

Sixty-four Nests

by

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Preface

Sixty-four Nests owes much to the work of others: the collection of poems by Pamela Laskin, *The Bonsai Curator*, provided inspiration in numerous ways — the concept of the found poem, her succinct writing style, the larger metaphor of the maintenance of a bonsai as a vehicle to explore her subject; Sue Taylor's research into the characteristics, habits and habitats of a selection of extinct and vulnerable birds as illustrated by John Gould in *John Gould's Extinct and Endangered Birds of Australia* was an ongoing reminder of the vulnerability of migratory wading birds and the demise of many species. My heartfelt thanks also go to David Gatiss for his ongoing support and suggestions, Dominique Hecq who has kindly perused this collection and provided feedback and Jim Colbert for his ongoing support.

My thanks to you to all.

The Bird Preserver

As a child
I blissed out
with birds in flight.

Massed flocks
soaring up,
across the sky,
gliding down the slip stream
of their understanding.

Their absence
shreds
my being.

Lost in Feathers

I am lost
in a labyrinth:
rachis, barbs,
barbules and barbicels,
all interwoven
into nests of
my making.

Their variations
are embedded
in style,
their softness
slept on,
their warmth
swaddled in cotton.

As I re-imagine
my world
within the landscape
of their sky
my breath falls into
the rhythmic beating
of wings in flight.

Life Cycle – A Tragedy

It's the weather:
rain, floods,
a lake renewed –
Kati Thanda - Lake Eyre.

It's the geological history:
gypsum, caprock,
vertical displacement –
a saltpan below sea level.

It's the abundance:
Lake Eyre Hardyhead
emerging from the mud –
a swarm of fish.

It's the migration:
thousands of long-distance travellers;
silver gulls, terns, cormorants –
flocking to feed and breed.

It's the pelicans:
thriving, delighting,
indulging in multiple couplings –
an inland lake swamped with life.

It's the heat:
increasing the salinity,
the salt crust reforming –
even the Hardyheads die.

It's the catastrophe of distance:
eggs abandoned,
chicks unfed –
adults too weak to fly.

Matchbox

When my mother —
searching for an elastic band
to reseal a bag of lentils —
pulls out a matchbox
from an Hawaiian hotel
I stayed at 27 years ago,
I am stunned.

Its gold embossed emblem
resembles the Eastern Curlew,
my unspoken heart-bird
whose loss of wetlands
propels my creative flights.

Scarred by reason,
this moment
rattles my cage of certainty.

From Inside My Box

We live in boxes.
Small,
particle board
constructions of our past.

How hard
it is
to see beyond
their opaque walls.

Through accidental holes,
occasional glimpses
of the outside
reset our vision.

This time,
I see the Eastern Curlew
hovering above
its drained wetland.

I love thee, I love thee not

A friend —
an avian expert,
domestic hens his speciality —
forewarned us
before the twenty-four hour news cycle
screamed and streamed,
'avian influenza pandemic.'

'Visit your GP,' he said.
'Order your shots.'

Suddenly,
the symbiotic relationship
between us and them
dissolved.
They were the enemy.

Millions were slaughtered,
our safety secured,
but still
we catch their flu.

Grilled Grapefruit

Each year
thousands
cluster in small numbers,
sharing the flight path,
instinctively
following the same route
to their chosen wetland.

I return
to my father's death,
the angle of his head,
his slack jaw,
his cold hands,
the fading warmth
of his back.

In between,
there is
the joyous memory
of his culinary adventures:
grilled grapefruit
with caramelised sugar
on top.

Good Eating

Behind your mask
of good eating
lives
the face of exploitation.

Never mind
the bundled detritus,
or the share factor,
it's all yours.

Plate-up
your perfection.
As for tomorrow,
it's not your concern.

Curlews

On their flight paths
there are no mirrors
to reassure them of
their existence.

Their guiding instincts
are more finely tuned to
the latitudes
and longitudes of life.

