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PHD

**A DIFFERENT CAGE WITH WORDS: A POETIC REIMAGINING OF  
FLIGHTLESS BIRDS**

Corlett, Rosemarie

**Award date:**  
2021

*Awarding institution:*  
University of Plymouth

[Link to publication in PEARL](#)

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
PLYMOUTH**

**A DIFFERENT CAGE WITH WORDS: A POETIC REIMAGINING OF  
FLIGHTLESS BIRDS**

by

**ROSEMARIE CORLETT**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth

in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

School of Society and Culture

**October 2021**

## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to my supervisors Miriam Darlington, Min Wild and Angela Smith.

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

This thesis has been proofread by a third party; no factual changes or additions or amendments to the argument were made as a result of this process. A copy of the thesis prior to proofreading will be made available to the examiners upon request.

This study was financed with the aid of a studentship from University of Plymouth and carried out in collaboration with University of Plymouth.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included research seminars with Plymouth Doctoral College.

The following external institutions were visited for research and consultation purposes:

**Publications:**

Corlett, R. (2016) 'Game Bird'. *Thief*, 3. 20. Tribe Media.

Corlett, R. (2018) 'Karen Carpenter on Drums in the Azaleas'. *Iota Magazine*, 97. 52.

Templar Poetry.

Corlett, R. (2018) 'Paper Bird'. *Poetry Wales*, 54 (2). 46. Seren.

Corlett, R. (2019) 'God is an Ostrich'. *Lighthouse Journal*, 18. 57. Gatehouse Press.

Corlett, R. (2020) 'Unresolved Dualities: Cultural Constructions of Flightless Birds in Contemporary Poetry', in Harper, G. (ed) *Responding to Creative Writing*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Corlett, R. (2020) 'Margot Don't Travel', *Finished Creatures*. 4.

**Presentations at Conferences:**

'Unresolved Dualities: Cultural Constructions of Flightless Birds'. *The Great Writing International Creative Writing Conference*. Imperial College, London, July 2019.

'Unresolved Dualities: Cultural Constructions of Flightless Birds'. *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment Biannual Conference*. Plymouth University. July 2019.

**Word count of main body of thesis:**

Critical Component – 31528 words

Poetry Collection – 55 pages

Signed: Rosemarie Corlett

Date: 05/10/21



**Rosemarie Corlett**

**A Different Cage with Words: A Poetic Reimagining of Flightless Birds**

*Are you Early or Late, in the history of birds*

*which doesn't exist, and is deeply ancient?*

Les Murray (2007, p.202)

**Abstract**

This practice-based project considers cultural constructions of flightless birds and initiates this topic as significant through original poetry. Through an ecocritical lens, it selects for exploration and analysis aspects of existing poetry, mythology, literature and art showcasing or including the emu, ostrich and great auk. As patterns emerge in the data, the original poetry arises as a dynamic response to recurring cultural concepts. My poetry borrows, resists, challenges and jumps off from these concepts through a creative process.

The question of incomplete dualities drives and shapes the project's thinking, inviting me to consider and express myself in these terms. I use my poetry as a way of speaking forth elements of gendered experience which resist the rigidities of disciplinary discourse; the figure of the flightless bird acts as a muted other looking for a place of articulation, and in its chronicles, especially its disasters of extinction, mockery, mutilation and death, I make poetry which not only addresses both the plight and place of these birds, but which also rehearses an allied concern with forms of failure or lack in human interactions.

Against the backdrop of a cultural understanding of flightless birds which can be figured as analogous to those conceptual frameworks which characterise sexism, speciesism and ableism, theoretical ideas inform and infuse the poetry, but never appear as fixed or dogmatic standpoints within it: the ideas are interrogated through the

creative practice. The writing, immediate and playful, moves towards precision obliquely, showing the ecofeminist frameworks it alludes to in a prismatic way. The work situates the reader as a participant in the energy of the poem – shifting voices, perspectives, tenses and discourses to destabilise the obvious, the polemical, the prescriptive, and to re-absorb the reader's attention from point to point. The poetry invokes a number of competing and disparate discourses, using scientific, taxonomic, zoological descriptions to estrange and enrich its representations. Autobiography is present in the form of memories which can emerge in the weft of the poem, and sometimes very specific cultural references offer another way of giving the poetry an energetic and richly startling power. A wit of dissonance and incongruity is another way in which the poetry resists settling into cliché or stasis. Deeply interested in animal and human physicality, the poems have sometimes an erotic charge, and they always begin from a standpoint that resists presumptions of power, hierarchy, or condescension.

## Contents

Contents .....	8
List of Tables .....	8
List of Figures .....	9
Introduction .....	10
Chapter 1 – The Cultural Representation of Flightless Birds – an Unusual Predicament.....	16
Introduction .....	16
1.1– Ballerinas and Spinsters – Marginalised Characters .....	20
1.2 – The Emu in the Sky – Divine, Supernatural Figures .....	32
1.3 – A Feather in your Cap: Captive, Punished and Fetishized Creatures.....	42
Chapter 2 – Stubby Little Wings - Feminism, Ecofeminism and Flightless Birds .....	51
Introduction .....	51
2.1 – Duality and Reciprocity in Feminist Theory .....	52
2.2 – Being in the Wrong Body .....	61
2.3 – Vocality and Mobility .....	64
2.4 – Ecofeminism and the Negative Dialectic.....	67
Chapter 3 – Poetry as a Reimagining of Flightless Birds .....	78
Introduction .....	78
3.1 – I’ll Invent an Emu.....	84
3.2 – Prophet-like that Lone One Stood .....	90
3.3 – Ladies Kindly Remove Your Hats .....	94
3.4 – St Kilda.....	98
Conclusion.....	106
Contemporary Context: Poetics and Aesthetics .....	109
A Different Cage with Words – Poetry Collection.....	120
Bibliography .....	175
List of Publications Produced During Period of Study .....	200

## List of Tables

Table 1 - He Digesteth Harde Yron.....	92
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## List of Figures

Figure 1 American Airlines, Advertisement Illustration. (Dorne, 1941) .....	56
Figure 2 Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Oil mural and fresco. Raphael., da Udine, G., Romano, G., (1519-24) .....	58

## Introduction

Birds have appeared in poems since the Greek augurs, and contemporary poetry shows no sign of tiring of all things avian (O’Riordan, 2009). Our fascination with these creatures endures, as their physiology dictates that they be fleeting in our lives and that we can never know them. If strangeness is indeed the canonical quality of sublime literature (Bloom, 1995, p.3), our unknowing of birds makes them inexhaustible subjects. The human fascination with flight seems to be associated with our desire for the pure transcendence of art.

The capacity to fly is central to birds’ constructed identity in mythical consciousness, as their supernatural power and usefulness to humans stem from this ability. Indeed, Greek doves must fly if they are to function as psychopomps, escorting the newly deceased from earth to the afterlife (Warren Chad and Taylor, 2016, p.114). Chinese cranes must fly if Taoist immortals are to transform into them and travel to other realms (Hung, 2015, p.58). Norse ravens must fly if they are to whisper words into Odin’s ear (Larrington, 2008, p.127). As far back as Plato’s Socratic dialogue *Phaedrus*, the soul and flying are deeply conjoined, and the wing is portrayed as the corporeal element most akin to the divine ([370BCE]2009). Augurs once interpreted bird flight patterns as messages from the Gods, and the ancient auspice as symbolic form endures and evolves into the twenty-first century: we now imagine unidentified flying objects as originating from other planets. The physical process of flight patterns once engendered the accompanying myth of divine messages in the sky. Now the existing archetype of the bird as messenger creates an according vision of extra-terrestrial life (Jung, 1959, p.xiv). In a contemporary context, it has been suggested that the symbolic form that flight birds take on in mythical thinking enables humans to return their post-

mythical minds to a primitive world where everything is interconnected (Savodnik, 2003, p.447). Thus, as the modern scientific mind turns to fertility treatment, the mythical mind trusts the flying white stork as predictor of imminent pregnancy.

There is an oblique historical conversation between the rich mythological identity of flight birds and their portrayal in poetry. As the scientific mind encourages an objective distance, poetry provides a form within which the mythical mind can speak, relax and play out its yearnings. In contemporary poetry, birds are portrayed as messengers, able to bring or communicate divine things to humans that would ordinarily be outside of our reach. A crow is created as God's companion to improve on his creation (Hughes, 2009). Sea birds are presented as auguries, situated in ecological and historical events (Smith, 2014). In Jorie Graham's poem 'The Phase after History', two junco birds appear as signifiers of the theme of entrapment, and their flight mirrors humans' compulsive desire for release (Gardner, 2005, p.223).

Given that flight is essential to humans' symbolic understanding and narrative appropriation of birds, what happens in stories to birds that cannot fly? And how is the flightless bird's role constructed in contemporary culture?

From a mythological perspective, flightless birds occupy a unique and peculiarly loaded status in popular consciousness, as we attempt to explain, justify, or transform their grounded nature, which is like our own, of course. Anticipated through the lens of their avian relatives, flightless birds are often understood within a framework of inadequacy. Aristotle puzzles over the ostrich's useless feathers and its being unable to soar aloft (1883). The Maori imagine that the kiwi, once able to fly, sacrificed its spectacular colourful plumage to save the dying forest, where the tui, the pukeko and the cuckoo refused (Warren Chad and Taylor, 2016, p.170), thus legitimising the kiwi's flightlessness as the consequence of self-sacrifice. Australian aboriginal mythology takes the flightless emu and places it in the sky, spotting a constellation of

opaque clouds of dust and naming it ‘the emu in the sky’ (Fuller et al, 2014, p171).

Here the flightless protagonist of the aboriginal dreamtime story is stencilled onto the stars, ‘transforming meaning into form’ (Barthes, 1987, p131), through astronomical interpretation.

Given that flightless birds occupy a distinctive yet nuanced space in popular consciousness, how can our conception of these creatures be further imagined, diversified and celebrated through poetry? My project critically investigates the existing ways in which the identity of flightless birds and their relationship with humans is constructed in contemporary poetry, and contributes to this conversation through the creation of new work. The practice-based element of the project seeks to find an entry into the conversation by reflecting upon the many ways in which birds can be flightless. In this sense, it addresses the idea of flightlessness in playful and curious modes, looking not only at birds that have lost the ability to fly through evolution, but reflecting on caged birds, stuffed birds, paper birds and mythical avifauna. My intention in this project differs from zoopoetics in the sense that it does not seek to be the articulator of animals. My contribution to knowledge lies in inventing new bird mythology in a contemporary context and proposing a negative mytho-poetics that seeks to re-imagine a form of lack as a plenitude.

The project reflects on flightlessness as an imagined scarcity, a model of deficiency applied to living and extinct birds, and this invites further interdisciplinary conversation. Because conceptions of flightless birds must always focus on lack, feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and modern philosophers of the negative such as Theodor Adorno will help to furnish frameworks for my thinking. The project will build impact as my work explores and challenges the gaze that assumes the centrality of select species based on aesthetic value. Its content

overlaps with discussions that link to evolution, Holocene extinction, the construction of otherness and the discourse of power in the Anthropocene.

What stories do we tell about birds that cannot fly and what new stories can we create? If the flight bird is the messenger, the omen, the interpreter of the will of the Gods, what role can the flightless bird play in our imaginations and how might this role be showcased and enjoyed via contemporary poetry? This creative and philosophical project offers rich new perspectives on the unconsidered and the marginal and asks this: what new ways of thinking can the evocation of these creatures offer to twenty-first century culture?

The thesis begins by considering how flightless birds are portrayed in stories, myths and fables. I organise the literature review into three sections: flightless birds as marginalised, supernatural and subjugated creatures. Within these sections I present, collate and analyse several cultural representations of flightless birds. These sections are not exhaustive. Of course, portrayals of flightless birds do not always fall into these three categories. These, however, are the accretional cultural concepts that I have observed in my reading. Additionally, organising the literature review in this way gives me the opportunity to highlight the cultural basis on which these portrayals appear to develop. For example, I find more examples of flightless birds as supernatural divine figures in African representations, and more examples of flightless birds as captured and subjugated creatures in Western literature. Organising the literature review in this way shines a light on how colonial history plays a part in how flightless birds are understood. Ostriches, whilst ridden and raced by the rich in parts of Africa, were also divine symbols of fairness and justice in Egyptian culture. The emu holds great mythical importance in Australian aboriginal culture, while its oil is sold as a female beauty product in other parts of Australia. The consumption of these animals happens everywhere, but this consumption exists within a broader spiritual context for



communities who have lived and shared their lives with these creatures. This lack of nuance, the single-story approach of catching these birds and owning them as trophies, is widely reflected in western literature, as will be shown.

Next, I will consider the portrayal of flightless birds through an ecofeminist lens. Flightless birds are unique in the animal world in terms of the language used to describe them. From an ecofeminist perspective, the ostrich and emu suffer two alienations: being animals and not being able to fulfil the function that humans associate with those animals. The Great Auk suffers a third alienation, being extinct. I draw on the concept of gender to analyse the relationship between humans and animals. But I also acknowledge that flightless birds represent one part of a duality, not just in relation to humans, but in the animal world unto themselves. So, my intention is to look at flightless birds as a special example, not just as suffering the first order differentiation of being animals, but also the second order differentiation of being divorced from their own species in the way they are described by humans. Ecofeminism helps me relate the oppression and dominance of marginalised groups to the oppression and domination of animals, and within this human/animal duality exists a further animal/animal duality for flightless birds. I draw a parallel between this animal/animal duality and the human/human duality that exists with men and women, using Simone de Beauvoir's work to inform my understanding of this predicament.

In the following major section, I will present and analyse a selection of my own poems. The function of this is to demonstrate the ways in which the poetry summons cultural understandings of flightless birds, to show where these representations are explored, questioned and unsettled, and to introduce my personal, gendered experience and response through my creative work. The first poem, 'I'll Invent an Emu' attempts to 'invent' an emu working backwards from emu products (oil, meat, string, knives), human descriptions of the emu and emu mythology. These three discourses mix to

create a defamiliarizing conversation with the factual. Satirical in its tone, the poem woefully tries to conjure the bird from its disparate, human-centred representations.

The next poem, 'Ladies Kindly Remove Your Hats', looks specifically at the fashion for ostrich feathers in women's hats in the 1910s. It explores the symbolic weight of this heavily traded object in the context of cinema at the time, where women's luxurious hats were so large that they obstructed the view of the film during cinema screenings. As such, the advice 'Ladies, Kindly Remove your Hats' was often published on boards outside cinema screens, much to women viewers' consternation.

The poem 'St Kilda' tells the story of the end of the St Kildan community, and the Great Auk's extinction. It situates the bird's fate as prefiguring that of the islanders', considering the scramble for the great auk's resources and the bird's eventual eradication as a bleak foreshadowing of the treatment that the St Kildans would later be subject to themselves.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on the human desire to reimagine, 'bring back' and capture animals through representation. Revive & Restore is the leading wildlife conservation organization promoting the incorporation of biotechnologies into standard conservation practice. Currently, its group of specialists are planning to 'bring back' the great auk from extinction through genome editing. This scientific research is used as a springboard for considering the many ways in which humans attempt to appropriate and hold still flightless birds. It is seeking to gain insight into the broader intentions within both art and science, such as appropriation, curiosity and atonement, that underpin the human desire to 'save' animals. I consider my own part in this as a poet, and reflect upon the motivations behind the violent and non-violent ways flightless birds are represented and consumed.

# **Chapter 1 – The Cultural Representation of Flightless Birds – an Unusual Predicament**

## **Introduction**

The phrase ‘flightless bird’ brings together several bird species and files these species into one group. The criterion for belonging to this group is a negative one, describing a lack: the inability to fly. The grouping of certain bird species under the umbrella of ‘flightless’ speaks to the notion that human understanding of animals is aligned with their abilities and the fulfilment of certain behaviours in the world. Looking at the ostrich, the emu and the great auk in stories, myths, fables and poetry, this chapter focuses on certain accretional cultural concepts associated with these creatures.

The term ‘flightless bird’ supports the model according to which animals and humans are judged in line with what they cannot, in some context, do, and in this sense the term articulates the deficit model that the burgeoning field of animal and disability studies seeks to challenge. The categorisation of flightlessness alienates the bird from its own class of animals, according to a criterion set by humans. Where the knowledge and language we have about animals become an index of power (Berger, 2009, p.14) that separates us from them, the term flightless bird also manages to separate *them* from them. This process of alienation highlights flightless birds as notable subjects in the limiting human rhetoric of animality, as discussed by Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* (2012, p.160), and is an invitation to explore the politics of representation of these creatures.

Historically, the conversations around animal welfare anchor themselves in the idea that an animal’s rights are dependent on and/or informed by their abilities and lack of abilities, as perceived by humans. Given that flightless birds are categorised

according to what they cannot do, conversely it is revealing to reflect on animals' special capabilities as key historical factors in how humans have approached them.

The year the French Revolution began, Jeremy Bentham, one of the earliest proponents of animal rights, contributed to the debate around animal welfare and confirmed this conversation as being rooted in the tension between animals' ability and lack of ability. Against the backdrop of Cartesian rationalism, which designates animals as complex machines (La Mettrie, [1749] 1953), Bentham proposed that 'The question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? But, Can they *suffer*?' ([1789]1907, p.311. emphasis in original). The emphasis was on which ability people should consider more or most important as they approach animals and their welfare.

In 2002, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, Jacques Derrida approached Bentham's question as still being entangled with the idea of what animals can and cannot do from the perspective of the human, and argued that this question on the capacity for suffering renounces the idea of capability. He said 'The word can [pouvoir] changes sense and sign here once one asks, "Can they suffer?" Henceforth it wavers... "Can they suffer?" amounts to asking "Can they not be able?"' (Derrida, 2008, pp. 27-28). The discourse moves from questioning what animals can actively achieve (reasoning, talking) to what they can passively endure (suffering). Where talking and reasoning are active, self-directed activities, suffering is something that happens to the animal. In this sense 'this question on the capacity for suffering foregoes the very concept of capacity, capability, or power, suggesting instead a radical form of passivity' (Meighoo, 2014, p.55).

In both cases, ability or lack of ability is the organisational factor in human conversations about animal rights. The grouping of flightless birds into a category is an example of lack of ability being a criterion that distinguishes and classifies the animal,

and also speaks to human efforts to establish order and hierarchy within these categorisations.

In evolutionary terms, however, the systems that underpin these classifications are unfixed and evolving. Indeed, flightlessness is not a passive feature. Molecular evidence suggests that ratites (a diverse group of flightless birds) trace their ancestry back to a flying relative; they flew to different continents and evolved their flightless features separately as they were not critical to survival (Baker et al, 2014, p.1687). ‘In both evolutionary and moral terms, ‘better’ must always be ‘better at something’ (Garrard, 2012, p.150) – the human designation of flightlessness erases the evolving nature of this feature, and the idea of lack of ability inherent in how we approach animals remains the language we use to describe these creatures.

Equally, not only does the ability of individual birds to fly evolve over time, but aptitude and characteristics of flight also vary greatly across species. Heavy chicken breeds fly a foot off the ground for a very short distance. ‘Bounding flight’, ‘flapping flight’ and ‘gliding flight’ have different properties, and coordinated formation flight varies from species to species, and can be absent. Greg Garrard affirms that

[t]he great insight of animal studies, in its productive encounter with the biological sciences, is not that there are no differences between humans and other animals, but that differences are everywhere: not only are individual humans and animals different to each other, but all species are different to each other as well. Uniqueness is not unique, because differentiation is one of the things evolution does.

