never mastered by earth's bluest eye
at the foot of the glacier, open to a cloudless sky—

nor recognized by idle school children
staring out the window at what appears to be a blue ribbon
tied to a telephone wire.

You are a flash of living, breathing blue.
And Lord what am I
that such a bird can escape from the cage of my skull and fly.

Ode To The Algorithm

This feather—

small, white, discarded,
lying in the dust at your feet—

pick it up and smooth out

the twisted vanes
with your thumb and forefinger.

Remember, out of

all those random tries, only one
was selected, this one,

the barbs and barbules

fitting perfectly together—
as precise

and necessary as your own

fingers, carefully
smoothing, restoring.

Now go ahead, stick

this miracle in your hat band,
and—

for the bird, for the world, for
yourself—

saunter on, whistling.

The Others

In the interstices of our world
(vacant lots, ditch-banks, the sad elms
in cemeteries)

they flit
and flicker, search for their spider eggs,
their wild grass seeds.
They are here!

Umber, plum,
plain or streaked, their eyes bright as drops of hot
black wax, they peer,
they stab with tiny daggers.

You may be
only casually aware of some small movement
in the leaves, a soft chip, a faint whirl of wings.
But they see you—

the others,
here! crying life,
feathered hearts going a mile a minute, ready if
you get too close, to freeze or fly.

Migration

On a winter night walking Abby, our
golden retriever,
high up
in the galaxy, I caught
a faint tinkling sound,
almost inaudible,
of a myriad of unseen winged things—
like smoke blowing north—
a singing.

The full moon,
so steady in the sky, shuddered in the pond.

By morning spring had come.

The Sparks Of Creation

(for George Coffee)

Once, you stood
beneath a huge live oak tree full
of wood warblers bouncing in a sun-kindled chaos of green.

They had come far,
across the Gulf on their spring migration
to this high island of trees on the salt flats of south Texas.

*According to the Jewish
mystic, Isaac Luria, God meant for
his light to flow downward through ten holy vessels to man.*

All night they had flown
through a storm; now falling out, splinters
of color, bright jewels in the trees, starved, exhausted, feeding

furiously on insects
and singing, each bird with its own name:
Yellow-throated, Blackburnian, Cerulean, Chestnut-sided.

*But a Cataclysm,
some say creation itself, burst
the vessels. Sparks of holiness fell into the depths.*

Others too, like you,
had come, quiet people with binoculars,
to walk softly and look up at the shimmering hallucinations

in the trees, their eyes
aching, their imaginations stretched
beyond certainty in that garbled green of a dripping forest.

*The sparks were
imprisoned in the opaque shards
of the broken vessels, divine essence searching to be free.*

Once, you saw them.

A Dream Of Wings

(Liberty, Texas)

Noon. We stood in the weeds at the edge
of a parking lot,
looking up through binoculars at the blue
blaze of the sky,
searching for Swallow-tailed Kites.
What impelled us?
Was it evolution's brain? Peterson's book?
Wordsworth's owls?
Rumor had it there was a nest in the tall pines behind
Wal-mart,
complete with fledglings. And all during that hot drive
from Winnie
in our heads we had seen them, preening their breasts, white
feathers
drifting down like snow; seen the adults
lifting off
to spiral up on thermals like thunderclouds boiling up
in the heat;
watched them snap roll in the air, catching
flying insects

from below, then bringing talon to beak to feed
on the wing.
I wish I could report we actually saw them.
We didn't.
The shoppers thought we were crazy. We almost missed
our plane
out of Houston. But birders are nothing if not
ponderers,
imagers, wonderers. Last night
when I
dreamt a whole flock of Swallow-tailed Kites flew over
my house,
my mind's hooked beak, wild wings, went
with them.

Heart Attack

At first a speck, high
in the sky, a speck diving on another speck.
Then through binoculars,
a peregrine,
wings folded, stooping two hundred miles
an hour
on a pigeon—
and the explosion
of feathers
as those terrible feet
reach out, grip and stop a heart
as easily as you might quench a candle flame
with thumb
and index finger.
Then the swoop and they're gone
and after—
white feathers spiraling down
in an empty sky.