They sense
above and below
the molluscs
of survival.

Instead, I troll
the supermarkets aisles
refurbishing
my identity kit.

Reflections on Re-potting

I am seeking new ways
to make my mark.
Consider,
'... the avian forebrain's
function is similar to
the mammalian neo-cortex'.¹
Now I must reflect on
more than those
taken-for-granted tropes
of form and colour.

And,
'... bird brains pack
twice as many neurons
into a given unit of mass...'
which probably explains their
'... capacity for moving
through a complex
three-dimensional world
at great speed ...'²
and my lack.

Recently,
my eye was re-potted —
cataract removed,
new lens inserted.
My world now sparkles
with definition and space.
I see
the coloured flash
of a lorikeet
and sense its world
in mine.

¹ Meredith, Peter 2017, 'Feathered Geniuses' in *Australian Geographic*, Sept/Oct pp, 98-99, 19/09/2017

² Op, cit

On the Chart 1

Let's begin with
measuring
all
the surface features.

Is it flat?
Is it curved?
Is it white?
Is it hard?

According to the standard,
is it large
or small,
long or short?

We don't need to know about
the beauty I see,
the love I feel,
the pleasure it gives
and certainly
not
my sense of wonder.

No experiential
please.

Simply, gather the data
and locate it
on the chart.

On the Chart II

Once, we asked
is the beak
long or short,
round or flat,
curved or straight?

All the surface features
identified
and catalogued
in files
labelled in Latin.

Now, we probe
your habits and habitats,
nitpick the engine
driving you
across continents.

We deconstruct
the form and movement
of your wings
but fail to save
the flight path of your life.

Planet Earth

Planet Earth,
your spin
is beyond
my control.

Gravity anchors me
to the cold crust
above the molten cauldron
of your centre.

Revering the stars
beyond my reach,
I hypothesize a rescue plan
on Mars as I chew up our
diminishing resources
and dump the residue.

I argue with myself
— the imperative of industry
— the catastrophe of pollution,
but find no meeting ground
for survival.

E7 – From Alaska to New Zealand A Partially Found Poem

'E7 flew
past Hawaii,
past Fiji,
and then
on September 7,
past the north western tip
of New Zealand' –
inserted battery
fading
as it landed at
the Firth of Thames.

'At eight days
and
eight nights,
and
7,150 miles ...'
it remains
'... the longest
nonstop,
migratory flight
recorded.'³

Go,
bar-tailed godwit,
go.

³ Bhattacharjee Y 2018, 'Celebrating the Year of the Bird.' in *National Geographic*, March 2018, p 43

En Route

In winter months
our grey nomads
trundle North.

Caravans and trailers
fitted out,
they camp —
solar panels
facing the sun
energising their mod-cons.

For them,
unlike the Eastern Curlew
trekking South to winter
on our shores,
there are
no Saemangeum sea walls
ringing the death knell of
their feeding grounds.

Fuelled by the residue of
ancient forests,
their fat tyres
and grinding gears
trample and preserve
their migratory routes.

Wetlands

The tide is out.
Small, deep holes
puncture
the surface of
the tidal flats.

Halophytic mangroves,
situated between
the high and low tides,
send tendril roots
to grip the shoreline.

Corky fingers —
pneumatophores —
jut above the wet silt
taking oxygen
to the canopy of leaves.

Beneath their shadows
the wild life of
snails, insects,
crabs and worms
flourishes.

Curlews
strut the flats
seeking crabs,
long curved beaks
dipping into soft mud.

A child dribbles a ball
between the remnant
stumps of a pier.
And I seek coffee
in the cafe nearby.

Within My Rectangle

In flocks,
they wheel and turn.

Sensing the mob,
they stream
the shifting drifts
of the coastal winds.

We, too, flock
but at the packed train door
I balk ...
anticipating the shove,
push and jostling
to find a place in
yet
another rectangular box.