(2012, p.149).

As the term ‘flightless bird’ becomes less and less compelling from an evolutionary and cross-species perspective, the question around the human need that the term is responding to is highlighted. John Berger contends that in one sense all of anthropology is an answer to the question about what the secrets are of the animal’s similarities and differences with humans. He suggests that these ‘secrets’ are about the animal as an

intercession between man and his origin (2009, p.4). From a human perspective (against the backdrop of animals existing in between man and his origin), the simultaneously similar and dissimilar lives of animals make them vulnerable to being perceived as not having a real existence but as representing some truth about humans. Indeed, Renaissance emblem books, animal fables and proverbs evidence the human tendency to use animal stories as analogies for human behaviour. In fact, it is even suggested this human cultural expression depends upon the animal metaphor: 'Altogether, the large number of animal proverbs allows us to claim that, without animals, proverbs would be unthinkable' (Schnoor, 2007, p.543). Proverbs, for example, are saturated with animals, but their function is to reflect the human, and not the animal world. Indeed, 'If the first metaphor was animal, it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric' (Berger, 2009, p.16). Thus, the category of flightless bird acts as a second order differentiation in the animal world, that supports and contributes to the acquisition of the capacity for '[man] to distinguish himself as he distinguishes them – i.e., to use the diversity of species for conceptual support for social differentiation' (Levi-Strauss, 1964, p.101).

Cultural attitudes towards flightless birds are revealed through the roles they occupy in literature. For example, the themes of ignorance and selfishness appear in relation to the emu in the one of the tales of the wheelman tribe of Western Australia, (Hassell and Davidson, 1934, p.240); this also applies to the ostrich in poetry (Mog Weol, 2015, p.151; Walling, 1991, p.124) and the penguin in poetry (Wright, 2011, p.4). Maternal duty and suffering appear for the kiwi (Major, 1994, p.25) and consistently for the ostrich: in the South African folk tale 'The Lonely Lioness and the Ostrich' (Ardema and Heo, 1996), the south African folk tale of the ostrich (Honey, 1910, p.98) and the Aesop fable 'The Ostrich and the Pelican' (L'Estrange and Goode, 1992, p.100). Equally, the ostrich's commodification and treatment as an object arises

consistently in English children's books set in South Africa (Jenkins, 1999, p.17), and this cultural appropriation can also be reflected upon in the context of bird plumage in women's hats, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hennefield, 2016, p.24). The flightless bird's relationship with death proves more complex, as the ostrich feather holds the key to admission to the afterlife in ancient Egypt (Roman d'Elia, 2015) and footprints that emus leave in the sand can chart ancestral journeys (Munn, 1983, p.139). In poetry, the ostrich can both be lauded as a symbol of biological resilience (Ross, 1984, p.332), as well as representing sickness and decay (Comer, 2016, p.258).

Turning specifically now to the ostrich, the emu and the great auk in stories, myths, fables and poetry, I will examine three accretional cultural concepts associated with these creatures. Firstly, flightless birds appear as marginalised: as suffering or neglectful mothers, creatures in some way physically dysfunctional, characters that have secrets and who are ostracised from their community. Secondly, flightless birds can emerge as divine, supernatural figures. Thirdly, they can appear as subjugated characters, often captured, punished and fetishized.

### 1.1– Ballerinas and Spinsters – Marginalised Characters

If animals become analogies for human social differentiation, it follows that humans would showcase this differentiation in their anthropomorphic portrayals of animals. As 'culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture' (Baker, 1993, p.4), lack of ability becomes part of the cultural portrayal of flightless birds. For example, in the 1940 Walt Disney animated film, *Fantasia*, ostriches appear as ballerinas in one of its segments, a pastiche of the ballet *Dance of the Hours*. The ostriches portrayed as ballet dancers aren't exempt from the usual neoteny associated with Disneyfication: large eyes, rounded features and, in this case,

big pink bows on their heads. But the humour in *Dance of the Hours* emerges from the contrast between the animals' bulky and lumbering shapes and the graceful, soaring motions associated with ballet. The ostrich, transformed into spectacle, disappears in every way except to highlight its body's inadequacy in a human context. As well as physical inadequacy, there is a further layer of meaning that informs the parody. The dancing ostriches are not androgynous; they are women, and the femininity associated with ballet is key to making the sketch funny. Whether we agree with choreographer George Balanchine, that 'ballet is woman', or choreographer Pam Tanowitz, that ballet is a man's idea of woman (Macauley, 2017, p.14), the meanings that flow from ballet are certainly gendered. And in this sense, the ostriches, dressed up as ballerinas, are mocked for their similarity and dissimilarity to this symbol of ultra-femininity.

The flightless great auk is subject to a complex gendered portrayal in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* ([1862] 2008). The Victorian novel tells the story of Tom, a child chimney sweep who, through a magical rebirth, is plunged into an underwater world, transformed into a 'water-baby', and given the opportunity to evolve into the man he should have been. Tom is advised by the King of Herrings to visit the Allalonestone, where the last of the Gairfowl (the great auk) lives. She is placed in a specialised, distinctly feminine role, described as 'the lady of an old house', a 'very grand old lady', and a 'chieftainess' (p.158). The bird's black and white colouring is imagined as a black velvet gown and a white pinner and apron. She wears spectacles, complains of the dreadful heat, croons an old song to herself, and is alone. Much like the ostriches in *Dance of the Hours*, she is a bird dressed up as woman, a female impersonator presenting a pastiche of a specific idea of femininity. And although her femininity is not the joke that it is in the *Fantasia* ballet sequence, the reader approaches her character as having an idea of herself, a sense of status, a 'high breeding', which is at odds with her body. Indeed, she is described as 'a full three feet



high', and the reader is told that 'instead of wings, she had two feathery arms, with which she fanned herself' (p.158). When the great auk talks about flight birds, she suggests that they are attempting, through flight, to 'raise themselves above their proper station in life'. Here, an animal is used to satirize an aspect of human life at the time. Victorian society being so hierarchical, notable Christian Socialist Kingsley highlights the absurdity of its rigid class system and the inability of its participants to see themselves and the world clearly – the charm and humour of the Great Auk's character is anchored in her misplaced, overly compensatory disdain towards flight birds, and her naïve idea of her own body.

Where the ostrich and great auk appear as women-birds in these stories, the flightless bird appears as a bird-woman in Nandi Comer's poem 'Ostrich Woman'. Comer describes her dying mother and her surroundings, her mother's 'ostrich legs, stock-still and raw-boned' (Comer, 2016, Appendix 1, p.258). The furtherance of the ostrich analogy begun in the first stanza occurs in the very last stanza, with the poet almost mistaking her mother for the bird. The poet corrects herself, having mentioned her mother's 'crippled wing', she starts again with 'I mean crippled wheelchair'. So here, rather than performing inside a functional, but inappropriate body (as with Disney's ostriches or Kingsley's Great Auk), the ostrich woman occupies an appropriate body that is lacking function. This idea of the flightless bird's body signaling illness or affliction is echoed in the tales 'The Ostrich, Birds and the Beasts' (L'Estrange and Goode, [1692] 1992, p.40) and 'The Lioness and the Ostrich' (Honey, 1910, p.98). In 'An Ostrich, Birds and Beasts', the birds and the beasts are in battle, and each group captures the ostrich on the same day, unable to distinguish it and thinking it an enemy. The ostrich shows its feet to prove it is not a bird, and shows its wings and beak to show it is not a beast. This story speaks to the fact that, for centuries, the bird was known as the *Struthio camelus* or "sparrow camel", and

many ancient, medieval, and Renaissance scientists who encountered it, viewed the bird as a hybrid – half bird, half beast. In the Aesop fable, the bird's inappropriate, unfamiliar and estranged body confirms it as belonging to neither the bird or beast group.

A more peculiar example of the ostrich's body being different and alienating comes in the South African folk tale 'The Lioness and the Ostrich' (Honey, 1910, p.98). The lioness observes that both she and ostrich have an equal roar, and invites the male ostrich to hunt with her. The ostrich is more successful in his hunt than the lioness and suggests she and her cubs eat the flesh and he drink the blood. But when the ostrich is asleep, the cubs look in its mouth and realise he has no teeth. The pair of antagonists are in opposition in the sense that one is female and a mother, the other is male and without offspring. Their parity is signaled by the presence of their equal roar, then undermined by the ostrich's absence of teeth. Feeling betrayed, and that the ostrich was not truly her 'match' as a hunter, the lioness challenges the ostrich to a fight. The ostrich, who appears both generous (offering the flesh of the hunt to the cubs) and as a survivor, (he wins the fight by directing an anthill to strike the lioness in the liver), is nonetheless undermined by his missing teeth. Having no teeth, and this appearing as a failing and a deception, seems to nod to three connected absences: muteness, flightlessness, and a lack of offspring. Flight, speech and producing offspring are connected in the sense that they each represent an expression, a manifestation of self in the world, perceived as healthy, vital or natural.

If flight is understood as a bird's expression in the world, flight can operate similarly to speech in the human imagination. In this sense, the ostrich's predicament speaks to the abstract definition of toothlessness, with being 'toothless' as lacking genuine force or effectiveness, even fecundity in this example, and also alludes to the muteness that humans perceive, as they interpret the bird's flightlessness as an

inability for the animal to articulate itself as designed. Toothlessness also indicates an inability to eat effectively, echoing the trope of the anvil lodged in the ostrich's throat, as well as gesturing to senility and powerlessness in humans. Indeed, the final lines in Nandi Comer's 'Ostrich Woman' are: 'I mean my mother, her voice./ I mean her walking, her dancing' (p.258). The poet expresses the experience of losing her mother, and the words she chooses to convey this are voice, walking and dancing – a loss of her mother's expression and vitality in the world. This extinguished body, described as an ostrich, feels like a negation of her as a mother, a betrayal of the body that was once fruitful.

Returning to the 'Lioness and the Ostrich' (Honey, 1910, p.98), the fact that the ostrich's missing teeth are discovered by the cubs by night alludes to the bird's physical inadequacy being secret or shameful. The Ostrich Woman in Comer's poem also has shameful secrets that link to disability. Here, the bird's flightlessness, or 'crippled wing' is equated with infirmity. The poet speaks of her mother's failure to keep up with the outside world, with 'so much mail, so many envelopes', and the 'creaking doors' and the 'cheap extension cords' suggesting poverty, degradation and loneliness. The themes of the ostrich being a woman, having secrets that isolate her from her community, and being physically dysfunctional come together. The scene her mother inhabits is one of decomposition and neglect: millet worms in the floor, rotted stairs, piles of things, a stained love seat and a soiled bathroom.

The flightless bird also shines a light on the theme of social marginalization in the human world in Robert Lowell's poem 'Skunk Hour' (2001, Appendix 2, p.89). Lowell gives a dawdling picture of a declining Maine sea town. The narrator reflects on his own loneliness, and remarks that no one is there with him except the skunks. In the final stanza, the poet chooses to describe the skunk's tail as an ostrich tail.

She jabs her wedge-head in a cup  
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare.

The word ostrich is used to provide ‘a metaphorical key to the poem’s major thematic concern’ (Walling, 1991, p124). The members of the community described in the poem: the hermit heiress, a lost summer millionaire, the decorator who would rather marry than work, are each ignoring some painful aspect of life, finding ways to put their heads in the sand (Walling, 1991, p.124). In this sense the ostrich idiom is discretely employed to shine a light on the negative characteristics of the community.

In the east African Maasai tale ‘The Lonely Lioness and the Ostrich Chicks’ (Aardema and Heo, 1996) and the Aesop fable ‘The Ostrich and the Pelican’ (L’Estrange and Gooden, [1692] 1992, p.100), the theme of femininity, considered through the lens of motherhood, links in with connected themes of maternal suffering and duty. ‘The Lonely Lioness and the Ostrich Chicks’ concerns a lioness who steals four chicks from a mother ostrich. The mother seeks help from a gazelle, hyena, jackal and mongoose, who trick the lioness into looking away long enough for the ostrich to take her chicks back. In this tale, we have two female antagonists. The ostrich benefits from a sense of family and belonging, albeit threatened, while another female character must endure loneliness. The ostrich is referred to as ‘mother ostrich’ throughout the book, but her function as a mother is presented as interchangeable with that of the lioness:

The lioness was so kind to the chicks that they soon forgot she was not their mother. And when she set out for her den, they followed in a line behind her.  
(Aardema and Heo, 1996, p.5)

The mother ostrich is a desperate character, ‘begging’ the lioness not to eat her young, ‘crying’ and ‘screaming’ for her to give her back the chicks, pleading with the gazelle,

hyena, jackal and mongoose to help her. She doesn't have the opportunity to practice bravery in the book, and finally rounds up her chicks while the 'small but fearless' mongoose distracts the lioness. However, the mother ostrich does have a certain agency in the sense that she initiated the rescue, if only through the force of her pleas. It is interesting to note that in both of these stories, the ability of the ostrich to make a lot of noise is important, suggesting that vocality may substitute for flight for them both.

This idea of the ostrich having resilience (echoing its biological resilience, as many of its flightless relatives are extinct) also appears in the Aesop fable 'The Ostrich and the Pelican' (L'Estrange and Gooden, [1692] 1992, p.100). This time, the flightless bird is pitted against a flight bird. The ostrich appears as the neglectful mother, and the moral of the story is that raising children is the highest calling, whatever the individual cost. The pelican feeds her young with her own blood, and this leaves the ostrich horrified:

'What! Is this your practice, to tear your own flesh, to spill your own blood, and to sacrifice yourself in this cruel manner to the importunate cravings of your young ones? I know not which to pity most, your misery or your folly'  
(L'Estrange and Gooden, 1992, [1692], p.100)

She advises the pelican to lay her eggs in the sand as she does, cover them with a little sand and leave them to be nursed by nature. Speaking of her own young, she says 'I give myself no trouble about them, and I neither know nor care what becomes of them'. The ostrich suggests that the pelican self-harms when she is 'cruel to her own flesh' feeding her young with her blood. The pelican replies that it is the ostrich who is cruel to herself by denying herself the tender delight of a mother's suffering.

This theme of maternal duty also appears for the emu in the children's book *Edwina the Emu* (Knowles and Clement, 1997), where Edwina, having given birth to ten emu eggs, goes out into the world to find a job. She wishes to be a ballerina, and

so, the trope of the flightless bird ballerina returns, as with Disney's *Fantasia* ostriches. This trope highlights the unconscious human desire for flightless birds to fly, or soar, like ballerinas, but doesn't allow the birds to achieve this in the narrative, and as such, puts into relief their inability to fly. The cognitive distortion humans experience with flightless birds manifests through the character of the flightless bird ballerina. In Edwina's first attempt to work, she is illustrated in a red tutu and red ballet shoes. The choice of red shoes echoes the maternal blood in 'The Ostrich and the Pelican', and also speaks to the Hans Christian Anderson fairytale *The Red Shoes*, where a young girl is cursed, as a punishment for her vanity and self-expression, for wearing her red dancing shoes to church. Edwina is scolded for her audacity; a human character, the casting agent, reprimands her:

‘YEEK!’ the man shouted, he seemed to be choking,  
‘An emu dance ballet? You’ve got to be joking!’  
(1997, p.9).

Edwina is criticised by humans in all her efforts to become useful or worthy of admiration in the human world, and each time, the line is repeated, where the human character ‘seems to be choking’. The word choice seems pertinent, given previous references to the importance of voice in this context: sometimes loud and essential, other times absent all together where the bird is mute, as will be shown in the next example ‘Ostrich and Lark’ (Nelson, 2012). Rather than the characters gasping, or being lost for words, they actually choke at the sight of the flightless bird at work. It is as though seeing the flightless bird attempting to ‘fly’ makes the human unable to speak. Given that Edwina is being perceived as greedy and foolish to want anything more than to spend time with her chicks, and that ostriches and emus have physical similarities, and can appear similarly in the human imagination, Might the resonance here chime with that of the popular image of the anvil in the ostrich's throat, as well as

the ostrich's 'toothlessness' seen earlier in the 'Lioness and the Ostrich'? Edwina discovers in her first shift as a waitress that humans eat eggs. She is reminded of her hatching chicks and dashes back to see them:

'Taxi!' she cried, 'take me home, make it fast,  
I know what the right job for me is – at last!' (p.23).

She returns to her eggs, having presumably found her true purpose. Surprisingly didactic for 1997, the book aligns itself with some of feminist arguments that will be explored in the next chapter. What differentiates the emu mother in *Edwina the Emu* and the ostrich mother in 'The Ostrich and the Pelican', is that the emu comes in line with her maternal duty, where the ostrich holds true to her independent stance. It seems that L'Estrange has secularised the Christian imagery of the pelican, which is usually taken to be the image of Christ's sacrifice, as its blood feeds its own children. This speaks to the earlier points about the ostrich being a biologically resilient and savvy bird-beast. To stay alive, the ostrich cannot afford the kind of piety the pelican promotes.

Indeed, the theme of vocality is about to return, but this time it is the lack of vocality for the bird which is a symbol of being able to absorb or avoid damage, and survive, in the children's book *Ostrich and Lark* by Marilyn Nelson (2012). It tells the story of an unlikely friendship between a small singing bird and a big silent one. Illustrated by members of the indigenous !Kung San, the story serves as a starting point for classroom discussions about Africa, ecosystems, and finding one's voice. The author gives the sense of time passing and a long friendship as in the first few pages she repeats that the ostrich and lark are together day in, day out, all day every day. This description of the passage of time provides an opportunity to put forward the relentlessness of the thrumming soundtrack of the African veld: 'the cicada's drone, a

drizzle of buzzings (...) a downpour of birdsong (...) Hornbill, Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Diederick, Mousebird, Whydah, Canary (...) warbled their rain-shower jazz' (Nelson, 2012, p.4) The hubbub of singing and the 'flickering', 'flitting' and 'trembling' of wings is punctuated by the repeated sentence 'But ostrich was silent' (Nelson, 2012, p.6). The other birds' wings are abundantly described, at one point as 'open and vermillion-spangled' (p.7). The ostrich's flightlessness is highlighted by the description of the other birds' wings and alluded to by the fact that the ostrich is mute. The author situates the bird's flightlessness as part of a wider yearning for freedom, expression and satisfaction:

Sometimes he dreamed of flying.  
Sometimes he dreamed of singing the sky full of stars.

Sometimes he dreamed  
of the green season, drinking  
caught water, and drinking, and drinking.  
(p.11)

When, at the end of the book, the ostrich finally finds his voice, it is described as

part lion's roar,  
part foghorn,  
part old man trumpeting into his handkerchief.  
(p.19).

This triptych of descriptions encapsulates the conflicting human understanding of the ostrich's expression in the world. The lion's roar signals the ostrich as part of the world of strong, majestic and dangerous animals. The foghorn situates the bird as oversized, loud from a distance, and obsolete. Finally, the old man trumpeting into the handkerchief alludes to the ostrich as an ill and uncouth figure. The bird's terrific scale of sound is then anchored in the landscape as the author continues:



Ostrich boomed like the rainstorm that ends  
the dusty months of thirst.

Ostrich boomed like the promise  
of jubilant green, like the promise of birth.  
(p.22)

Here it is as though the bird's biological resilience holds it as the symbol of new beginnings, of the idea that life returns, survives, and is cyclical. It is as though his muteness was one part of the story, the preface for expression and renewal. This is the third story where a loud voice as attribute is essential for the flightless bird. These folk tale constructions could be viewed as kindly, offering the apparently incomplete bird a form of compensation, a greater capacity in another function.