At Bosque del Apache

(for Peg)

Here

on a tree stripped down to its black wires

a hundred yellow-headed blackbirds

jostle,

each

spaced exactly three inches apart, each

facing the setting sun—for an instant

that tree

as full

of gold lights as Christmas. Then all

lift off, swirling away, a black flock

driving out

over a plowed

field, settling down between the furrows,

leaving the struck tree in the wind-

polished sky.

Birdskin

"...when the last individual of a race of living
beings breathes no more, another heaven and another
earth must pass before such a one can be again."

William Beebe

A rag-doll bird now,
neck on a string.

A clean slit up from the cloaca.

The gleaming jewels: the heart, liver, lungs drop
on a newspaper. Pry out the eyes,
scoop out the skull, and the pecan-sized brain
is delivered with its star-maps.

Nebraska, April, 1887.

*A twelve year old boy watches an undulating
banner in the sky,
a quarter of a mile long and one hundred
yards wide, settle
across the mud-flats,
a scintillating mirage—birds
feeding, exhausted,
on their way from Argentina to the Arctic.*

The bird's back is brown, its belly buff, its crown
striped, its bill incredibly long
and down-curved.

Its new body
becomes a stick
wrapped in cotton, imbedded in the skull.

"Prairie pigeons" they are called.

*Spiraling in on one of their beautiful
revolutions they offer
a more compact target for the gunners. And
the guileless birds
continue to circle
in spite of the firing, their great numbers
falling.*

This is the last bird

we know about,
shot in Barbados in 1963 by a hunter
on its lonely flight south,
its legs tied together with the thread
of a specimen tag
that reads "Eskimo Curlew."

The shooting today is "too good."

*The wagon beds are filled with heaps
of dead birds.
Soon, they are dumped on the ground
to rot
so that more can be taken.*

The skin of the last bird

now rests in a wooden drawer
in a museum in Philadelphia, its blank eyes
white
with wisps of escaping cotton.

To A Garter Snake

You never had a chance, on your warm rock in the late October sun.

I watch you curl around the horny talons,
watch the terrible beak bite
the back of your neck and pull your slender body straight,
watch you go, headfirst, down the throat,
watch your still wriggling tail disappear in one, two, three gulps,

then watch you fly away across a brown field,
circle
and climb to heaven—

now you are hawk.

Kingfisher

Heart,
 one gold afternoon
as sudden
 as a single beat
you dove
 from your empire of branches,
folding yourself
 into a perfect knife
to cut
 the river's skin,
then plunged
 into the icy clear water....
the sheer shock of it,
 the grasp, the good
firm feel of silver
 in your mouth....
the explosion of diamonds
 as you leaped
back to your branch
 where you sat,
blue and white,
 feathers crusted with light,
swallowed your catch
 and shook
once, twice
 your cocky blue crest.
Heart,
 how many beats are left?

Bird Of Being

Almost every time out
at least once
it comes

when I stop to listen and look
standing still
in the dumb beauty of some waste place

some forgotten back lot
some weedy
haunt

even without hearing
the warbled song or seeing
the flash

of its red crown
or white throat it comes
in a rush

and lifts me on its holy wings.

Conversation With A Great Blue Heron

"I came out to the pond to ask you a question," I say.

"What shall I do with my life?"

You are studying a shadow in the water.

A single-engined airplane clatters up
from the city airport, towing a white glider into the sky.

You spear.

"Last night on the stairs
for the first time I felt the death of promise," I say.

The fish you just caught is now a bulge in your neck.

"And I don't care about
the box-scores in the morning papers anymore."

You raise one foot and freeze, a drop of water glistening
from your toe. I watch your yellow eye.

"Catch a fish," you say.



George Young is a retired physician living in Boulder, Colorado. His first book of poems, *Spinoza's Mouse*, won the Washington Prize and was published by Word Works. He had one other chapbook of poems, *Creating the Universe*, published by Perivale Press and has been in a number of anthologies of poetry by physicians: *Uncharted Lines*, *Blood & Bone*, and *Primary Care*; *MorePoems by Physicians*; as well as other two anthologies: *Winners: A Retrospective of the Washington Prize*, and *Visiting Dr. Williams: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of William Carlos Williams*.

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