On the Other Hand

I see them
all round
gobbling up
our natural resources:
cicadas in the summer,
worms following the rain,
crabs and molluscs
as the tide slips out,
plump acorns
as summer folds into autumn,
the fish in my small pond.
How dare they?

Black Holes

Black holes in the mud,
a wader's claw prints
criss-crossing
the dark soil
edging the tidal creek.
My footprints,
too,
leaving a mark.

This dark expanse
interrupted by
a pier
a playground
and a car park
with white parallel lines
defining the space.

As co-inhabitants,
this is what
we do.

Can You Tell Me the Date?

Can you
identify the era,
tell me the date,
or describe the moment
when we decided
to stop wearing garments
filled with feathers
or woven with wool
and turn
our fossil-fuelled heaters on?

An Encounter with a Dead Bird

My back-yard birds are
darting in pairs,
twig gathering for Spring.

We cloak them with
immortality
and freedom.

They are,
our departed souls
presaging the divine.

Their dead whisperings
harbour our demise
and new beginnings.

The blackbird's dark cloak
tempts us to linger with
evil and the flesh.

I puzzle over
the gift of a dead bird —
a back yard find —
now a headless tangle of
black feathers and bones
confined to a plastic bag
on my studio shelf.

A Wine Tasting

A wine tasting,
full-bodied reds,
hearty food,
a winemaker's story
celebrating
hard work and
a dedication to his truth.

The man on my right
when I speak of
migratory birds, mangroves
and tidal flats in the city,
says,
'I live there.
You should see them.
Only this big' —
his hand flicks to 20 cm —
'spindly legs,
long beaks' —
his fingers speaking this time —
'running so quickly across the mud.'

We had just met
yet we were one.

No UFO.

I sit to write
the coming Spring
the curlew's return.

Through the window,
a bright stationary light
catches my eye.

I dismiss
the fantasy of a UFO,
a plane in flight,
and step outside
into a crystal cold
that winters my bones.

It's the morning star —
Venus leading the sun —
shimmering its immensity
through my song-line of awe.

Traces of You

Your claw prints —
three pronged, triangular —
are scattered like straw
across the crab holes.

This trace —
washed away by
the incoming tide —
reminds me that
fortuitous encounters are
all I can hope for.

I take photographs —
the sky, the sea,
the tidal sandbar —
but fail to capture
the hollowness
of your absence.

Wallowing

Occasionally,
I struggle with
the larger picture.

I am ground bound,
inextricably locked
to a gravitational force
requiring I use
all my strength
to stand.

Once, other species
enabled me
to lift more,
to travel faster,
to be protected.

Now, mechanical devices
think for me,
build for me,
help me be ...
like other species.

I fly with
birds in the sky,
linger in
the darkness of the ocean,
skim
its glistening surface.

My survival depends
on the unique qualities
of other species
but we neglect
the habitats
ensuring theirs.

On Sundays

On Sundays,
siblings and I
walked the damp paddocks,
shuddered at the dead lambs,
eyes picked out by
those crows
whose coarse cries
and beating black wings
broke the stillness of
the grey sky
and winter-green grass.

The Eastern Curlew
was migrating back
to Tooradin
from its breeding ground
in Kamchatka and Siberia
where the eyes were picked out
of human compassion
when those struck by
the Gulag boot of injustice
were denied
the breeding ground of life.

Abundance

A late Autumn morning
a rising sun
birds and engines
vying for airspace
above the freeway
and parkland.

If I could unwind
the reel of suburban amenity
before the ponds were drained,
the grass cut short
and the asphalt laid,
an abundance of birds
would be heralding the dawn.

Blues Train

I'm on the Blues Train —
man, oh man.
His nuanced voice
sings my soul.
His rhythmical words,
snatch my heart.
His steely slides,
and honeyed wood slaps
lock me
to his lines.

And those swans
on the water
besides the track?
They give me
peace.

Let's Deal With Some Facts: A Partially Found Poem *

The Bar-tailed Godwit —
let's deal with
some facts:
John Gould wrote.
'I saw this species
in very great abundance
in company with Curlews,
Oyster Catchers
and Sandpipers.'