In another gendered portrayal of a flightless bird, Clarence Major reflects upon the flawed and absurd understanding that humans have of animals they have never encountered in his poem 'On Trying to Imagine the Kiwi Pregnant' (1994, Appendix 3, p.25). He begins with the admission:

Having never been  
to New Zealand's green forest,  
  
or North Island's Waitangi  
or the forest of northland,  
  
I can only imagine, to see,  
the little earthworm eater.  
(p.25)

Major describes the female kiwi anthropomorphically, as being 'mounted furiously and briefly/ by a he-kiwi', then going out 'looking to get laid again/and again/and again' – this self-consciously crude portrayal seems to acknowledge and show the author's ignorance. He is not denigrating the bird, but rather highlighting how little he knows about it. Major, an African American Postmodern artist, employs this narrative voice to present a glib and Eurocentric portrayal of the kiwi. Where in our earlier examples, the

figure of the flightless bird is used to shine a light on aspects of human society, as a lens through which to approach the characters in a text, Major situates himself as the flawed lens through which to approach the bird. Assuming the role of the species chauvinist, he presents a cerebral interior response to social reality, and invites the reader to join him in becoming explorers of their own interior landscape (Bell, 1994, p.8).

It has been noted that Clarence Major has pursued an art that suggests the complex dynamics of his double consciousness as an African-American postmodern artist (Bell, 1994, p.5). This move can be seen in this poem ‘On Trying to Imagine’ (1994, p.25) – an African-American man apprehends the kiwi from a Eurocentric perspective. This concept of double consciousness (Dubois, 1903) is a sense of inward ‘twoness’ experienced by African-Americans because of their oppression in a white-dominated society. Dubois describes the sensation of double-consciousness as

second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (1997 [1903], p.38).

The concept speaks to flightless birds’ predicament as culturally anticipated through the lens of their avian relatives, as with the ‘sparrow-camel’ ostrich, existing as two things at once.

Turning now to my own work, Major’s poem prompts the question: what can the necessarily inaccurate, perception of the flightless bird reveal about the poet, and the way the animal and human world is interpreted? Can my poetry be an invitation for others to explore what the imagined flightless bird reveals about their own attitudes, projections and prejudices? The creative element of the thesis aims to bring together various competing and disparate discourses around flightless birds, including

the mythological, the taxonomic, and the zoological, with a view to highlighting their collective incompleteness. The way in which Major's poem illuminates my own practice, as will be developed later, is that it does not seek to know the bird, but rather to expose, explore and unsettle the internal set of presumptions and narratives that make up my understanding of the bird who cannot fly.

As well as being portrayed as marginalised figures, flightless birds experience an inverse kind of attention, where they are culturally presented as supernatural figures. These two categories are connected in the sense that the marginalised figure can be hated or lauded for its strangeness, but never allowed to transcend it. The next section in this chapter looks at the ways in which flightless birds are linked to the supernatural, and what these links can further reveal about human thought in relation to these creatures.

## 1.2 – The Emu in the Sky – Divine, Supernatural Figures

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, five bird skins travelled back from New Guinea with Magellan aboard the *Victoria* (Andaya, 2017, p.374). Their feet and wings had been removed before their skins were traded, and this expedition saw the first specimens of birds of paradise reach Europe. In Antonio Pigafetta's account of Magellan's voyage, the birds were described as having long multi-coloured plumes resembling great panaches in the place of wings. The legend dispersed by explorers such as Pigafetta was that the birds lived in paradise, feeding on dew, only seen by humans when they died and fell to earth. Not yet seen alive by Europeans, the apparently wingless birds were made skybound through storytelling. Historian Jose Ramon Marcaida says that the absence of feet and wings engendered the European

conception of the bird of paradise as a natural wonder, and established the species as a permanently flying, heavenly creature in European emblematic lore (2014, p.113).

By the end of the sixteenth century this myth was further actualised through art, as Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi released, in the first volume of his treatise on birds *Ornithologiae*, an illustration of a bird of paradise, drinking dew from the clouds, with no wings or legs (1599, p.810). By the time Rubens painted his first version of the *Adoration* (1609), with its explicit depiction of the aigrette in the black magus' headwear, the motif of the bird of paradise had established itself as a signifier of the appropriation of divine nature through exotic luxury adornment in European visual culture, in a way that transcended natural knowledge of the bird itself. Over two hundred years later, in 'Paradise: In a Symbol', Christina Rossetti is still writing of the bird of paradise singing in heaven, where no moon, sun or human has existed, and living in the paradise of God (2008, p.156). These examples speak to the fact that Europeans in the sixteenth century, when presented with a bird apparently without wings, were more inclined to believe that it was divine and lived in the clouds, than to assume that the bird lived on the ground. It is as though the idea of the flightless bird was impossible. Moreover, once the myth of the bird of paradise was dispelled, Rossetti's poem speaks to the enduring fascination and desire for this myth to be true.

Indeed, when birds aren't flying, humans place them in the sky, and the practice of placing flightless birds in the sky through storytelling is echoed in cultural astronomy in the Australian Aboriginal context. Aborigines observe the flightless emu's shape against a constellation defined by dark nebulae, visible against the Milky Way background. Here astrological phenomena are woven into storytelling— the emu in the sky appears as a transforming cultural object that relays non-linguistic messages to humans. As the Milky Way changes position in the night sky, the emu moves from

season to season (Anderson et al, 2014, p.4). It reaches its first appearance in full length in April and May— a female emu running, to remind Kamilaroi and Euahlayi people that eggs are available. In June and July, the male emu now appears sitting on its nest, hatching its chicks, signifying to humans that eggs are still available. From August to September, the neck of the emu becomes indistinct in the sky, leaving the body to represent an egg— a sign that chicks were hatching and the egg resource was no longer available (Anderson et al, 2014, p.6). Here the flightless bird is made skybound by humans, but it is not held static there. Its changing image serves as a reflection and signifier of seasonal change and resource events relevant on earth. Unlike the birds of paradise, imagined as Gods whose colours could be captured and traded, the mythologised emu, although light years away, acts as the conductor of an intimate conversation between humans and the natural world, where people, animals and the skies are interconnected, correlative and listening. In this sense, the aboriginal people of Australia offer us not simply a folk tale, but a ‘parable for survival’ in the emu in the sky (Cowan, 1992, p.vii).

Almost every ancient, medieval and renaissance text about the ostrich puts forward the image of the bird as hybrid monster (Roman d’Elia, 2015). The legacy of the Latin term for ostrich – as noted, *struthiocamelus*, meaning ‘sparrow-camel’ – seems to pervade our human understanding of the bird. Art and literature sustain the ostrich’s ancient legacy as hybrid, or somehow monstrous, and the sparrow-camel’s narrative endures through storytelling. As with all scientific categorization, the designation of the ostrich as a hybrid is purely mythical and subjective and is a man-made idea. This invented status sets the scene for the bird being ‘incomplete’, not only through its inability to fly, but through its mongrel, bird-beast condition.

At variance with this, the ostrich feather held spiritual importance in ancient Egypt, as it was the hieroglyph for justice. It served as the symbol against which all

lives would be measured to determine whether their heart was worthy of the afterlife. The final test before the deceased would enter into eternal life would be to have their heart placed on scales. The heart had to weigh the same as Ma'at, the goddess representing balance, harmony, justice, law and truth (de Ville, 2011, p.336). Ma'at is identified by her ostrich feather, worn on her head or held in her hand. Unlike other birds' asymmetrical feathers, ostrich plumes are uniquely symmetrical (Roman d'Elia, 2015), and so represent balance and fairness. The ostrich appears as an attribute of Justice in Raphael's mural and fresco (1519-24). Justice holds a pair of scales in one hand and cradles the ostrich's neck with the other:

Raphael's mysteriously dark ostrich evokes these arcane [Egyptian] meanings but does so in a modern way, as the bird is no flat symbol or fanciful monster but a meticulously observed creature, probably drawn from life using a bird in the pope's menagerie.  
(Roman D'Elia, 2015, p.)

So here, it is as though Raphael is pushing against and drawing critical attention to the bird as a straightforward symbol. By painting a naturalistic animal, but still set within its allegorical context, it invites the viewer to consider the ways in which the physical world expresses meaning.

The ostrich as symbol of justice is portrayed in Marianne Moore's poem 'He 'Digesteth Harde Yron'' (2011, p.1). The poet alludes to the ancient Egyptian practice of riding ostriches, and mentions the ostrich's plume of justice:

the large sparrow  
Xenophon saw walking by a stream--was and is  
a symbol of justice.

(...)

that ostriches

might be decoyed and killed! Yes, this is he

whose plume was anciently  
the plume of justice;  
(p.1)

If the poem is viewed as a didactic tale, it falls somewhere between animal tale and beast epic. The ostrich's nature reflects the moral argument in the poem. In their ability to survive where other same species birds have become extinct, they offer a fable in resilience:

even where  
no tree of freedom grows,  
so-called brute courage knows.  
Heroism is exhausting, yet  
it contradicts a greed that did not wisely spare  
the harmless solitaire

or great auk in its grandeur;  
unsolicitude having swallowed up  
all giant birds but an alert gargantuan  
little-winged, magnificently speedy running-bird.  
This one remaining rebel  
is the sparrow-camel.  
(p.2)

The ostrich puts forward a plenitude that exists in relation to and in spite of its biological legacy. Moore's poetry can be viewed in the fabulist tradition, with her treatment of moral themes and use of animal subjects, and the poem is a response to the moral dilemma of animal extinction, presenting the ostrich as symbol of justice through its persistent survival (Ross, 1984, p.332).

Pak Mog-weol's ostrich in 'The Hippopotamus, and: The Ostrich, and: The Moon' (Pak, 2015, Appendix 4, p.151) is admired by the poet, as well as being described as strange. In this case the bird's divinity is experienced as baffling in light of its physical characteristics. The poet puzzles: 'I am bewildered when it descends from heaven to pick up a few biscuits.' He describes the bird's 'unearthly face' and 'too-long neck.' The ostrich appears to have no usefulness to humans or contact with God. It has

simply descended to earth from the heavens in some kind of accident, and doesn't belong here. This is at variance with the ostrich in Egyptian mythology, where, as we have seen, the ostrich is indeed useful to humans and connected to divinity. The ostrich is not worshipped, but its unique body, unique symmetrical feather, is essential in a divine ritual.

This was also true for the great auk. The island of Newfoundland was home to the indigenous Beothuk peoples at the time of European voyages to the region in the late fifteenth century. By then, the Beothuk had been living on the island for over a thousand years. Analysis of burial site locations and funerary objects reveal the indigenous Beothuk community of Newfoundland as living within a sacred cosmology that places birds at the centre of their belief system (Kristensen and Holly Jr, 2013, p.41). Kristensen and Holly Jr hypothesize, based on burial goods, such as bone pendants depicting three toed aquatic bird feet, forked tail carvings of flight birds, and feathers, that seabirds served as spiritual messengers who conveyed souls of the dead to an island afterlife via the sea (2013, p.41). The great auk was one of these messengers. The Beothuk community revered them, and buried a man in an outfit decorated with more than two hundred auk beaks (Thornhill, 2016, p.19).

In the poem 'An Ostrich with its Head in the Sand' (2010, Appendix 5, p.137), Sean Tribe also gives the flightless bird access to an alternative world. This time, access to this alternative world is for the bird only. In this example, it is not the physiology (as with the great auk's ability to swim, for the Beothuks) of the bird that gives it access to an alternative, unseen place. Rather, Tribe takes the popular idiom associated with ostriches having their 'heads in the sand' and subverts it. The poet is subverting language to reimagine and elevate the bird – the ostrich can see and feel the world underground. He ostensibly describes the experience of how it must feel to be underground:



The earth shuffles as it sleeps  
Ants tick, kicking up dust.

(...)

Beauty in worms  
Not cicadas

(...)

The straining noise of roots,  
Ticking of ants and  
The fierce silence of moles.  
(Tribe, 2010, p.137)

Tribe speaks of the pushing roots and warns that there is no stasis underground. He tells the reader ‘Don’t believe it is still’. But Tribe also describes the experience as one of being in a place that is free from the trappings of language:

I retreat nothing;  
Save the distortion of words.

(...)

The noise of language exists  
On the prairie  
With gazelles who never speak  
And the wind always whining.

It is as though the ostrich figure in the poem has access to a liberated consciousness, a place unrestrained by language. Tribe lets go of the myth associated with the ostrich, but keeps the idiom as a sensual prompt. The poem suggests that having one’s head in the sand is not an ignorance of the outside world, as suggested in Robert Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’ (2001) seen earlier, but consists rather in being inside a multitudinous space, beyond language, that transcends the material.

The great auk (along with the dodo) is perhaps the most fetishized flightless bird, as will be shown in the next section of this chapter. Connected to this,

it was also negatively labelled as supernatural, in a way that engendered and justified the brutal killing of the last great auk in Britain. The last great auk to be seen on British Isles was stoned to death by three sailors from the Scottish Island of St Kilda in 1840. The flightless bird was abducted on the nearby seastack of Stac an Armin. Its legs were tied together and it was taken back to the men's ship for three days. The sailors grew increasingly superstitious, and on the fourth day, during a terrible storm, they believed the bird to be 'a maelstrom conjuring witch' and stoned it to death (Galasso, 2014). The bird was fast asleep when it was grabbed, but once captured,

a storm arose and that fact together with the great size of the bird and the noise it made with its bill caused them to think it must be a witch (...) It was killed on the third day after it was caught and they were beating the bird for an hour with two large staffs before it was quite dead.

(Harvie-Brown, 2012, p.142-3)

The bird was described in the nineteenth century as so tame that it would walk up a plank or a sail that stretched from the ship to the shore (Grieve, 1885). And yet the sailors were so disturbed by (according to the account) the size and vocality of the bird, that they felt it could be responsible for creating a storm. But why a witch?

This event is aligned with a topic I will be looking at in the next chapter – that of language reinforcing problematic concepts of women and animals. The use of the word 'witch' to describe the bird places it within the oppressive conceptual framework that allowed women to be murdered during the witch hunts: it objectifies the bird and confirms it as subordinate. The great auk suffers three connected alienations: being an animal, being flightless and being feminised. The historical cue of the witch hunts (in particular the Scottish hunt for 'weather witches' who created storms) mixes with the sailors' existing fear of the creature, and together these may have provided the moral justification for killing the bird. The study of flightless birds through the lens of ecofeminism in the next chapter will contextualise linguistic perspectives on the

formation of aggressively framed cultural stereotypes. On the one hand, women are animalised through language, as they are referred to as chicks, old crows, old hens, or birdbrains. Here, the Great Auk is feminised through language. As Carol Adams argues (1990, p.94-109), to animalise women and feminise nature compounds patriarchal domination as it fails to see the extent to which the oppression of women and animals are culturally analogous. Did the framing of the bird as a witch provide a confirmation, a compelling moral justification for murder, alongside seeing the bird as a non-human animal? Notably, in the context of looking specifically at flightless birds, was the bird more likely to be feminised in a threatening or derogatory way as a witch (rather than, say, a bird goddess, angel or fairy) because it was flightless?

Jessie Greengrass puts forward a dark rationale for the Holocene extinction of the Great Auk in her short story about its brutal killing:

Here is the truth: we blamed the birds for what we did to them. There was something in their passivity that enraged us. We hated how they didn't run away. If they had run away from us we could have been more kind. We hated the birds. When we looked at them we wanted nothing more than to smash and beat and kill. We felt in them a mirror of our sin and the more we killed of them the cleaner we became.  
(Greengrass, 2015, p.5)

Here, Greengrass alludes to the great auk having the power to compensate for human inadequacy, a balancing function, like the ostrich feather in Egyptian mythology. But in this example, the bird functions as a kind of sacrificial creature in a ritual of cleansing human rage. The passage also confirms the birds as subordinate and naïve, highlighting the feminist arguments made above, although in Greengrass' example, the birds are not conjuring witches but rather maddening victims. But what this passage also speaks to is the killing of the birds being incited by the collective twenty-first-century guilt and shame around having already killed so many of these creatures who were so helpless. This feeling of guilt and rage is affirmed by the nineteenth and twentieth-

century fetishization of the loss of the great auk, which will be shown in the next section, and the current twenty-first century plans to restore the great auk through science, with the organisation ‘Revive and Restore’, which will be looked at later in the thesis.

The birds of paradise example shown at the beginning of this section illustrates that, on this occasion, the apparent absence of wings was no deterrent for humans to consider birds of paradise as flying creatures. Where the wings were absent, mythical thinking bridged the gap, and God enabled birds of paradise to fly and feed. This process of borrowing from religious norms to either compensate for, rationalise or assuage the confusion engendered by a bird that doesn’t fly, appears on some level through many of the examples in this section. Sometimes the reflection on the flightless bird stops at the point of being baffled by the fact that it can’t fly, even though it has descended from heaven, as with Pak Mog-Weol’s ostrich. Sometimes a rationalisation occurs that then pervades how the animal appears culturally, as with the ‘sparrow camel’ (neither bird nor beast) designation of the ostrich throughout ancient, medieval and renaissance texts. Sometimes the negative associations around the bird are positively reframed, as with Tribe’s ostrich, with its head in the sand, gaining unique access to a private, sprawling, multitudinous and unknown space – associations we might usually have with the sky. Finally, this lending from supernatural ideas in the air can so strongly override our natural observations, that they transcend the bird itself to the extent that the bird no longer exists, and then this inner reality is wilfully mirrored in the outside world, as with the killing of the last great auk to be seen in the British Isles in the nineteenth century. Embedded in many of these examples is a wider context of imperial domination and oppression, and in the next section of this chapter I will look at how flightless birds are captured, punished and fetishised.

### 1.3 – A Feather in your Cap: Captive, Punished and Fetishized Creatures

Along with the seventy-three great auk eggs that are known to exist today, there are also seventy-eight stuffed birds. All these specimens are highly coveted, and they passed through many collectors' hands many times during the nineteenth century. But the stuffed great auk whose story most encapsulates the absurd and near grotesque nature of its fetishization is the one that the Icelandic government bought in 1971. Until that time Iceland did not own any great auks, despite it being the last place the bird had lived. The stuffed body was purchased for a large sum, with funds donated from all over the country. The acquisition was nationally promoted, shared and celebrated, as children were given half a day off school and a red carpet was laid out at the airport to greet the stuffed bird. It was given its very own seat on the plane from London, and as such, a creature who had never flown in life, was able to fly, business class, in death. There are innumerable cultural examples of the fetishization of the great auk, closely preceding, and following its extinction in 1844:

The Queen owned a jewelled great auk egg made by Faberge. Great Auk cigarettes would be smoked in the trenches. The Sevres porcelain factory produced a great auk dinner service. (...) Prague, Copenhagen, Amiens, Abbeville, Autun, Paris, Rouen, Strasbourg, Berlin. Dresden, Hanover, Dublin, Florence, Pisa, Milan, Turin, St Petersburg, Oslo, Stockholm, Lausanne, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Cincinnati: all these and more had their great auks or their eggs with which to make real to their owners or citizens the poignancy of extinction. They were fetishizing absence.  
(Nicolson, 2017, p.290)

The great auk was plundered in life and revered in death.

The ostrich also appears as readily an expendable beast as it does a prize, especially in its role in ancient Greece and Rome. In Marianne Moore's poem 'He Digesteth Harde Yron' (2011, p.1), already discussed above, the poet describes '[s]ix hundred ostrich-brains served/ at one banquet', and suggests that the

meaning dramatized by this feast is ‘missed on the externalist’ (p.100). The poet refers to one of the extravagant banquets hosted by the Roman emperor Elagabalus.

The collection of biographies of the Roman emperors, *Historia Augusta* (4th Century) portrays the emperors most associated with ostriches (Firmus, Commodus and Elagabalus) as notoriously evil. Ostriches were used in magnificent and gruesome displays, along with boars and other large beasts, held captive in the Coliseum and slaughtered in chaotic spectacles (Roman d’Elia, 2015). Ostriches were eaten, ridden and slain throughout depraved spectacles, commanded by vicious emperors.

The ostrich is depicted as prey in the first recorded painting of the bird. Located in the Magura cave in Bulgaria, painted in bat excrement during the early Bronze Age, the bird is depicted leading a warrior and an archer; the archer aims at the bird’s back with a bow and arrow. This narrative of being a hunted trophy, a concomitant of the ostrich’s speed, will follow the bird throughout ancient times. The archer’s gesture takes the form of a motif, echoed throughout ancient Egypt, on the flabellum from Tutankhamun’s tomb, showing Tutankhamun aiming an arrow at an ostrich (1350 B.C.E), and in the fourth century relief sculpture with the hero lunging towards his target.

Whilst the appropriation of ostriches was brutal and grotesque in ancient Rome, the seventeenth century sees the ostrich feather appear as a symbol of elegance. Alongside her restrained jewelry, translucent white collar and lace cuffs, one of Rembrandt’s sitters holds an ostrich-fan for her portrait (Rembrandt, 1656). This came at the time of the ‘Dutch Golden Age’ of painting and the move towards display of exotic trophies on the part of the newly-enriched Dutch merchant class. At this point, ostrich feathers were increasingly worn only by women as symbols of elegance and cultural dominance. But only a century before, ostrich feathers were a symbol of masculinity. In the sixteenth century, it was Europe’s men who wielded the

plume (Almeroth-Williams, 2019). For example, in 1521 (the year that feathers became a craze in Europe), Matthäus Schwarz, a 24-year-old German fashionista, commissioned a lavish headdress, measuring more than a metre in width, made of thirty-two dyed ostrich feathers:

The rise of the feather in Europe was a conspicuous sign of expanding trade and imperial conquest. Ostrich feathers reached the continent – via camel routes and merchant ships – from the sub-Saharan region spanning Timbuktu and Darfur, where the birds had been hunted for centuries.

(Almeroth-Williams, 2019).

But why were ostrich feathers used rather than any other exotic bird? The ostrich's flightlessness is important, as the absence of flight feathers, and the absence of the interlocking mechanism in the flight feathers means that ostrich plumes are limp and floppy. The feathers curve, hang and sway. Speaking of Schwarz's headdress, Jenny Tiramani, the Principal of London's School of Historical Dress, says that the 'result is magical. Ostrich feathers are sensuous, they weigh nothing, they are very soft and their movement is titillating.' (Tirimani, in Almeroth-Williams, 2019).

In the decade of hats (1907-16), bird plumage was further commodified, when affluent bourgeois women would wear exotic bird plumes – the flamingo, the pelican and the ostrich – as massive ornaments. Women's hat fashions were spectacularly excessive, and the size of the hat announced the woman's place in consumer culture (Hennefeld, 2016, p.28). Here the flight bird and flightless bird hold equal rank, so long as they are exotic— this kind of consumption is a marker of geopolitical appropriation. But the ostrich feather was very large, and, as mentioned above, had movement, which made it more visible, erotic and obstructive. Women's hats were status symbols, and more status was attached to the exotic: whether it be fruit or bird plumage, both signified wealth. Hats were styled to invoke the exotic, from ottoman turbans to indigenous Central American headdresses:

The politics of imperialism loomed large in women's hat iconography, bringing the violence of the image even closer to the presence of the body (...) The sheer ethnic diversity distilled in the ever-evolving female hat trends was a testimony to the geopolitical imperialism fueling these millinery creations. (Hennefeld, 2016, p.32)

Children's books set in South Africa throughout the nineteenth century are full of ostriches. Ostriches served in 'in just about every role that wild creatures filled in the English fiction and non-fiction for children that was set in South Africa by both expatriate and local authors' (Jenkins, 1999, p.17). In many ways ostriches were a useful symbol in a colonial context, as their foreignness made them alien and dangerous, whilst their flightlessness allowed them to be possessed, often after an exciting chase. For children's books, their strange bodies could fill full page illustrations to exert their peculiar fascination close up. They could also be ridden, hunted, killed eaten or brought home, offering plenty of narrative opportunities for adventure tales.

The motif of bushmen disguising themselves as ostriches in order to hunt them appeared often in these children's books (Jenkins, 1999, p.19). Robert Moffat's illustration, *Blue Ostriches* (1842), which purported to show the method of hunting the birds, was copied in many subsequent books. This image and associated story of a costumed hunt of the ostrich became a standard and strangely customary narrative in nineteenth-century writing about South Africa (Dowson et al, 1994, p.3). In this sense, the camel-sparrow's hybrid nature is extended, as a man wears the bird like a mask. This moves the attitude from commodification to a kind of layered fetishism: the obsession with the bird and wearing of its skin as a crucial part of the hunt becomes the motif to which the reader's desire for voyeurism is directed.

The dance masks worn by the Kwakiutl tribe of the Pacific Northwest Coast in the nineteenth century open like shutters to reveal a second face, and sometimes a third behind the second. Described as 'simultaneously naïve and ferocious mechanical



contraptions' (Levi-Strauss, 1983, p.7), these masks could be two or more things at once, echoing the hybrid interpretation of the ostrich:

This dithyrambic gift for synthesis, the quasi-monstrous ability to perceive the similarity between things which others describe as different, give to the art of British Columbia its unmistakable stamp and genius.

(Levi-Strauss, 1983, p.8).

The dance masks, often representing animals (particularly bird heads) and humans simultaneously, seen from above and below, from the outside and from within, are concretizations of the mythical mind in the physical world. In the mask, all things are interconnected and it is possible to see, touch and wear it.

Women from Mande communities in Western Africa wore ostrich masks specifically throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The ostrich mask rituals were intended to

transform initiands from little girls who were potential sources of anarchy and destruction into adult women who could contribute to a stable, ordered community through their positive social contributions and the bearing and raising of children (...) The ultimate goal of initiation, then, was to bring about a balance between the creative female qualities required for success as mothers and the male qualities required for success in the community.'

(Weil, 1998, p.29).

In these conceptualizations for Mande populations to the east of Wuli, birds generally represented the spirit, the power of thought, and the moral challenge of self-knowledge (Weil, 1998, p.33).

It is uncomfortable to reflect upon the social and spiritual dimension of the Kwakiutl and Mande masks alongside the deception created by the ostrich mask in the *Blue Ostriches* image. As with myth, the elements represented on the masks cannot be interpreted as separate objects. But the wearing of the ostrich depicted in the *Blue Ostriches* picture emphasizes separateness, at once through the violence of the image,

the theme of capture contained in it and the image's function as a source of voyeuristic fascination for an English audience. The motif of bushmen disguised as ostriches puts forward a special kind of layered disrespect as it not only objectifies the animal, it parades the hybrid camel-sparrow, turning the symbolism of animal masks and their mythical and social importance at that time into a kind of farce. The bird-mask is dropped into a colonial story where the translation of meaning and social function is neglected.

The ostrich can replace an elephant or a tiger in an adventure and step in as the dangerous animal that the hero can defeat, or be rescued from. This method of paralleling the colonial process with the ostrich as symbol of South Africa is also explored in stories about ostrich farms. So, the iconography adjusts from the ostrich being a dangerous solo enemy to an already defeated commodity to be plundered. The work at an ostrich farm can also serve as a test of character. In *A Girl of Distinction: A Tale of the Karoo* (1912), Bessie Marchant presents the ostrich farm as squalid and repulsive. The heroine Celia, believing she is the daughter of an Afrikaans family, must bring the farm into order. She attempts to domesticate the wild animals, and later also discovers that she is, in fact English-born. This odd and deeply chauvinistic character arc seems to imply that the possession and domestication of the wild ostrich farm is the harsh test that is eventually justified as the heroine discovers her 'true blood'. Here the ostrich is a device, symbolizing lack of refinement and primitiveness. The bird signals the inferior life Celia is threatened by, until she finally discovers that she was a 'girl of distinction' after all.

John Fairfax subverts the idea of the captive flightless bird in his poem 'Ostrich Boy' (1985, p.31), describing the ostrich's body as a site of refuge, rather than concealment, as with the *Blue Ostriches* picture. The poet presents the human in the story, once 'rescued' from his ostrich family, as a captured creature. Fairfax retells the

true story of the boy, Hadara, lost by his parents in the Sahara Desert at the age of two, then found and brought back to society aged twelve. The poem describes the ostrich flock as the boy's family, his 'chosen kin'. The moment he is rescued from them is the moment he loses his relatives. The poem opens: 'I found them / they are mine, I am theirs' (Fairfax, 1985, p.31). 'Ostrich Boy' is written retrospectively, although the poet sometimes takes on a child's voice as he moves between past and present tense. He looks back and says 'For days I wandered through the scrub/ looking but seeing little/ until bright egg-shards drew me' (Fairfax, 1985, p.31). He then moves into the present, saying 'I watch feathers grow on the chicks/ and touch my own skin, and feel my hair' (Fairfax, 1985, p.31).

The poet understands the ostriches as entwined with the elements and part of nature's process. He places in parallel the drumming rain water and the slow heartbeat of the ostrich (Fairfax, 1985, p.31). He remarks that the ostrich 'flaps awake the day' – here the ostrich's wings have movement, power and impact on the world. It is not noted in the poem that the bird is flightless – from the child narrator's point of view, the wings, and especially feathers, are described as lively objects of reassurance, comfort and nostalgia. The child's lack of access to universal enlightenment knowledge enables him to experience the bird in an unmediated way. The poet talks about the 'silken plumes' that he would shelter under as a young child, then repeats this phrase later in the poem, describing the soft feathers as one of his abiding sensory memories. It is the feather that also shelters the memory of his ostrich family. He says 'An encased drum of heart and rain/ [is] under the folding plume (Fairfax, 1985, p.32). The ostrich family is described as loyal and protective: 'On the right she squats; On the left he guards' and 'For years I ran as the ostrich runs/ Never left behind abandoned in chase/ Or panic (Fairfax, 1985, p.31). When horsemen come to collect the boy and return him to his human family, the poet establishes himself as a captured creature. He describes the

burning rope that made him fall, and describes himself as bound by rope and chained in iron. His violent capture takes him away from the humane and loving world in which he belonged. The poem ends 'I am theirs. They are mine. / I lost them.'

In 'The Emu' (2002, p.39), Carol Becker observes an emu at a zoological park in Belgium. The poem reflects on the bird's foreignness in this environment, and describes the bird as 'in a place where it has no purpose'. It is as though the bird resides in a place for which it has no coordinates or understanding; it is 'searching always the wrong terrain' and 'knows nowhere to go'. The poet reflects on the futility and repetitive movements of the emu's body in the environment: 'All day it stalks the compound. At night it sits in the ground'. The bird searches for meaning in an environment that cannot provide it: '[it] investigates the dirt as if/the reason lay there' (p.39).

Becker reflects on the bird's relationship to other animals and to the world. It is objectified, as the citizens on their lunch break, 'intrigued by its size, throw ice cream sticks through the fence/to incite a little action'. The bird is described as 'stubborn' and 'everything seems lower than it, or a threat' (p.39). This frames the emu as alone in the sense that nothing around it is its equal, only inferior or dominant. It is as though it has no companions: the poet describes the emu's body as shelter, but the reader gets the sense that this, the refuge its body provides, is empty and without light. She calls its body 'a dark umbrella', 'a black feathered hut of a body'. The ancient flightless bird's conflicted relationship with divinity is revisited, as it carries its body 'in 'private ceremony' as though enacting a ritual whose participants are all absent.

The examples in this chapter show flightless birds portrayed as ballerinas, spinsters, as disabled, fetishized, consistently feminised through language, ridden and raced, displayed and consumed. It also shows how these norms can and have been unsettled through language, and how literature also provides an opportunity to glimpse

alternatives to these norms. The chapter makes visible the western cultural disempowerment of flightless birds. It demonstrates the role played by language in creating, maintaining, and perpetuating the interconnected exploitations of women and animals, as well as showing the role language can play to unsettle and challenge this exploitation. As such, the next section will approach the predicament of flightless birds through the lens of feminist and ecofeminist theory.

## Chapter 2 – Stubby Little Wings - Feminism, Ecofeminism and Flightless Birds

*It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds.*

Helene Cixous (1976, p.887)

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore the cultural portrayal of the flight and flightless bird through the lens of feminist and eco-feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of the relation between the masculine and the feminine (1987) will be used as a lens through which to consider the relation between the flight bird and flightless bird. Then I will consider several predominantly western cultural examples of flight birds and flightless birds and ask to what extent these cultural representations evidence a way of thinking that overvalues the flight bird in relation to the flightless bird within a symbolic economy. Karen Warren's definition of an oppressive conceptual framework (2000) will serve as a structure within which to consider in what ways avian cultural representations are characterized by hierarchical thinking ('up-down thinking'), oppositional value dualisms, a conception of power and privilege that advantages the 'ups', and the moral premise that superiority justifies subordination.

Using these strategies, my aim is to investigate the representations, images, cultural imaginaries and symbolic systems that flightless birds occupy, to detect and analyse patterns of representation and cultural understanding, and finally to consider these in the context of the way these creatures are treated. Feminist and eco-feminist theories provide lenses through which to explore, unsettle and glimpse alternatives to the symbolic system of oppression that designates flightless birds as one part of a figurative

duality. The chapter also engages with feminist ecofeminist responses to Theodore Adorno (Martin, 2006), to aid and develop understanding of the theory of negative dialectics, the importance of non-identity thinking, and how this can inform the element of my project that looks at the reimagining of flightless birds as a creative process that can include critical analysis and may engender social change. As ecofeminism makes visible the interconnections among violence against women, violence against nature and pornography (Adams, 1990), the study of Adorno may shed light on the exploitation of women and animals as mutually reinforcing systems, and give me the tools to challenge the identity thinking that underpins the development of these interconnections.

## 2.1 – Duality and Reciprocity in Feminist Theory

At times, the way flight appears in poetry illustrates and affirms the bird in flight as in line with the natural order and growth of things, and consonant with a divine purpose. In Liz Berry's 'Bird', the poem opens like a prayer, with Berry affirming 'When I became a bird, Lord, nothing could stop me' (2014, Appendix 6, p.5). When the poet becomes a bird, her 'heart beats like a wing' – the action of the bird flying is put forward as synonymous with being alive. The poet says 'I left girlhood behind me like a blue egg'. It is as though the poet is maturing in a way that is inevitable and freeing, and flight acts as the analogy for reaching maturity – 'nothing could stop [her]'. The poem is about growing up, but it alludes to a process that situates flight as a necessary moment of evolution – the fleeing of the nest. The poet sheds her nightdress and shoes, and when she is 'bared', she finds her bones 'hollowing to slender pipes' – another allusion to flight (hollow bones, essential for flight, are not a consistent feature for flightless birds: the ostrich, emu, kiwi, cassowary, rhea, penguin and extinct moa and elephant bird have/had dense bones). As the poet flies, she says that she feels at last 'the rush of

squall thrilling my wing/and I knew my voice/was no longer words but song'. It is as though, through flight, her ability to articulate herself in the world has been elevated from mere form (words) to an expression that is composed, musical and accomplished (song). Also, within the phrase 'squall thrilling' there is another word hovering: squill, the hollow tube-like part of a bird's stiff wing or tail feather, and this also recalls a quill a pen made from a bird's feather. In the introduction to this thesis, I referred to the idea of bird flight providing the analogy for the quality art aims to achieve. Perhaps there is an allusion to the poem being written with such a pen, allowing the poet and the language to 'fly'.

In Wallace Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' (2010, p.58), the poet establishes the blackbird's flight as causal in and interconnected with nature's elegance. In the penultimate stanza, Stevens says: 'The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying.' (2010, Appendix 7, p.58). The flight of the bird is placed in parallel with the movement of a river. If a river is not flowing, it's no longer a river, so within the parallel is the suggestion that when the blackbird is flying it is fulfilling the function that defines it. In seven of the thirteen stanzas, flight is mentioned or alluded to. In the third stanza, the poet says: 'The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds. / It was a small part of the pantomime.' It is suggested that as the blackbird flies, it is one element of a larger form of entertainment, in which performers express meaning through gestures. It is in the blackbird's movement, its 'whirling' that it plays its part. Later Stevens says that 'At the sight of blackbirds / Flying in a green light, / Even the bawds of euphony / Would cry out sharply.' Bawds are female pimps who secure sex for money, and Stevens seems to use the term euphony ironically, to signal a cheap pleasure, a pleasing accord or homogeneity that can be sold:

The euphony of 1917 would very likely sound phony to us. So does a lot of current euphony, though it may be sincerely meant. Euphony means 'a pleasing



sound’ though not to Stevens in 1917. Nor always to the OED in 1893:  
‘euphonious’ is ‘often used ironically’ (Cook, 2007, p.336)

The sight of blackbirds flying, then, could convert a cheap, pleasing and reassuring sound into intense emotion – the bawds ‘would cry out sharply’ at this amazing new sight. This speaks to Berry’s poem, where flight is the activity that is transformative, that immaturity and naïve pleasure cannot survive, and concurs in suggesting that flight has a function in converting human forms of understanding and expression. Where Berry is graduating from mere words to song, Stevens is moving from song to a sharp cry. Against the backdrop of things having the appearance of a saleable harmony (bawds of euphony), the incongruousness of the blackbird flying in the green light reveals the chaotic elegance and complex pleasure of the natural world, and even the jaded can but ‘cry out sharply’ at the sublime sight of it. There is also the suggestion that they may be crying out in protest—the sight is jarring and discordant. Both possibilities underline the centrality of flight to the poem’s *raison d’être*.

The poem continues:

He rode over Connecticut  
In a glass coach.  
Once, a fear pierced him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his equipage  
For blackbirds.

In the context of the poem’s historical background, the juxtaposition of the man flying, the equipage and the blackbirds recalls the reconnaissance planes Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird used in World War I, which, from the ground were conceived as metallic birds (Schwarz, 1994, p.138). Perhaps here, the birds in flight are signalling the transformation of death, as the man in the ‘glass coach’ (recalling Cinderella and her own transformation at midnight) looks down to the shadow of his plane, and mistakes

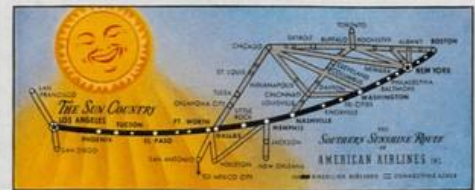
for a moment that he is being followed by a blackbird. Is the man primed for this transformation by already being in flight?