I have yet
to see the Godwit
but know this:
it fattens up
before flight,
awaits a storm
before departure,
its migratory path spans
29,000 kilometres.

Their abundance
has passed
as we drain
their wetlands
for our journey.

Spring Rain

Small things
tell us
how it works:

steam rising
from
a rain-soaked fence;

glistening drops
slipping from
new leaves;

transmitters
on pole lines
washed clean;

stalking birds
pulling worms
through the grass.

Safari

A visit —
a safari into the past —
the Natural History Museum
of Vienna.

A surprise —
being used to the interactive —
glass display cases,
long and high,
creatures out of reach.

On display —
the extinct Dodo and Thylacine —
their plumes and hair
fastidiously arranged
into
a taxidermist's version of life

Birds: An Ontological Position

My backyard currawong
flaps its big black
body between
the winter-green trees,
calls
and prods the past:

snow gums
with icicles
dripping from leaves;

wombat tracks
criss-crossing
the snow;

the currawong's call
stalking
my winter landscape
of loneliness.

Wetlands at Night

Mewling mudflats
awaiting
your claw prints.

Hard Wiring

Apparently,
we are genetically coded
to reveal
our predictable
ancestral patterns.

And,
there are those
neural pathways
which form
embedded circuits.

This morning
a turtle dove
cooed
its endless
love song.

Even the peak-hour surge
of engines, tyres,
and revving trucks
failed to obliterate
its call.

Why do I hear
the irritating
buzz of traffic
but listen for
the softness of a
pigeon's coo?

Toondah or not Toondah

Go, drain the wetlands,
build your mansions,
those psychic soothers
of rampant capitalism.

Unwrap your plastic life
and leave your littering values
for the next generation
to sweep up.

Unpick the seams
of the natural world
and restitch it
with your shallowness.

It's okay.
The planet
will survive
without us.

National Geographic, p. 46

Now,
here's my dream —

that the holes
peppering
the tidal flats
are the small holes
of the darting crabs
nourishing
migrating curlews

not those of
the pylon maker
preparing for
a concrete pour.

'Tender Loving Care Required'

The sign
next to the fern reads,
Tender loving care required —
a reminder that
even this mundane purchase
requires decision making.

My neighbour chose
to fell the eucalypt
in his newly-acquired
front yard
and spotlight
the liquid amber.

The council workers,
unable to identify
the dying lilly pilly,
chainsawed the living
leaving two stumps
instead of one.

I weed out those words
in the forest of syllables
seeking and reflecting —
oh so painstakingly.
Sadly,
that plant can't be mine.

Between the Twitterings

In the quiet spaces
between twitterings
I still
the hullabaloo
of death.

Sandblasting

Although Spring,
the winter shards of
child abuse
scroll endlessly
across my screen.

There goes another mogul,
celebrity,
proselytizer of religion,
intimate family member,
prowler of power.

The faint echo of
my aunt's man
jogs a childhood memory
of her reading
AA Milne with
her covering tone:
it was all about
cherry stones.

'Tinker, tailor,'
... if it were only
a saucepan
and suit
that needed
mending.

Noisy Minors

Let's not neglect
those fluffy chicks
courting my backyard
with their cries of hunger.

Why Am I Worried?

1. Families are complex microcosms.
2. Establishing outward bound pathways is difficult.
3. The tightrope between individual and family worlds is hard to walk.
4. Technical innovations do not support intergenerational crossings.

Four generations —
the centre
of our world?
The mobile phone.

A brief touch allows
us to transgress
the loneliness
of time and space.

We fly
like curlews
across borders
to rest
in migratory spaces
but are blind
to the hardening crust
around the centre
that once joined us.

On the Psychologist's Couch

Sitting
on the psychologist's couch,
seeking the hidden narrative
that orders
my haphazard thoughts,
I question
the god of normalcy
who places two baubled
party-girls-for-hire
on the cover of
a real estate magazine.

Stepping out
in my cloak of understanding,
I cross
the barrier of
commercial razzmatazz
seeking to savour
the sweetness of
understanding
but taste instead
the bitter auger
of dying coral reefs
and desiccated wetlands.

Oscillation

Eyes lead
to my exterior,
but when sleep
scrambles my senses
all is set in disarray.

Flick!
There,
do you see
my survival tools?
Water, kettle,
knives, stove,
salt, tea, coffee,
toaster, fridge —
the rhythm
of horizontal handles,
on cupboards
hiding the rest.

Flick,
I'm on your
journey
scanning the horizon,
searching for a resting place.
I wake knowing
your survival
is threatened by mine.

Expulsion

We expel you
without thinking.
Just look at the stats
in Queensland.

Chainsaws massacre
your habitat,
bulldozers rip
roots from the soil.
men trample
your breeding grounds
in preparation for
their personal seeding.

A Scattering of Feathers

Within
my forest of mournings
rests an injured child,
an immanent death,
more recent losses.

And here,
on the ground
of the mown parkland
rests a cluster
of protruding bones
tangled with
the indigo feathers
of your life.

Not This Year

There are
no nests
in my garden
this year.

My dog
has guarded
his territory
too well.

No fledglings
making their
first flight
between the shrubs.

No parents
overseeing
their struggling
beginner.

But, around the corner
a wattle bird
shrieks its defence
from the camellia.

Losses and Gains

Angst
holds me
to the task
of penning
negative thoughts:
what if
there were
no bird calls
in the morning?

Yet,
sound attraction
and nesting boxes
are drawing
the white-faced storm petrel
to the restored
Rhagodina habitat
on Montague Island.

Whoops and Whelps

Rooted in sandy soil,
a coastal pine stands
host to
a predawn
chorus of
chattering:
those coos, squawks,
whoops, whelps
and warbles —
all anticipating
the arrival of
the sun.

That Dream: A Partially Found Poem

'Like a dream
not sure of where it's going ...
it throbs
beneath the surface ...
bubbling
out of a swamp.'⁴

That curlew,
that tide,
that mudflat,
that mangrove,
that mollusc,
that crustacean.

The flight
that brings you here.

⁴ Laskin, P 2013 'In the Womb: Hearing a Baby's Heart Beat for the First Time' in *The Bonsai Curator*, Červená Barva Press, Somerville, USA

Thou Art With Me Blackbird

Thou art with me:
your whiteness,
your blackness,
your strut,
your seeking,
your attack,
your swoop,
the quirky angle of
your head.

I carry you with me
in elongated memories,
strung in the abundant circle
of my dream-catching life.

Reprieve from Gravity

It began with a dream —
a soaring flight
above
a deep sudsy bath,
a brown linoleum floor.

Then I was running —
down a dirt path
leaping
swiftly
into flight.

En route
to Singapore
I saw
the rise and fall
of land,
glittering rivers, muddy dams,
the flecks of
warm-blooded beasts.

Land bound,
now,
I soar and search
our coastal shorelines
for remnant wetlands.

Let's Be Local

Let's be local
and personal
for a moment.

Four magpies
have taken up residence
in my yard

Diagonally behind,
all trees and bushes
have been bulldozed
prior to
the demolition
of the house.

The new neighbours
felled
the significant tree
in theirs.

I watered well
in this week of
unseasonal heat.
The worms rose.
They came.

Did you know
magpies integrate
the song lines of others
into their calls?

Such a timely preparation
for the performance of
Mahler's Ninth.

The Concrete Pour

Now,
here's my dream:
that the holes peppering
the Yellow Sea tidal flats
be the fine holes
of crabs
nourishing
the eastern curlews
en route to Tooradin,
not
the gridded holes
a drill spiralling down
for the concrete pour.