In an earlier poem Gerard Manley Hopkins implies through poetic indirection – with his ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’ (2009, p.129) – that each mortal thing has its own distinctive and single function, and cites the lightning flight of the kingfisher as an example of divine incarnation. The bird’s flight is used as a representative case to put forward the poet’s claim that identity and function are the same: ‘What I do is me’ (2009, p.129). Hopkins goes on to characterise all creatures’ purposes as divinely ordered, proposing that a man act ‘in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is’ (2009, p.129) – a state of being that the kingfisher achieves through flight. Berry talks about a general quality of ‘birdness’ in her poem, whereas Stevens and Hopkins are talking about specific birds. Nevertheless, when looking at the way *flight* is put forward, all three share the feature of presenting bird flight as the moment in which we might observe or seize a kind of transcendence. The first contemporary example by Liz Berry brings together flight and the individual quality of being alive and thriving. The modernist ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ extends flight’s scope, establishing it as organic and integral to the functioning of the natural world. Finally, the Victorian poet takes the most transcendent stance, establishing flight as the moment the presence of Christ is glimpsed in the bird.

When flight and flightlessness meet in their cultural representations, and the flightless bird is situated in relation to another animal or thing, its flightlessness can be the negative attribute that elevates and puts the subject into relief. When an ostrich is depicted with its head in the snow in the American Airlines advertisement illustration below (Dorne, 1941), its flightlessness acts as a counterpoint to the flying aeroplane above it: the service being sold.



AN OSTRICH with his head in the snow might properly typify many of those people who formerly traveled by air only in the summer time. Now they have learned that winter makes *less difference* in the air than it does on the ground. Above the snow and ice, the clear, clean winter air is fine for Flagship travel. This winter, as never before, the time-saving advantages of air transportation — for men, mail and materials — will prove priceless to individuals, to business and to the nation.



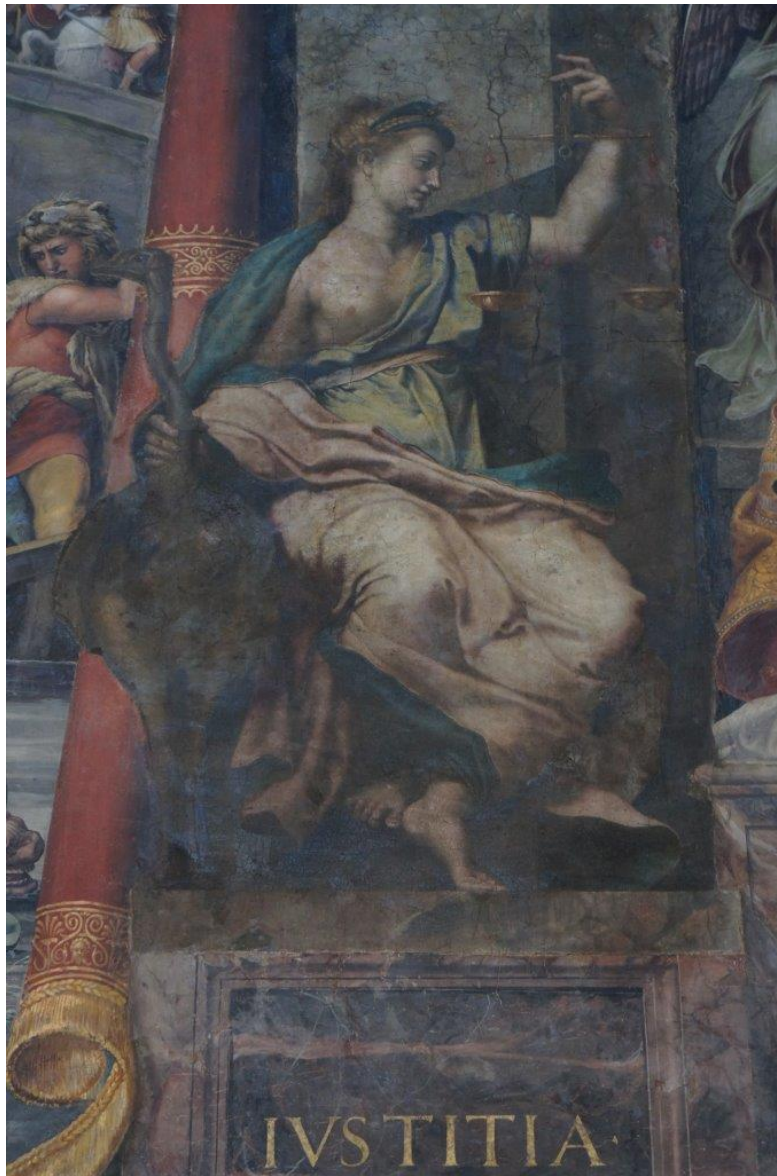
**AMERICAN AIRLINES Inc.**  
ROUTE OF THE FLAGSHIPS

Figure 1 American Airlines, Advertisement Illustration. (Dorne, 1941)

In this advertisement, the flying object is lauded as the flightless object is undermined. The idiom of the ostrich with its head in the sand is also recalled, reminding us that the flightless bird is foolish. This frames the aeroplane (and its

passengers) as discerning. It is also worth noting that the ostrich is drawn from behind, faceless, wrinkly and ugly, where the aircraft is streamlined, elegant and beautiful.

Once it is established that flightlessness can sit alongside foolishness and ugliness, the flightless bird as a symbol can also put intelligence and beauty into relief. This speaks to Raphael's ostrich, mentioned in the last chapter. On the oil mural and fresco in the Vatican Palace, the *Battle of Milvian Bridge*, Raphael's image pairs an 'exquisitely lovely, pearly fleshed, sensual woman with this rough, dark, sinewy bird (the ostrich)' (Roman d'Elia, 2015, p.92).



*Figure 2 Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Oil mural and fresco. Raphael., da Udine, G., Romano, G., (1519-24)*

The parallel here is with the ostrich's function in the Aesop fable 'The Ostrich and the Pelican' (Williams, 2013), mentioned in chapter one. With the Raphael painting, the ostrich offsets Lady Justice aesthetically, but contributes to the image by recalling the ostrich in Egyptian mythology. They gaze away from each other, but Lady Justice holds the ostrich's neck in one hand and the scales in the other, and in this sense is in control. In 'The Ostrich and the Pelican', an ostrich, which leaves its eggs to nature, chides a pelican for feeding her own with blood. The pelican responds that children are the highest calling. In this fable, the ostrich is a device that exists to affirm

the pelican's moral stance, where the ostrich in the Raphael mural contributes to affirming the goddess's beauty and superiority. Notably, in Christological emblems, the pelican who pecks her own breast to feed her infants is a symbol of Christ's love and sacrifice. In ancient Roman art, Lady Justice is the allegorical personification of moral force. The iconography of goddess and pelican here links to three differing religious belief systems. The goddess and the pelican share a connection to religious stories, and the ostrich helps put their divine role into relief. Reciprocity cannot exist in these dualities, because the relationship and the storytelling hinge on the negative, passive role of the flightless bird. The ostrich is not understood or illumined in relation to the aircraft, the sensual woman or the pelican.

The particular duality referred to when we talk about flight birds and flightless birds has intellectual parallels with a feminist understanding of the relation between the masculine and the feminine. Indeed, the idea of masculine and feminine being considered in opposition is challenged and refined in Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The author notes that

...the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.  
(1987, p.15)

Is this particular expression of duality not also true for birds, with 'bird' designating the whole group of species, and 'flightless bird' the species that lack the qualifying criterion of flight?

Through the lens of de Beauvoir's argument, 'flightless bird' represents only the negative, differentiated with reference to the flight bird. This suggests that at some point in human representation the flight bird's body became established as the 'normal' body for a bird. This can be placed in parallel with the word 'man' being synonymous

with 'human'. As such, through being different to the norm, the flightless bird confirms and elevates the flight bird as the normal bird. This power-based dynamic speaks to another French feminist Annie Leclerc's words, where she asserts that 'woman is valuable in so far as she permits man to fulfil his being a man.' (Leclerc, 1974, p79,). The positive dialectic witnessed in both examples demands that inferior forms of man or bird get subsumed in the broader category: one category absorbs and becomes master over the other. It is as though the flightless bird expresses the counterpoint to the way the bird should be and behave in the world. In the same way De Beauvoir would suggest that a man 'thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world' (1987, p.15), we think of the bird's body in flight as the moment in which it is apprehending the world normally.

The function of these examples is to show that, 'bird' designates a group of species *and* calls up the idea of a bird as a flying animal. The flightless bird as a cultural symbol becomes problematic when we consider it within a dialectic that is striving for the achievement of an overarching identity. For example, Kant's dialectic from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (2007) posits that the concept bird and the object bird cannot exist without one another, as the abstract and the concrete are mutually dependent and mutually generative. Examining the flightless bird in this framework presents a problem because Kant's dialectic relies on the principle of identity and assumes that the concept 'bird' and the object 'bird' can be reliably reconciled. But the flightless bird presents a contradiction. Kant claims the concept bird and object bird as inseparable, but if we check the concept bird against the object flightless bird, there is a mismatch: the object represents a remainder that the concept cannot contain. If we experience the idea of a bird and the idea of flying as paired, the idea of the flightless bird becomes incongruous and we rationalise this by reframing it as an abnormal bird. As we begin to reflect on their possible reciprocal relationship, we observe (in the examples above) that the



flightless bird's perceived lack of authenticity can be used to highlight the flight bird's ability and status. The way myths account for flightlessness is a symptom of the belief that the flightless bird's body requires an explanation, as will be shown in the next section.

## 2.2 – Being in the Wrong Body

Ecofeminism was originally associated with the view that femininity and nature are linked in the sense that they both express wildness, fecundity and vulnerability that is violently degraded in patriarchal cultures (Cuomo, 2002, p.7). However, by the mid-eighties, this connection was revised as this glorification of femaleness was felt to be universalising and retrograde. Indeed, Simone de Beauvoir's claim that women have been made into the 'Other' of man and subsequently regarded as less human, helps us reflect on the function of such dualisms (Gruen and Weil, 2012, p.479). In line with this approach, flightless birds are explored in this chapter through the lens of contemporary ecofeminism that seeks to understand theories of oppression, rather than adopting the standpoint that women and nature are connected in morally significant ways because both are identified with femininity. Indeed, Warren states:

In so far as other systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism) are also conceptually maintained by a logic of domination, appeal to the logic of traditional feminism ultimately locates the basic conceptual interconnections among *all* systems of oppression in the logic of domination. (Warren, 1990, p.132)

This section engages with ecofeminism not solely as a critique of domination, but as a framework that '[articulates] connection and uncertainty' (Cuomo, 2002, p.3). My aim is to find new ways of seeing and experiencing the flightless bird through poetry, while resisting the temptation to come to conclusions or reimagine the creature in a way that is



universalizing or regressive. This project seeks to work with poetry as a practice that engages the senses, doesn't seek to universalize, and challenges the absorption of one category into another in an attempt to arrive at an absolute concept through negation. In this sense, engaging with ecofeminism as a conceptual framework *and* as a practical philosophy (that both articulate uncertainty) allows further engagement with and mindfulness of the advantages and pitfalls of approaching the flightless bird as a creature that can be appropriated, in its existing cultural depictions and in my own creative work.

As described in the last chapter, the last great auk to be seen on the British Isles was captured in 1840 by sailors from the Scottish island of St Kilda. They had been commissioned to catch the bird and deliver it to a collector. They tied its legs together, and its piercing scream along with a terrible storm led the sailors to believe the bird was a 'maelstrom conjuring witch'. They clubbed it to death and threw it behind a bothy. This example of language reinforces problematic concepts of women and animals. The use of the word witch to describe the bird places it within the oppressive conceptual framework that allowed women to be murdered during the witch hunts. Describing the bird as a witch objectifies the bird and confirms it as subordinate. The Great Auk suffers three connected alienations: being an animal, being flightless and being feminised. The historical cue of the witch hunts (in particular the Scottish hunt of 'weather witches' who created storms) mixes with the logic of domination (Warren, 2000, p.47), and together these may provide the moral justification for killing the bird. On the one hand, women are animalised through language, as they are referred to as chicks, old crows, old hens, or birdbrains. Here, the Great Auk is feminised through language. As Carol Adams argues in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990, p.304), animalising women and feminising nature compounds patriarchal domination as it fails to see the extent to which the oppression of women and animals are culturally analogous. Did the framing

of the bird as a witch provide a confirmation, a compelling moral justification for murder, alongside seeing the bird as a non-human animal? Notably, in the context of my project, was the bird more likely to be feminised in a threatening or derogatory way as a witch (rather than, say, a bird goddess, angel or fairy) because it was flightless?

In her essay, 'Night Porters' (1988) Benoit Groult, quotes several writers, part of the avant-garde canon, who analyze pornography in terms of its revolutionary potential. One of these writers, whom Groult doesn't name, attests 'I often tend to think of the female organ as a dirty thing or as a wound, though no less attractive because of that, yet dangerous in itself' (Groult, 1988, p.69). The word 'wound' is resonant as we reflect upon flightless birds. If the flightless bird's body were mapped to pinpoint the source of its defectiveness, the location of its inadequacy would be the wing. As the flight bird's body in flight is understood as the bird's normal functioning body, the flightless bird's wings become the site of an injury. In effect, the great auk's wings have been described as 'stubs' (Gill, 2019; Winter, 2012). This can be aligned with the fact that this 'wound' or 'lack' leaves a 'scar' on the female psyche in Freud's schema of human sexual development – the female child sees that she is not 'endowed' like the male one. This invented biological servitude is framed as inherent and inescapable. The way myths account for flightlessness is a symptom of the belief that the flightless bird is the recipient of its own body, and that this body requires an explanation. The Maori imagine that the kiwi, once able to fly, sacrificed its spectacular colourful plumage to save the dying forest, where the tui, the pukeko and the cuckoo refused (Warren Chad and Taylor, 2016, p.170). This story legitimises the kiwi's flightlessness, affirms the kiwi as different to all the other birds, and accounts for its wounds as the consequence of self-sacrifice.

A similar justification emerges for the emu in the myth of the Dinewan (Emu) and the Goomblegubbon (bustard). Here the emu and the bustard are presented as feuding mothers. The emu, once the largest, supreme flying bird is tricked into cutting off her own

wings by her jealous rival. She believes she has to sacrifice her wings to save her queenship. This myth is less generous with the flightless bird than the story of the kiwi, as the emu is portrayed as power-hungry and easily duped. However, both stories provide an explanation for flightlessness and the idea that these birds once had 'real' bodies, could once fly, is explicit in both tales. One loses its correct body through sacrifice and violence, the other through foolishness and violence. The existence of the female body is equally 'explained' through her creation myth. Man is the authority within creation and names woman and the animals. Woman is presented as man's 'ezer kenegdo': the opposite, the counterpart to man. In a biblical context, woman is explicitly created as Other.

### 2.3 – Vocality and Mobility

When speaking about women's expression, French feminist Xavière Gauthier says: 'they tried to make us believe that women did not know how to speak (...) that they were stutterers or mutes.' (Gauthier, 1988, p199) and Helene Cixous describes '[women's] lovely mouths gagged with pollen' (Cixous, 1976, p878). As shown in chapter one, flightless birds have a conflicted relationship with vocality in their cultural representations. We might recall Hilaire Belloc's forever dumb Dodo from *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* whose voice could only attempt to squawk and squeak (Belloc, 2010). The dodo in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 2010) also has a strange historical connection with vocality: a popular belief is that Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (known as Lewis Carroll) chose the particular animal to represent himself because of his stammer, and thus would accidentally introduce himself as "Do-do-dodgson". Equally, the trope of the ostrich choking on a horseshoe or an anvil cements itself in our consciousness as the flightless bird being choked for its greed.

In Les Murray's poem 'Second Essay on Interest: The Emu' (2007, Appendix 9, p.201), Murray nods to the flightless bird's perceived greed, describing the emu as 'gulping the hand of evolution', as portrayed in the image below.

Vocality is alluded to in several unusual ways in the poem, often invoking femininity alongside paralysis. The pronoun 'she' is used to designate the bird, and the poet describes 'her lips of noble plastic/clamped in their expression'. The plastic lips remind us of a doll, where the clamped mouth nods to silencing and torture. The idea of pain and blockage in the throat continues as the Murray describes the bird 'collecting the bottletops, nails, wet cement that you/ famously swallow'. The poet says that 'she bubbles her pale-blue windpipe' – perhaps an effort at vocality. And in the context of the bird already being feminized in an objectifying way, the bubbling windpipe could evoke the bubbling in a witch's cauldron. The emu is later described as a 'rubberneck, stepped sister' – the animal's neck, like her lips, is described as synthetic. And where the doll and the witch were invoked earlier, here the 'sister' nun could be an addition to the growing collection of female archetypes. But the word 'stepped' that comes before creates a different suggestion: a creature that was made a step sister by force, or against her will. It is as though the emu has entered the family in error, or been demoted within it. With the earlier focus on the throat being synthetic, full of nails or cement, the word 'stepped' may recall 'strep' throat, the infection that causes pain and inflammation. At variance with Berry, Stevens or Hopkins' flight birds shown earlier, 'the stepped sister' sits outside of the natural order by being outside of or removed from the family.

But these images are part of a wider questioning that moves between cultural and ideological ideas around the emu, never settling on one version of the creature, a dynamism and plurality that Lyn McCredde describes in Murray's work as 'a representation of the organic: animal, human and God reunited' (McCredde, 2005, p.170). Where Wallace Stevens equates the river flowing to the blackbird flying, Les

Murray brings together the descent of the rain with the emu's hanging feathers, and as such puts forward the emu's body as being in state of belonging and accordance with the natural world:

The distillate of mountains is finely branched, this plain  
Expanse of dour delicate lives, where the rain,  
Shrouded slab on the west horizon, is a corrugated revenant  
Settling its long clay-tipped plumage in a hatching descent.  
(Murray, 2007, p.202)

Here it is as though the emu is no stranger to the grace that flight birds inhabit in Murray's poem 'Equanimity' (1983, p.158-159). Here the 'on-off grace' that attends the movements of birds as they flap their wings in flight, is a 'landscape of deepest humanness, we are told (...) a place from which 'all holiness speaks'' (McCredden, 2005, p.166). And the poet skirts the idea of the emu belonging within this landscape, while also situating the bird within the marginalized and fetishized roles that were explored in chapter one: this emu also has plastic lips (a doll), is a 'wasteland parent' (mother), a 'feather swaying condensed camel' (hybrid), in its 'sleeveless cloak' (lacking wings). And Murray affirms the co-existence of these cultural images and the impossible task of making sense of them when he asks 'Are you Early or Late, in the history of birds/ which doesn't exist, and is deeply ancient?' (2007, p.202). The poet's questions and assertions are aligned with ecofeminist intentions in the sense that they resist social simplification by playing, through language, with the rich diversity of historical and cultural imaginaries that the emu is associated with.

As well as having a conflicted relationship with vocality, the emu's body in Murray's poem is described through strange metaphors, sometimes invoking immobility. Its body is described as an 'alert periscope', and like Nandi Comer's 'Ostrich Woman', is disabled, with its 'knees backward in toothed three-way boots' (2007). The backward knees nod to disability as well as being unenlightened. The three-

way boots speak to the bird's tridactyl feet in human footwear. And finally describing the boots as 'toothed' reminds the reader of vocality and violence once again. Helene Cixous affirms the notion of women inhabiting incorrect, frozen bodies as she describes 'the little girls and their ill-mannered bodies immured (...) frigidified' (Cixous, 1976, p.877). These immobile, paralysed bodies also evoke the flightless moa in Allen Curnow's poem 'The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch', where the bird's carcass is held upright 'on iron crutches/ [brooding] over no great waste' (Curnow, 2017, p.99). To brood can be to reflect moodily, but also to sit on or watch eggs. Curnow says that the bird broods over 'no great waste'. It is as though the poet is highlighting the fact that the moa is extinct, and will no longer create any young, and he is also exposing the saddening belief that this could be interpreted as a loss that is unimportant. Furthering the theme of a broken body, Curnow says that 'under the skylights, [the children] wonder at the huge egg/ Found in a thousand pieces.' The next section will further explore and look at the impact of the demeaning conceptual framework that flightless birds inhabit in their cultural representations, and consider how this may bleed into how they are treated in the world, using the story of the last great auk to be seen on the British Isles as an example.

## 2.4 – Ecofeminism and the Negative Dialectic

Had the St Kildan sailors who captured the last great auk to be seen on the British Isles been interested in the bird's valuable meat and feathers, they would have boiled it once captured. Indeed, it was not the bird's nature or value but rather the sailors' fears that led them to kill the 'witch of St Kilda'.

Gauthier addresses the way that so many women in the past were slaughtered as witches: 'such a great number of women were burned, (...) out of fear, that one is forced

to conclude that they tried to have the female sex disappear from the earth' (Gauthier, 1988, p.201). Indeed, humans succeeded in making great auks disappear, and through being bound and gagged and burned. The great auk had disappeared from Funk Island (its biggest nesting colony) by 1800. An account by Aaron Thomas of HMS Boston from 1794 described how the bird had been slaughtered systematically until then:

If you come for their Feathers you do not give yourself the trouble of killing them, but lay hold of one and pluck the best of the Feathers. You then turn the poor Penguin adrift, with his skin half naked and torn off, to perish at his leisure. This is not a very humane method but it is the common practice. While you abide on this island you are in the constant practice of horrid cruelties for you not only skin them Alive, but you burn them Alive also to cook their Bodies with. You take a kettle with you into which you put a Penguin or two, you kindle a fire under it, and this fire is absolutely made of the unfortunate Penguins themselves. Their bodies being oily soon produce a Flame; there is no wood on the island. (Thomas, 1968, p.30)

By the mid-sixteenth century, the nesting colonies along the European side of the Atlantic were nearly all eliminated by humans killing this bird for its down, which was used to make pillows. In 1794 Great Britain banned the killing of the species for its feathers, though hunting for use as fishing bait was still permitted. In North America, the eiders were nearly driven to extinction in the 1770s. Down collectors switched to the great auk at the same time that hunting for food, fishing bait, and oil decreased. Finally, superstition and violence terminated the Great Auk as a species. As we return to thoughts on the cultural representations of women and flightless birds being bound and gagged, a picture starts to emerge of the Other as differentiated and dangerous. The creation myths looked at earlier remind us that this danger is encoded into the Others' bodies. Next comes the binding of the body as some kind of response to this danger. The idea of tying up and killing witches was in the air, part of cultural expectation for the St Kildan sailors; the classical period of witch hunts (the illegal and summary executions and torture of women) occurred alongside the systematic wiping out of the great auk, between the sixteenth and

the eighteenth century. As the contextualist Christopher Ricks understood, many events and artistic works contain importantly unstated truths – the context of the witch hunts at the time was so pervasive as to have become largely invisible (Ricks, 1985, p.101).

For the Great Auk, it seems that the binding of the bird by the sailors may have been an unreasoned response anchored in beliefs and images associated with the treatment of marginalised or different bodies. However, there is a further layer to consider when we attempt to examine the assumptions behind the murder of the last Great Auk on the British Isles. The idea of the weather witch, a witch who has the particular ability to create storms, may have been anchored in the sailors' consciousness because the invention and persecution of this particular type of witch has specific historical connections to Scotland.

In 1590 James VI arrived at Leith after a very stormy passage from Copenhagen, and it had been observed that the ship that carried the King was more violently affected by the storm than the other vessels in the fleet. In parallel, at the end of the sixteenth century, David Seton, afterwards Earl of Winton, was the prime mover in the crusade against witchcraft in Scotland. Suspecting his maid, Gellie Duncan, of being a witch, he crushed her fingers with thumb-screws, then bound and wrenched her head with a cord. He claimed to find the 'mark of the devil' on her throat, at which point Duncan confessed to being part of the Devil's fleet, and conjured the storm to sink the King's ship, along with thirty other accomplices. Shakespeare adapted many concepts from the Scottish witch trials, including the rituals confessed by the witches and the Scottish setting in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare was influenced by the trials, and borrowed many quotations from the treaties. The three fictional witches cast their spells in the same manner as the North Berwick Trials: 'purposely to be the cassin into the sea to raise winds for the destruction of ships' (*Macbeth*, 1.3) and to 'unleash violent winds that tear down churches, make the foamy waves overwhelm ships and send sailors to their deaths' (*Macbeth*, 4.1).



A cultural rationale is thus emerging for the way the great auk was killed, through attention to the power-based duality informing the cultural representations and treatment of women and flightless birds. The positive dialectic that demands the inferior category be absorbed into the superior one may give us insight and a deeper understanding of the process of marginalisation, and in particular how that process can lead to violence: the killing of the ‘witch of St Kilda’. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to arrive at a positive outcome by means of negation. Theodore Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1973) seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative properties without diminishing the determinacy of the process. The negative dialectic seeks to replace the unity principle with the idea of what would be outside the sway of this unity. In Adorno’s description of positive dialectics, objects do not become subsumed into new concepts without leaving a remainder. The concept does not exhaust the thing conceived. Indeed, Adorno says ‘what we differentiate will appear divergent (..) just as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity’ (Adorno, 1973, p.5). ‘If totality is the measure we aspire to, whatever is non-identical will appear contradictory’ (Adorno, 1973 p.5). Indeed, Adorno references witchcraft in this context, and puts it this way:

What differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft, while thought figures such as proximity, home, and security hold the faulty world under their spell. Men are afraid that in losing this magic they would lose everything, because the only happiness they know, even in thought, is to be able to hold on to something – the perpetuation of unfreedom.  
(Adorno, 1973, p33).

When looking at the particular expression of duality between the masculine and the feminine, and the flight bird and flightless bird, then, it could be suggested that the positive dialectic presents the difference between the distinct and the universal, dictated by the universal. At this point Adorno’s idea of the negative dialectic appears to allow a

feminist methodology that may liberate the non-identical and free it of its coercion. The negative dialectic, as a philosophical and creative methodology, may challenge the process of marginalisation at its most fundamental level. Speaking of Levi and Cixous' ways of interacting with animals in their writing, Maria Essunger argues:

The ability to hear what seems mute- or what is made mute- depends largely on the willingness to reimagine representation and to interact with multifaceted texts that dare to expose themselves as open to different interpretations- even misunderstandings. To hear the unheard, or reimagining representation, is arguably of great importance to the potentiality of creating constructive conditions for a greater inclusivity in our daily lives. (Essunger, 2017, p.438).

If we believe, like Essunger, that to reimagine representation is to think openly in manifold images, the negative dialectic opens the door to the multiplicity of interpretations and removes the positive dialectic's power over them. If we are to challenge the flight bird as encompassing all avian identity, we must 'challenge 'the anticipation of moving in contradictions' that teach 'this mental totality' (Adorno, 1973, p.10).

The positive dialectic process is the journey that leads to the expression of duality, as in de Beauvoir's masculine and feminine, the same expression of duality as flight bird and flightless bird, in the sense that one category is master over the other. Adorno suggests that it is only an incomplete view of these things that allows us to consider them as binaries. Moving forward in the spirit of the negative dialectic with my poetry will mean not reconciling the rifts between these, but demonstrating new ways to think of difference as a challenge to orthodox mastery of one by another.

Helène Cixous and Maria Essunger propose that poetry can help us reimagine representation: in this sense, poetry is approached as the medium to make visible what is unseen, as it doesn't seek to represent, but gains 'strength through the unconscious (...) the place where the repressed manage to survive' (Cixous, 1976, p. 880). Adorno

had ten years earlier affirmed that philosophy should also allow us to be in error, and even makes the comparison with art, suggesting that we can experience a work of art in its particularity, and that through interpretation, an infinite number of associations may emerge. For example, flightless birds, in their representation, could transcend the obsession with the wing and its functionalism by operating as one centralised body. Cixous states ‘though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralised body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalisation which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries.’ (Cixous, 1976, p886) Applying Cixous’ concept of regionalisation to the flightless bird, its body becomes not limited but uniquely unbounded.

Speaking of the writing method ‘*l’écriture féminine*’, coined by Cixous in circumstances explored in my next chapter, Susan Sellers states that ‘for Cixous, the willingness to enable and sing the Other, rather than appropriate the Other’s difference in order to construct and glorify the self in accordance with masculine law, is the keynote of ‘*l’écriture féminine*’ (Sellers, 1996, p.10) Indeed, feminine writing might prove to be both a method and a spyglass that focuses light upon an abstracted conception of the great auk, because it allows us to imagine a new way of seeing it.

As we reflect on the flightless bird, in its definition and its cultural representations, we increasingly recognise and empathise with the ‘the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display- the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion’ (Cixous, 1976, p.885). Cixous reminds us that ‘a woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter.’ (p.885) In this sense, flightlessness, as a defining negative attribute, as a collective quality of not having, cancels the possibility of richness and diversity in cultural representations of flightless birds. Can a flightless

bird, be a ‘good fighter’, for example, even in our imaginations? And does the rehearsal of this method of understanding and describing the world mirror prejudice in other contexts? What is the cultural loss of the flightless bird being considered inadequate? More optimistically, if animal fables function as analogies in any way capable of affecting the reader, if animal stories can organise and impact our moral code, can the reimagining of flightless birds in poems and stories offer a reformation of attitudes to the marginalised?

Adorno claims that objects are larger than their subjects and subjects are larger than their objects – that our concepts always fail, or fit badly. In Wallace Stevens’ essay ‘About One of Marianne Moore’s Poems’, he explores Moore’s aesthetic integration of the flightless ostrich as an individual reality, expressed through poetry. Stevens explores Moore’s poem “He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron’” and argues that its potency lies in the fact ‘that it illustrates the achieving of an individual reality’ (Stevens, 1951, p98). We see that for Stevens, Moore achieves communion with the ostrich by bringing together the various historical and ideological worlds it inhabits, leading to the poet’s own aesthetic vision. As Stevens reflects on Moore’s Ostrich, he notes that,

It is the reality of Miss Moore that is the individual reality. That of the *Encyclopaedia* is the reality of isolated fact. Miss Moore’s reality is significant. An aesthetic integration is a reality.  
(Stevens, 1951, p.98).

Returning to Adorno, we’re reminded that the excess of the object beyond its concept is the part of the object that extends beyond the bare reporting of facts (Morelock, 2016). Stevens’ analysis reminds us of Adorno’s negative dialectic in the sense that it tells us they both affirm that ‘truth’ should not be interpreted as wholly contained within empirical facts. The zone of error, the implicit remainder in the concept and the object is ‘the zone of creativity that moves understanding forward’ (Adorno, 2014, p87). Indeed,

if reconciliation is predicated on antagonism and the defeat of difference, Adorno's drive to abandon the imperative for reconciliation is in line with the feminist standpoint that recognises and rejects the absorption of one category into another. Speaking about Adorno and ecofeminism, Bruce Martin asserts,

The insights of critical theory support the ecofeminist and generally radical ecological perspective that nature is best viewed not as a collection of objects for manipulation and control, but as a profound process that develops in not entirely predictable directions, and that always exceeds existing conceptualisation.  
(Bruce Martin, 2006, p.146).

Reflecting on the negative dialectic, Jeremiah Morelock reminds us that 'ideas under the pretence of the truest true are the most removed from the object in its full chaos' (2016). Indeed, thinking back to Murray and (in Chapter One) Clarence Major's poetry, these poets are intentionally not attempting to see the flightless bird empirically, but rather to imitate it and imagine the manifold imaginaries that these birds occupy within human thought. Taussig asserts that 'The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power.' (Taussig, 1993, xiii). For Adorno, the dialectical way of knowing involves a 'yielding to the other, the immersion of the self in the other, a loosening of boundaries of identity' (Bruce Martin, p.147). Indeed, in the context of negative dialectics, Adorno invokes the idea of 'a diversity [of objects] not wrought by any schema' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972 p.13). Here we see the negative dialectic as a philosophy that resists marginalisation, that challenges the process: the 'need to dominate nature is [...] a projection of the need to dominate other human beings' (Keller, 1995 p.124). The reimagining of the flightless bird finds pathways to its most impactful realisation when it is mindful of the logic of domination that determines the flightless bird as 'other'. Bruce Martin puts it like this:

The strength of feminism has been its ability, based on its recognition of the unfreedom and suffering of actual women in their day to day lives, to generate a variety of analyses revealing the depth and breadth of the domination of women under social systems controlled by and for the benefit of men. Further, women with feminist commitments have been able to show that an adequate answer to the problem of domination does not consist in a 'liberal' solution of equal inclusion in the existing system. The problem goes to the very structure of language and beyond; to the unconscious imaginings of both men and women; to how we become gendered subjects capable of speech; and to question how the images, concepts and practises of society can be changed.

(Bruce Martin, 2006, p.159).

To apply this argument to the reimagining of the flightless bird through poetry is to imagine the bird through manifold images. As the predicament of flightless birds becomes increasingly aligned with the power-based duality that exists for women and men, the poet is invited to summon, engage and retain the marginalised part of herself, with a view to releasing Martin's 'unconscious [and irrational] imaginings', and loosening the hold of the view that humans are rational agents, who are separate from and superior to nature.

Finally, before I turn to my methodology of using women's writing to attempt to skirt, dig for or discover the 'impossible image' (Bruce Martin, 2006, p.159) of the flightless bird – Adorno's 'remainder' – through the medium of *écriture féminine*, I would like to situate this concept by introducing some contextual material.

Feminism played a central political role in France between 1944 and 1981. The important contributors during this time were often left-wing women who were part of a post-war tradition that aimed to produce social change. French feminists were committed to a materialist critique of society and to promoting equality related to work and family life, including laws around marriage and abortion. If I am interested in challenging the logic of domination that affirms the flightless bird as 'other' through women's writing, I must ask, what exactly is meant by 'women's writing'? In May 1968, a period of protest began throughout France, lasting two months and punctuated by demonstrations, general strikes, and the occupation of universities and factories. The

unrest began with student sit ins rejecting capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism and traditional institutions. The events of May 1968 created space for the emergence of a radical gay movement and a feminist movement, as expressed in the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF).

Helene Cixous was part of the French feminist movement that had significantly grown since May 1968. Where the protest against women's exclusion from political institutions was apparent, feminists also wanted to challenge the sexism inherent in language that excluded women from public discourse. As historian Diane Bornstein observed in 1978, women had been 'seen' as objects of male discourse, but never 'heard' as subjects of female discourse (p.132). The aim of feminists at the time was to be heard within a female discourse. As such, Cixous coined the term *écriture féminine* as forms and styles of writing that could become a starting point for female consciousness. This included new methods, such as non-linear writing, unconventional narrative technique, and new syntactical and grammatical manipulation of words to evoke new meanings. This is a new language that presents 'irrationality' (Crowder, 1983, p.143). Cixous wished to change the field of literary production with a view to challenging the patriarchal cultural system that underpinned it. Cixous contended that both *logocentrism* (the privileged role of western speech and logical language) and *phallogentrism* (the idea that the male sexual organ is the central element in the organisation of the social world) marginalised all kinds of other language, including women's language. Some critics have further revealed the extent to which masculine writing is seen as superior by suggesting that Cixous' methods do not liberate women but support sexists in their point of view that women speak emotionally and irrationally. Cixous says that

[n]early the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has

been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is, indeed, the same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism.

(Cixous, 1976, p.897)

The characteristics of women's writing are closely linked with the female body and sexuality. Cixous believes that the expression of female sexuality in writing is essential in order to challenge masculinist writing. She views metaphor and the orientation of women towards the multiple sexual impulses of their body as a means to liberate the feminine from the restrained nature of phallogocentric writing. In line with this, Cixous offers no framework for feminine writing beyond her own example, and acknowledges the multiplicity of female experience in the assertion that 'Woman must write herself' (Cixous, 1978, p.880). She advises,

[L]et's leave it to the worriers, to masculine anxiety and its obsession with how to dominate the way things work— knowing "how it works" in order to "make it work." For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalise or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to "fly." (Cixous, 1978, p.887)

This chapter has established an intellectual parallel between the conceptual framework that characterises the differentiation of women in relation to men, with the ideas that emerge from exploring cultural depictions of flightless birds. It has also put forward the methodology that will influence my poetic practice, that will be used as a tool to unsettle the cultural imaginaries around flightless birds that we have explored so far. The next chapter offers an analysis and reflection of a selection of poems from the practise-based element of this thesis.



## Chapter 3 – Poetry as a Reimagining of Flightless Birds

### Introduction

Now I am going to demonstrate the practical ways in which my poetry engages with or re-enacts the ideas I explored in my previous chapters. Each poem in my collection aims to, in some way, loosen, unsettle and glimpse alternatives to existing cultural responses to flightless birds, and, as such create a dynamic and evolving idea of these creatures through poetry. In line with some of Cixous's ideas about *écriture féminine*, for example, the poems are often deeply interested in animal and human physicality and sexuality. In this sense the flightless bird becomes a place of articulation through which to 'write myself', and the method of *écriture féminine* helps to find new ways of seeing creatures that have existed within a similar power-based cultural duality as women.

As examples for this introduction, multiple invented imaginaries the flightless bird might occupy are gestured to in the poems 'Flightless Bird', 'We Killed two Flightless Birds', 'Paper Bird', 'Game Bird', 'To Be One of your Things', 'Dodo', 'Not the Sort of Thing One Gives a Name', In this section from the poem 'Flightless Bird', which is presented as unpunctuated prose,

your kiss gives off its own imaginary nationality silenced through language with  
a rich and muted culture your lips wear like an emblem when you order coffee  
beyond you there's a flightless bird lingering in one of the canvas' abstractions  
mincing in and out of sight like a cat.

The flightless bird is in a painting, and like a cat, and is myself. The flightless bird  
lingers and is abstract, and later appears concrete and is intended to evoke the effect of  
cabin pressure. From the same poem, the flightless bird's body is at once useless and  
fully realised:

she reveals to us with her silenced wings and magnificent body that useless and fully realised are the same thing I came across when I found a hair inside my ex-husband's Bukowski book from when I wore it long and curly when I'd mastered the colour codes on baby food and knew all the buttons on the pram I closed the book with shameful care and nestled it between two hardbacks knowing my old hair inside my ex-husband's book of poems is a maquette for an unrealisable project and the unbearable quantity of shatterable models bleeds off on me like the cabin pressure of your lips' biography and the broken bird

In 'We Killed Two Flightless Birds' two dead great auks now appear as two coal eyes in a snowman in a memory, but only for the person who killed them, the narrator of the poem. The poem explains,

You take one real thing out of the world  
but you don't know which imagined thing shares its coordinates.

In line with this, the narrator no longer sees the neighbouring graveyard's rows of wooden crosses the same way:

I awake

from a nap where snowman faces make no sense  
and go outside to check the cemetery is still the same.  
Relaxing my eyes

over the rows of grave crosses,  
it's like the swathe of bumblebees that emerges  
when you adjust your focus on lavender flowers.

And this levelled field of wooden crosses  
becomes a field of scarecrows, stripped and arranged open armed in the sun.

His experience of killing has altered this scene – the crosses now resemble rows of scarecrows that have been stripped of their clothes. But they remain on display and 'open armed' - alluding to the fetishization of great auks post-extinction.