Swarming Dots

I replay
childhood moments
again
and again.
It's a compulsion
fuelled by loss:
the swarming dots
of migrating birds;
the flit of blue wrens
between the scattered bushes
along the side of the house.

Data Mining

Tracking devices follow
your flight paths
and mine.

Each journey,
each call
slips into
a data bank.

You have changed
your habits:
you rest longer
at your relay stops;
there is less food
on a diminishing shore line.

John Gould, too,
gave us data:
he recorded
your abundance.

We record
your demise.

Data Mining 2: The Paradise Parrot – A Found Poem

'The Paradise Parrot
excavated a cavity
into a low round,
termite mound ...

It constructed
a long narrow tunnel;
up to
90 centimetres long,
leading to
a wide nesting chamber,
about 20 centimetres high
and about
twice as wide.

The main reason for
the demise of
the Paradise Parrot
appears to have been
habitat change...
over grazing,
altered fire and water regimes,
invasion by Prickly Pear,
removal of termite mounds
for
tennis courts, ovens, floors and roads,
increased predators,
exploitation for
the E bird trade.⁵

⁵ Taylor S, 2012, *John Gould's Extinct and Endangered Birds of Australia*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, p,15.

Easter Sunday

Here I am
juggling ambivalences:
altruism — self concern,
generosity — selfishness,
psychic interpretations —
biochemical explanations.

Yet,
on this
Easter Sunday morning
I am replete
as the magpies chorale
the moving air
and my dog chases
the Indian Minor
away from
the pickings of
last night's barbeque.

Sea Birds

Although silent
during flight,
sea birds,
variously,
creak, croak, cackle,
squeak, quack, squawk,
wheeze, wail and whine,
moan, grunt and growl,
boom, bray,
click, clack,
chirp, cluck,
bill clap
and call
kek-kek-kek
whilst nesting.

Vale Timmy the Cat

To take a life —
not let nature
run its course —
to feel the weight of
my hand and mind
in the burden of death
is unspeakable.

It's easier
at a distance
as I succumb to
the glossy desire for
and ever brighter
and more beautiful —
residence by the sea —
and hear
the thumping rhythm
of the pylon makers
replacing wetlands
as nothing more than
the mere white noise
of progress.

A Night of Deep Listening

Last night
it was a trio:
piano, percussion, didgeridoo
with a cameo performance
from the totemic
Red Crested Black Cockatoo.

Stillness,
musical moments,
the didgeridoo
peppering the void
with the cockatoo's call,
the percussion echoing
life's unexpected turns,
the piano
soothing away
its implications,
the cockatoo
giving voice
to its creation
and
demise.

So Large, So small

That Indian Minor
pecking at the dog's food,
runs at my approach,
flutters against the glass
it doesn't understand.

I shooing,
chase,
afraid to grasp
its anxious wings,
to hold so warm
and soft a body
in my hands,
my hidden fears
buried in its fluttering.

Dark Crab Holes in the Mud

Beyond the board walk,
the dark holes
of small crabs
pock mark
the tidal mud.

Their darting,
erratic jumps
break up
the reflected light
on the watery surface.

The claws marks
of departed Curlews
are long gone;
washed away
by the inevitable tide.

My Trajectory

Rain fell last night.
The air is damp
and still.
Small puddles remain
at the uneven intersections
of the tiles
in the courtyard.

A jack hammer
throbs in
a neighbour's yard.
Distant calls
suggest the magpies
still linger —
but not in my yard.

Today, I wonder at
my own trajectory —
an in-house scribe
watching birds, listening
but hearing
the urban rattling
of the machines outside.

To take flight
is my dream —
to escape
the mundane, weekly patterns
of suburban life
and follow the curlew's flight
to Siberia.

Weaving Nests

Here are the questions:

Why birds?

Why migratory flight paths?

Why empty nests?

Those intersecting trajectories
meeting within me
stem from sources
beyond memory
or my capacity
for explanation.

At the intersections
my needle and thread
dart and weave
a mourning for
the lost —
an anxious hope
for the remains.