In 'Paper Bird', I make an origami penguin, which at various stages of the folding process, appears as a cut diamond, a gutted pig, and buffalo wings. The emus in

‘Emus in Winter’ are at once the same as the landscape: they are mountains, with balsam fir tails and valleyed necks. But they also are agents of the landscape, encouraging the mountain to grow and gather snow. In ‘Leda and the Ostrich’, my own sex drive remotely converts the swan in the painting ‘Leda and the Ostrich’ into an ostrich:

The beam is strong enough to change  
a painting in a gallery,  
a Type A oeuvre like Leda and the Swan,

into something breathtakingly bastard: half-blood  
gorgeous, treacherous lovely mongrel  
sexy fresco and oils where plaster

forms a physical bond  
with paint. And the painted swan  
becomes an ostrich. And all  
the gallery birds go monster— a camel-sparrow neck

snakes around Leda where a swan once stood:

In David Wright’s poem *On the Death of an Emperor Penguin in Regent’s Park* (2011, p.4), the emperor penguin (identified as masculine) is maligned for his ignorance and social class. The idea of the flightless bird as a consumable object, as ‘blubber and feather’ (Wright, 2011, p.4) is subverted in my poem *Game Bird*, as the concept of preparing a bird is reimagined as an absurd craft project. Instructions include juliennening a bridal veil to make the feathers, and crafting a skeleton from honeycomb:

mix sugar, syrup and bicarb in a deep saucepan

while she bubbles, shrink a good tree (if you don’t have a whole tree,  
the bonsai’s fine)

cover the shrunken tree with slabs of the hot toffee mixture {as though  
making

leave to cool

Papier-

mâché

*carefully* remove the branches from inside the cinder toffee casing

when the honeycomb frame feels weightless in your palm, you know you have  
the skeleton \*

for the feathers:

julienne a bridal veil then iron out the splay with starch  
break off a high heel for the centre spine of each plume  
have a friend play a continuous tremolo on the violin to get everyone in the  
mood for flight  
if you run out of wedding train, flatten a pompon and comb out its threads  
hook the barbs with corset eyelets to resist the wind- ruffle

Moreover, the idea of the flightless bird as proletarian and its need to be useful (for  
men) and dutiful (for women) is challenged in my poem 'To Be One of Your Things':

There's a plane  
                  draped over the beach.  
Wings out, on its front— a toddler napping,  
                  three windows missing.  
And the very tip of its nose  
might be gone.  
It's no beast

in silence like this;  
the sun  
draws dark circles  
under two white wings— a miscarriage.

Here the flightless protagonist is a grounded plane, a failed journey- the poem attempts  
to bring together uselessness with beauty and exalted purpose, and it challenges  
flightlessness as a metaphor for physical failure – the failed journey of a grounded plane  
and the failed journey of a miscarriage.

In line with Cixous' work, flightless birds transcend the obsession with the wing  
and its functionalism by operating as one centralised body. In my poem 'Dodo', Cixous'  
concept of 'regionalisation' is applied to the flightless bird in the context of sexuality,  
and how we approach and define sexual dysfunction is explored:

Believers lick their lips  
behind the glass

at my brain's cradle,

and chew over who  
could have arranged me  
this way-

dysfunctional.  
*The ungodliness  
of a flightless bird,*

they prattle.  
I have  
no working wings.

Just three or four  
black feathers  
branded nastily

either side,  
to mark  
where wings aren't,

and to imply  
that I broke a promise.  
Wet descriptions

can be found of me  
in wrecked ships' journals.

This speaks to the analysis from chapter one, that identified examples where flightless birds are portrayed as women and as disabled. I reflect upon Cixous's concept of 'mother as nonname' (1976) and consider the significance of how objects and people are named and not named in my poem 'Not the Sort of Thing One Gives a Name':

Sat down breathing

baked-bean-air, I drift  
and decide that there are words

inside words  
(like love is inside the word clover)—

they're stuck but they flutter,  
like moths in jars. And they crawl around the in-flight magazine—

soft bodied fireflies

with glow-in-the-dark organs: one flash  
a broken Christmas light,  
the next a compressed musical. Because  
I won't see our garden again: so big  
it stretched past snack time. All the way down  
to an empty  
sunken pool, lounging  
in mustard leaves. Three metal steps down  
to no water. My sister  
and I, bare  
skin on the concrete, so young  
our feet are still opening out  
in little blooming fists:  
twenty curly toes being flattened and educated  
in the ways of being flat. I left  
my fingerless gloves  
to the mustard tree, because  
I was rushing  
and I hadn't given them names yet.

As was shown in chapter one, the kiwi is anthropomorphised and ridiculed (Major, 1994), whilst for the emu, maternal duty is framed as a cautionary tale (Hassel and Davidson, 1935) as the female emu foolishly strays from her husband and leaves her eggs. The reader is reminded at the end of the tale that 'had it not been for her folly she would have had a fine clutch of chicks... She was the one who suffered most for her foolishness' (Hassel and Davidson, 1935, p142). My poem 'Margot Don't Travel' reflects upon motherhood figured as lack, brings pregnancy together with captivity, and explores flightlessness by reflecting upon the distinction between movement and travel:

The hanging cage by the tumble dryer  
is pregnant with a bird.

She grows inside it like a foetus

or a finished book being annotated.

She lives in a red brick house  
that is pregnant  
with a floral room  
and the damp room is pregnant  
with a birdcage  
and the antique cage is pregnant  
with a caged bird.

And inside the yellow bird  
is a beating heart  
and the heart is like the bird  
because it can move but cannot travel.

This chapter continues with exposition of, and reflection on, four other poems from my collection: 'I'll Invent an Emu', 'Prophet-like that Lone One Stood', 'Ladies Kindly Remove your Hats' and 'St Kilda'.

### 3.1 – I'll Invent an Emu

Australian aboriginal mythology takes the flightless emu and places it in the sky, spotting a constellation of opaque clouds of dust and naming it 'the emu in the sky'. Here the flightless protagonist of the aboriginal dreamtime story is stencilled onto the stars, 'transforming meaning into form' (Barthes, 1987, p.131) through astronomical interpretation. Initially inspired by this aboriginal dreamtime story, the poem 'I'll Invent an Emu' was written as an introduction to the emu and a reflection on the bird's relationship with humans.

#### **I'll Invent an Emu**

I'll spread out an ostrich, then shrink its frame.

Until it's tall as a man, comely as a girl,

and beefy as an emperor penguin.

I'll humiliate its bones then dress its feet

with bustard or burnt quail slippers.

I'll tend to a cassowarie's tryptich claws,

and slip the bird four working bellies.

I'll call its song a straight blues drum beat,

un-render bush medicine and the oil from lamps,

cut open soft capsules to set its cushy fat in motion,

uncurl a ball of string to substitute its tendons.

The steak knives will assemble into the shape of its skeleton,

while its meat slowly grows the same pH value as beef.

The blue moon will come. All the way down to earth

without rolling or adjusting or getting any bigger.

And an egg will land as softly as a cat

inside my emu's nest. I'll tuck in my arms and claim

I was the first to be flightless, then steep a 747

in imbricate petals. I'll roll a beluga in soot and scales.

I'll ask that we look up to the dark cloud lanes

when the Milky Way is clear and dying, and I'll demand

we see an emu reaching out for itself in a trail of running dust.



When humans describe the emu in zoological terms, its physical appearance is often understood to the extent to which it is similar, or dissimilar to other birds. For example, its toes are described as having the same tridactyl arrangement as bustards, quails and cassowaries (Nupen, 2016, p.35). It is described as weighing slightly more on average than the emperor penguin, and being slightly shorter than an ostrich. Emus are described as unique among birds in that their gastrocnemius muscles in the back of the lower legs have four ‘muscle bellies’ (the sum of all muscle fibres in any given muscle) instead of the usual three. In ‘I’ll Invent an Emu’, these relative physical descriptions are considered in isolation, then collected as guidelines, as the poet attempts to build an emu from these disparate pieces of knowledge:

I’ll spread out an ostrich, then shrink its frame.  
Until it’s tall as a man, comely as a girl,  
and beefy as an emperor penguin.  
I’ll humiliate its bones then dress its feet

with bustard or burnt quail slippers.  
I’ll tend to a cassowarie’s tryptich claws,  
and slip the bird four working bellies.

While the emu’s physicality is understood in relation to other birds, the emu’s behaviour and physiology is sometimes framed in relation to human points of reference. For example, its grunting call is described as similar to a drum beat (Menon et al, 2019, p.3), hence the line in the poem: ‘I’ll call its song a straight blues drum beat’. The bird’s strength is also understood in relation to its impact in a human setting: it is said that the bird’s legs are powerful enough to tear down metal fences. Emu meat is described as a ‘low-fat product’ and is called a red meat because it has a similar pH value to beef, also mentioned in the poem. The incongruous imagery of drum beats, beef Ph etc has its origin in zoological descriptions. These images work to estrange the writing via another known mode of discourse, that isn’t poetry, but sits amongst it. The poetry becomes a

defamiliarizing discussion with the factual. For example, the emu's tridactyl claws become 'tritych' claws in the poem – subverting the scientific term and deploying a term from art.

The poem begins to consider and attempts to imagine what creature or object might appear if working backwards from human descriptions of the bird and emu-derived products. A third discourse emerges as the Aboriginal myth of the emu egg being throw into the sky and becoming the sun (Skatsoon, 2005), is 'reversed' in the poem, with the moon coming down from the sky and landing in an emu nest:

The blue moon will come. All the way down to earth  
without rolling or adjusting or getting any bigger.  
And an egg will land as softly as a cat  
  
inside my emu's nest.

In the third stanza, I bring together the tools and supplements made from the emu's body:

[I'll] un-render bush medicine and the oil from lamps,  
cut open soft capsules to set its cushy fat in motion,  
uncurl a ball of string to substitute its tendons.  
The steak knives will assemble into the shape of its skeleton,  
  
while its meat slowly grows the same ph value as beef.

Aboriginal use of bones for making tools is documented across Australia. In some parts of Australia, a sharpened section of emu bone was fashioned into a peg or spur mounted on the end of the spear-thrower (South Australian Government Printer, 1897). Emu bones were also made into ritual daggers, known popularly as "pointing bones" (Elkin, 1977, p.36). In the poem, these tools are referred to as the steak knives to highlight the emu's chemical link with beef. Emu tendons were used to make string, fat used for aboriginal healing purposes (Clarke, 2018, p.30), and now rendered to produce

oil for cosmetics, dietary supplements and therapeutic products, also mentioned in the poem.

In terms of process, 'I'll Invent an Emu' began in second person conditional tense: 'You'd Invent an Emu'. The conditional clause was made up of all the physical, behavioural and cultural references to the bird, with the intentionally flawed hypothesis that if one was to collect all these elements, one would, ostensibly, 'invent an emu'. And as such, this human invention is borne on the page as a collection of items and comparisons that bear no apparent resemblance to the bird. I changed the poem to first person because even in the efforts to highlight and challenge the human and knowledge-centred ways the animal is described, a new emu representation was inevitably being garnered through the act of writing the poem – indeed, *I* would invent an emu. I also changed the tense to future tense to show the poet looking forwards throughout the poem: the act of finishing the poem (and 'inventing' the emu) is not something that could happen (as the conditional tense would imply) but something that will happen, the moment the poem is complete. I am looking into the future with each line of the poem, and there is a satirical and fatalistic tone that runs throughout the piece – hopelessly and inevitably moving towards another representation of the bird. The poet becomes more and more desperate and the emu becomes more and more effaced as this representation evolves. In fact, when the poet cannot conjure the bird from its distinct parts, she attempts to fashion the bird from aeroplanes. Given that the bird is considered oversized and stout-bodied, the poet chooses the first jumbo jet (the Boeing 747) and the first wide-body plane designed for oversized cargo (the Airbus Beluga):

[I'll] steep a 747 in imbricate petals.  
I'll roll a beluga in soot and scales.

In the poem, the petals are used to attempt to mimic the bird's overlapping feathers; the soot is used to mimic the emu's colour (and as a soft call-back to the burnt quail slippers in the second stanza). The scales can be interpreted as overlapping fish scales to mimic feathers. But a scale can also be a rudimentary leaf or feather, or each of the numerous microscopic structures covering the wings of butterflies and moths. The word also alludes to the relative size or extent of something, as though amidst the efforts to measure and grade the emu, the poet is somehow trying to cover the bird with, and/or (dis)cover the bird's true 'scale'.

Unable to make the bird from its distinct parts, or craft it from aeroplanes and various props, the speaker in the poem becomes frantic and decides to use her own body – trying to disguise herself as the emu and appropriate its flightlessness. She can't describe or encompass it, so moves on to trying to appropriate and become it:

I'll tuck in my arms and claim  
I was the first to be flightless

Then finally, unable to animate the bird through language, the poet makes a demand on the reader. She references the 'emu in the sky' a constellation representing the bird used in aboriginal culture (Fuller et al, 2014, p.171), and tells the reader to see it:

I'll ask  
  
that we look up to the dark cloud lanes  
when the Milky Way is clear and dying, and I'll demand  
we see an emu reaching out for itself in a trail of running dust.

In turning in imperative mode to the reader, instead of encompassing the emu, the poet creates (albeit coercively) a small moment of human community – we are looking together. Finally, the emu in the sky, an idea of the emu stencilled onto the stars, is now

reaching out for itself, and the reader and poet watch the representation reaching out for its own essence.

### 3.2 – Prophet-like that Lone One Stood

The methodology behind the poem ‘Prophet-like That Lone One Stood’, consisted of engaging with several factual aspects of the great auk’s story, filtered through poetry, with a view to experiencing the subject as a revelation of a new reality. Wallace Stevens contends that poetry enables a ‘transition from one reality to another’ (Stevens, 1951, p94). The aim with this poem was to move through factual information towards a new reality that acknowledges itself as deeply entrenched in the individual energy of the poet. Jeanette Winterson talks about art enabling us to see the world through different eyes and thus allowing us to reject the notion of cultural separatism: ‘We learn early how to live in two worlds; our own and that of the dominant model, why not learn how to live in multiple worlds? The strange prismatic world that art offers?’ (1996, p.110). In this sense I wanted the poem to welcome the possibility of being the expression of many realities.

Helene Cixous maintains that the redress of poetry comes about through the unconscious, and that this abstraction is possible within poetry, unlike other forms of writing:

But only the poets- not the novelists, allies of representationalism. Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is a place where the repressed manage to survive. (Cixous, 1976, p.887).

As Stevens brings together Marianne Moore’s poem and the paper “On Poetic Truth” by H.D. Lewis, Stevens substantiates Lewis’ claim that an isolated fact derives its

significance from the reality to which it belongs. He compares the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of the ostrich to the bird's description in Moore's poem. Stevens reflects that where the encyclopaedia presents an isolated fact as reality, Moore presents an aesthetic integration as reality (Stevens, 1951, p96).

Indeed, both poems 'He 'Digesteth Harde Yron'' and 'Prophet-like that Lone One Stood' present a world factual in appearance, but do not present isolated facts as reality, as in the encyclopaedia. As I show in this graph, they each contain biological information, historical context, geographical and cultural references specific to the bird in question:

Table 1 - He Digesteth Harde Yron

	He Digesteth Harde Yron	Prophet-like that Lone One Stood
<b>Biological Information</b>		
<u>Weight</u>	‘linked with [the aepyornis, roc and moa] in size’	‘you weigh the same as a six-month-old’
<u>Body Characteristics</u>	‘He has a foot as hard as a hoof’	Its heavy and crooked ‘nutcracker’ beak.
<u>Plumage</u>	‘in S-like foragings as he is /preening the down on his leaden-skinned back.’	‘In summer, /your plumage shows/a white patch on each eye: two eggs. Twins. /Exotic/animal capital. In winter you lose the patches, /instead developing a white band/stretching between the eyes.’
<u>Physical prowess</u>	‘magnificently speedy running bird’	‘With unseen stealth. /Your body will only ever be known by water.’
<b>Historical Context</b>		
<u>Historical Appropriation and Exploitation of the Bird’s Body</u>	‘prized for plumes and eggs and young’	Papa Westray where ‘bird feathers fill pillows’, referring to the 18th century practise of killing the bird for down (banned in Great Britain in 1794).
<u>Mythical Importance of the Bird’s Body</u>	‘a symbol of justice’ referring to the ostrich feather as belonging to the Egyptian Goddess Ma’at.	‘beaks strewn over maritime archaic coats, a play on the word ‘coats’ - the Maritime Archaic people revered great auks and were buried in coats decorated with their beaks.
<u>How the Animal’s Body was/is Displayed for Public Consumption</u>	Ancient Egyptian banquets: ‘six hundred ostrich brains served/ at one banquet, the ostrich-plume-tipped tent/and desert spear, jewel-/gorgeous ugly egg-shell/goblets, eight pairs of ostriches/in harness	The description of the monument (made in 1988) and its context. It was ‘made by children’ – the junior members of the Orkney Field Club at Fowl Craig in the RSPB’s North Hill reserve. It is ‘rose stone’ - coloured pink.
<b>Geographical Reference</b>		
	‘Madagascar’, one of the ostrich’s homes. The Ostrich in China as an exotic gift- ‘for the Chinese lawn it grazed on as a gift.’	The mention and description of Fowl Craig at Papa Westray, where the monument to the Great Auk currently resides.
<b>Cultural Significance</b>		
	‘the one remaining rebel’	‘A charismatic icon of extinction’.

Individual reality and multiple realities occur simultaneously in both poems. In ‘He ‘Digesteth Harde Yron’’, the many historical and ideological worlds the ostrich inhabits are brought together and held by Moore’s overarching aesthetic vision (Stevens, 1951). Undoubtedly Moore’s ‘fantastic reverence’ (Felstiner, 2009, p.176) for the natural world allows this vision to emerge.

The flightless bird experiences a double alienation, or muteness, being an animal and being flightless. The Great Auk is subject to a third alienation, being extinct. Cixous argues that the special ability that art has is not simply to allow us to observe a subject from a different perspective, but because of the immediacy and power of the form, it enables us to glimpse the subject from an internal perspective. Indeed, speaking of Rembrandt’s Bathsheba, Cixous reminds us:

Where does Rembrandt take us? To a foreign land, our own.  
A foreign land, our other country.  
He takes us to the Heart.  
(Cixous, 2005, p.6)

If we are to reimagine flightless birds, it is useful to be mindful of the existing language that describes them. Speaking of *l’écriture féminine*, Susan Sellers isolates a central characteristic:

for Cixous, the willingness to enable and sing the Other, rather than appropriate the Other’s difference in order to construct and glorify the self in accordance with masculine law, is the keynote of *écriture féminine*. (Sellers, 1996, p.10)

Indeed, feminine writing, as the process of writing through the senses rather than reporting on the senses, is both a method and a spyglass that focuses light upon an abstracted conception. Here it is that of the great auk, allowing the reader and poet to imagine a new way of seeing the bird.



### 3.3 – Ladies Kindly Remove Your Hats

Interested in the geopolitical and symbolic weight of the ostrich feather as a heavily traded and appropriated object, the poem *Ladies Kindly Remove Your Hats* is a poetic response to the trend for luxuriously adorned women's hats, which caused great annoyance to 1910s motion picture spectators. Adorned with 'everything from exotic bird plumes, (...) to miniature barnyard animals, women's early twentieth-century hat fashions butted heads with the sheer logistics of film screen visibility' (Hennefeld, 2016, p.25). In 1909, one film journalist complained:

The eternal feminine hat is always a source of much irritation to mere man (...) In this regard the average woman is quite a savage person. It is a matter of pure indifference to her as to how much inconvenience the person sitting behind her may be put by the wearing of her hat. She bought it to wear; to be looked at; to be admired and envied on all and any occasion, and if she has to remove it, 'hell hath no fury like a woman' deprived of her pet hat... (Moving Picture World, 1909, p.482).

The poem takes second look at the ostrich feather and the women who wore it, confronting the patriarchal ideology that provoked a 'profound ambivalence towards the female spectator' (Hennefeld, 2016, p.26), and creating a poem that places women at the centre, plays with ideas of excess, vanity and voyeurism, and ultimately enjoys an intentionally decadent showcasing of female rage.

#### **Ladies Kindly Remove Your Hats**

Don't put me on a pedestal  
because I will let you

down. I wear a plumed hat

to a silent film – the violence

of a feather draws close

to my body. Dense and bound,

amphitheatred with oranges,

the headdress blocks

the movie screen—

balanced erect with imitation

deadness; I'm no use

to fauxweathers.

It's probably that I'm trying

to provoke a murder. *My* murder

flicks across soft millinery, bang

against the auditorium. Bedeck me

good in meteor crêpe—

*she bought it to be looked at—*

my bad

heart, yes

arranges like a story. Or bordering collected

stories, asleep on each other's shoulders:

one a waxed clementine,

next the lacquered feather of a flightless bird.

I'll have it all at once

and one at a time. And the insides.

As theatre owners sought to legitimize film culture at the time, the social conditions were created that would engender the desire to for patrons, particularly women, to project status. This manifested through the wearing of increasingly ornate and visually obstructive hats – the symbol of middle-class decency. The poem begins:

Don't put me on a pedestal  
because I will let you

down. I wear a plumed hat  
to a silent film – the violence

of a feather draws close  
to my body.

As such the 'pedestal' in the poem is the female body itself that holds the hat, but it also alludes to the gendered public sphere of the time – the aesthetic problem of the hat was fuelled by the social desire to appear more 'elevated' than the average frequenter of the seedy nickelodeon theatres. 'The violence of the feather draws close to the body' – indeed, the hats were carcasses: testaments of status, excess and geopolitical imperialism. Importantly, the sought-after feathers were exotic conquests, procured from animals in North Africa or the South Pacific. In 'The Arcades Project', cultural critic Walter Benjamin says 'There is hardly another article of dress that can give expression to such divergent erotic tendencies, and that has so much latitude to disguise

them (...) the shades of erotic meaning in a woman's hat are virtually incalculable.'

(Benjamin, 2002, p.80). The poem continues:

Dense and bound,  
  
amphitheatred with oranges,  
the headdress blocks  
  
the movie screen—  
balanced erect with imitation  
  
deadness; I'm no use  
to fauxweathers.

The 'dense and bound' headdress is portrayed as a place that is suggestive, erotic and unknowable, while the amphitheatre analogy affirms the hat as a site of performance and entertainment. The hat is 'balanced erect with imitation deadness' – it is as much teetering and unreliable as it is lifeless and phoney, a contradiction further crystallised with the invented portmanteau 'fauxweathers'.

In the closing stanzas of the poem, I respond to two statements made by men about women's hats, one remark that resides within a movie itself. I firstly respond to Charles Haughton's character Sir Wilfred in the 1950s film-noir *Witness for the Prosecution*. In the film, he remarks 'I am constantly surprised that women's hats do not provoke more murders.' (Wilder, [1958] 2018). I confirm in the poem that it is, in fact 'my murder' that I am trying to provoke. Thus, within the poem, a third display is added into the fray of moving and static images: the silent film running onscreen, the plumed hat obstructing it, and finally my own murder, providing a further garish interruption: flicking 'across soft millinery' and banging 'against the auditorium'. As such, in the context of the movie theatre, the 'lacquered feather of a flightless bird' mentioned in the poem, is not only a feature in the network of personal and shared encounters that traversed public and private borders at the time, but also the object that

most crudely exhibits and encapsulates the pageantry and violence that permeated and characterised these collective and individual experiences. Finally, I quote the journalist from *Moving Picture World*, who mentioned that I ‘bought [the hat] to wear; to be looked at; to be admired and envied on all and any occasion’ (*Moving Picture World*, 1909, p.482) specifying that I not only bought the hat to be looked at, but that I intended to consume every element of it, from the feathers to the waxed clementines. As such the sheer animal greed for experience and consumption is completely antithetical to the demure conventional femininity signified by the hat. I explain that:

I’ll have it all at once  
and one at a time. And the insides.

### 3.4 – St Kilda

As referenced previously in this thesis, just under a century after the murder of the last great auk to be seen on the British Isles, the St Kildan people were removed from their island home, and their community disappeared. The poem ‘St Kilda’ tells the story of the end of the St Kildan community, and the Great Auk’s extinction. It reflects on the islanders’ exploitation and eventual eradication alongside the bird’s fate. The poem considers the cultural beliefs about human and nonhuman communities that could legitimise domination and engender violence.

#### **St Kilda**

##### **1.**

I only see her picture, but it feels like looking at a photo

of myself as a child – her carriage so much more sober  
than the other extinct birds.

Where the red rail arches its talons, and the little bittern  
pouts its chest, the Great Auk holds no internalised mood.  
No anchor to herself. It's like she's waiting

to ask permission. She is black on one side  
and white on the other, like a sea stack at sunrise.  
I love her dark hair against the white dress.

She models herself: a sexual bride with instant history,  
a moving story, if stories become moving  
the moment their contents are released.

Extinction – the hand that just now held a gold coin,  
opens up and vanishes.

## 2.

I love to imagine the family prayers  
spoken softly for the last time –  
the delicious black image  
of a bible left open in each house.

We boarded a steamer for the archipelago

of St Kilda, to obtain a postmark  
before the island was evacuated.

Later that year, its inhabitants

were gathered and removed.

It's a scene that begs

the same terrific yearning

for a storm so severe

it leaves you deaf for a week.

For the island bay's conflicting winds

to see a dozen sheep blown over

a cliff. For the timbre

of the seabirds' screamings –

the one remaining unmuted frequency,

to unlock the weather and foreshadow

its decisiveness. To be free

yet to freely espouse

an island fit for prison,

fit for good impartial justice – the factor

dressed in a long tweed trench-coat

beside the heap of harvested gannets.

**3.**

Before humans vanished from St Kilda,  
there was a golden hour  
in which their paucity was rehearsed,  
with seabirds enacting the dry run  
of what it means to be flatteringly scarce.

Each year, the Great Auk  
slipped ashore to lay one egg  
on bare rock. And as the value  
of her diminishing body increased,

her single egg came to function  
like a postmark: a collector's record  
timestamped in the dark – inkless,  
mineral and freeform.

It wasn't difficult for the three islanders  
who found her asleep.

These were the same alpine cragsmen  
who hammered bolts,  
fastened ropes around their chests,  
scaled barefoot to better grip the familiar,  
soaking descents. The same men  
who years later would pay in felt and oil  
for their own evacuation.



4.

They caught her asleep and for three days  
the Great Auk hovered, like witchcraft –  
pre-liminal and blaringly realised  
with her legs tied together.

As a storm reached its bleakest  
they beat her for an hour. Broke her  
short sleeves with two large stones,  
then placed her behind the bothy –  
each shaking with the extraordinary heat  
of touching a family member  
as she goes. Later, dead gannets

were slipped through the gaps in their belts,  
and their bodies snowed occasional feathers  
on their way back up the rock face.

By evening, they had cleared a fulmar roost  
so dense it blanched the rocks,  
gently dismantling  
the seabirds' concrete poem  
to open up a path along the ledge.

The shaping of St Kildan culture speaks to a negotiation between real and imagined versions of the place and its inhabitants. The fact that the word ‘evacuation’ was used to describe the St Kildan’s forced departure from their home in 1930 (regardless of the fact that many inhabitants did not support the move), addresses the notion that cultural rhetoric is not shaped equally by all its participants. More than two dozen files, once property of the department of agriculture, were released in 1968. Steel notes that it is only from the collection of letters, minutes, and memoranda that we can begin to understand the ‘true tragedy of the evacuation – not only the human distress involved, but the parsimony and bureaucratic behavior of the civil servants involved’ (Steel, 1994, p.10). In 1930, St Kildans were presented as being rescued from their unsanitary, uncivilized lives. Today, it is generally considered that the community was torn from their historical home. Indeed, the changing impression of the St Kildan’s migration speaks to that fact that ‘rhetorical analysis suggests that the meaning of tropes is closely related to their wider social context. They are therefore not fixed entities but develop and change historically’ (Garrard, 2012, p.8). The literary trope of extinction has changed as awareness of climate crisis has risen. For example, the great auk’s flightless neighbor, the dodo, largely forgotten for the hundred years following its extinction, has moved from a clumsy and incidental curiosity in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, [1865] 1998) and the joke in the flippant idiom ‘dead as a dodo’, to the hero of a cautionary tale – a popular (and lucrative) icon of human-induced extinction.

In the second stanza of the poem, three monochrome images blend: one human, one nonhuman and one geological:

She is black on one side  
and white on the other, like a sea stack at sunrise.  
I love her dark hair against the white dress.

The great auk becomes a bride as well as the sea stack on which the bird was killed. The geological formation becomes a monument to the great auk, echoing its shape and colour scheme at sunrise. The bird's image, wedded to the St Kildan rocks, is presented as embedded in the landscape.

As discussed in the last chapter the great auk's nesting colonies along the European side of the Atlantic were nearly all eliminated by the mid sixteenth century, and the bird had disappeared from its biggest nesting colony by 1800. The increased scarcity of the great auk in the mid nineteenth century engendered a fury on collectors' parts to buy their eggs and skins, and the vanishing St Kildan life would be subject to the same scramble for resources. From the 1870s onwards, cargo steamers with passenger cabins offered trips around the Hebrides and St Kilda began to feature in the itinerary. From 1877 the SS *Dunara Castle* offered annual summer cruises to St Kilda. The excursion included observing the cragsmen at work, purchasing eggs, cloth and stockings and meeting the inhabitants. If the appeal of the people there, their hand made products and old-fashioned practices appeal to a pastoral ideal, the untamed and brutal landscape presented a potent idea of wilderness. Many on the mainland had their interest aroused by the publicity given to the St Kilda evacuation in 1930; vessels passing by were in the habit of whistle-blowing or canon-firing to startle the gannets and allow passengers to enjoy an ornithological show. The poem refers to the many day trips mainlanders took there in order to obtain a postmark from the island before the community disappeared:

We boarded a steamer for the archipelago  
of St Kilda, to obtain a postmark  
before the island was evacuated.  
Later that year, its inhabitants  
  
were gathered and removed.

The poem then places the human and nonhuman communities in parallel, suggesting that the seabird's diminishing eggs operated as a similar commodified souvenir to the St Kildan postmark:

Each year, the Great Auk  
slipped ashore to lay one egg  
on bare rock. And as the value  
of her diminishing body increased,

her single egg came to function  
like a postmark: a collector's record  
timestamped in the dark – inkless,  
mineral and freeform.

## Conclusion

The thesis has shown that flightless birds occupy a particular cultural space. It is a particular space in the sense that birds which cannot fly are differentiated within their own taxonomic class, and the ability that they lack is wrapped up in the human fascination with, and understanding of the bird's identity. As such, cultural depictions of flightless birds are often imagined and apprehended through the lens of flight birds, and flightless birds' place within a western symbolic economy is conflicted. This conflict can manifest directly through representations of lack or inadequacy, and can also be represented in uncomfortably celebratory and fetishized portrayals, where a reverence for the bird is entrenched in its lack or its absence.

My poetry acknowledges this cultural space, referencing flightless birds' bodies, mythical roles, historical disasters and diverse cultural manifestations. The way in which it attempts to unsettle and glimpse alternatives to the conceptual framework that undermines flightless birds, is not by assigning them a new cultural role, but rather by employing the methodology of *écriture féminine*, with a view to accessing the unconscious through manifold images, and glimpsing many dynamic new ways of seeing the repressed. The poetry achieves this by presenting a liberated space, both in terms of form and content, that does not settle into one discourse or conclusion. It moves freely between discourses, narrators and standpoints. It plays, baits, takes pleasure in its own stratagems, with a view to glimpsing new realities that transcend notions of marginalisation or privilege. If the collection acknowledges, but also wishes to move beyond using flightless birds as an analogy for human social differentiation, in what ways is it important to see these specific animals more freely, or inventively?

The American Research Institute 'Revive and Restore' attempts genetic rescue for endangered and extinct species. Its mission is to enhance biodiversity through

genetic rescue, and one of its current projects is to ‘bring back’ the great auk from extinction. For this it would extract DNA from preserved fossils or preserved organs, and then use digital data to sequence the animal’s entire genetic code. The company argues that restoring the roles of extinct species is valuable to conservation and is an increasingly considered a solution for ecological problems that stem from past extinctions. They claim that when populations go extinct locally, conservationists can reintroduce individuals from a neighbouring population, or replace an extinct species with a related species (Novak, 2019).

However, until recently, the roles of species that have no living substitutes have been impossible to restore. Thanks to paleogenomics and gene-editing, the emerging practice of “de-extinction” via precise-hybridization may recreate ecotypes of such species. For marine environments, the extinct great auk has been identified as a potential de-extinction candidate.

Although de-extinction is an exciting prospect, and not inherently antagonistic to the conservation of evolutionary processes, it has been the subject of much debate. It is not just within the framework of evolution that the effects of human actions on biological processes is being considered. Many debates that surround de-extinction have also focused on ecological, ethical, societal and economic issues. Some animal advocates oppose de-extinction because it exploits animals for unimportant human purposes, a similar argument to the one that opposes zoos. Equally, animals may end up suffering as a result of the de-extinction process. Sherkow and Greely also foresee that

[s]ome people will complain that, whatever its consequences, de-extinction is just wrong—it is “playing god,” “reversing natural selection,” or an act of hubris. Others may argue that we cannot know enough about the consequences to re-introduce a species. But neither do we know the full consequences of its extinction or its continuing nonexistence (2013, p.32)

In the context of extinction, and de-extinction, I would like, through my poetry collection not only to agitate the framework that designates some beings as more important than others, but also to shine a light on how biodiversity loss is negotiated, particularly when it concerns animals with a low symbolic status. Why do we want to bring an extinct bird back? Is it a particular compunction about the fact that we murdered birds that were flightless? If violence can be framed as the only way of setting the scales of justice right again (Arendt, 1970, p.161) and this rationale can be applied to the St Kilda sailors, wishing to stabilise the elements during a terrible storm by murdering a bird, could the same skewed sense of balance be the motivator behind bringing the bird back? It may be that repossessing the great auk will somehow be experienced as an atonement or preventative gesture against climate change, or speak to a collective unconscious need to expiate past generations' destruction, and be a gesture of redress. Wallace Stevens articulates that poetry is a 'violence from within that protects us from a violence from without' (1965, p.30). In this sense poetry may hold and act as a mirror, a parallel imagining of progress or change, running alongside scientific aspirations and criticisms. Poetry may offer insight for a type of social response as yet unimaginable. Returning to Bruce Martin,

Central to this desired change ... is "the impossible image" of the new world of the future to be formed in the present. What image(s) will spark the imaginations, open the unconscious, and provide the energy to motivate other individuals and new generations to continue hoping and struggling for a changed world, a world where suffering recedes and the ideas of freedom and happiness can truly fulfil themselves in concrete reality?

(Bruce Martin, 2006, p.159).

If poetry's 'deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are' (Havel, 1990, p.181), poetry may offer us a spyglass through which to glimpse responsible and connected intentions. Speaking of Thomas Hardy's 'Afterwards' (Appendix 10, 2009, p135), Heaney states that the poem 'is more given

over to the extraordinary than the ordinary, more dedicated to the world-renewing potential of the imagined response than the adequacy of the social one.’ (Heaney, 1995, xvii). As Essunger argues:

Imagination is meant in its most simple meaning, as a way of describing the phenomena of thinking through images or the creative ability to form (new and unexpected) images, ideas and sensations in the mind from the input of senses and experiences. The willingness to enable and sing the Other, I would claim, is expressed in a special way. It is expressed through a thrilling trust in the human capability to imagine- or put differently, to think openly in (manifold) images- and actively take part in the poetical and political (re-) construction of a more inclusive philosophy of life. (Essunger, 2007, p443)

My collection makes a contribution to this imagined social response to suffering and differentiation, and my wish is that its energy might unearth the ineffable, the impossible image of a fair, good-natured and benevolent future.

#### Contemporary Context: Poetics and Aesthetics

The poetry collection *A Different Cage with Words* deals with depictions of the self, the body and the environment, and thus its contemporary context encapsulates poetry that explores these themes. The poetics and aesthetics of the collection largely stem and flow from its use of the first person. Dorothea Lasky’s thoughts on the metaphysical ‘I’ help to unpack the poems’ portrayals of the self: a post-confessional ‘I’ that at times appears plural, and at other times ‘doesn’t pretend to be a self at all’ (Lasky, 2015). Poet Heather Christle’s lyric ‘I’ (2018, 2018, 2019) shines additional light on the collection’s first person, and thematic links can also be made with her work, namely domesticity, childbirth and the body/imagination nexus. The collection’s strange, conflicted and at times grisly depiction of the body can be further explored in relation to Rachael Allen’s poetry (2019), as it deals obliquely with birth and pregnancy, and exposes the tensions between physicality, individuality and domesticity. If *A Different Cage with Words*



tunes into the physical and personal, it does so with and through the environmental; the poet reveals herself through the consideration of themes of animal taxonomy, history and extinction. This aligns the work with contemporary eco poet Pascale Petit, where 'the personal and environmental lament [find] imaginative fusion' (Nagra, 2020). The collection's voice and content are often delivered through open verse (Olson, [1950] 2009), where 'form is never more than an extension of content' (Creeley, 1980, p.79), 'composed in the sequence of the musical phrase' (Pound, 1968, p.3). As such, the sentence can appear disrupted, as the poem does not rely on a received structure as its driving force.

In her poem 'On Whose Order' (2018, p.253) Heather Christle concludes with the lines:

I hum along for company,  
I guess, and later for the archive.  
I don't know what I'm missing.

Here, Christle's first person has the traits of the metaphysical 'I' that Dorothea Lasky describes as having 'no centre' and being 'beyond the idea of a singular self' (2015). Christle's 'I' explains why it is humming, shruggingly acknowledging it isn't sure of its own motivations, then says why it might hum later. It then moves into a different moment, which could be the present moment or describing the future, morphing into two connected 'I's, one that is missing something and the other unaware of what it is missing. Similarly, this inconsistent 'mercurial trickster' (Lasky, 2015) can be found at the end of Christle's poem 'Beach Sonnet' (2018, p.103), where she explains,

Thus I entered  
a new phase of my life  
which I will call "The Rounded Hour  
of the Large Flightless Bird,"  
for reasons I'm keeping private  
even from myself.

Here the narrator alludes to two connected selves – one concealing something important and comically grandiose from the other. This ‘shapeshifter, a persona that uses unexpected language and imagery, that is inconsistent, frightening and funny’ (Lasky, 2015) makes its way through *A Different Cage with Words*. In ‘Paper Bird’, an alien ‘I’ appears to be making an origami bird, and may be delighting in the rehearsal of violence involved. This ‘I’ changes its mind about what the paper bird is or reminds the poet of, from the pristine analogy of a cut diamond to the butchery of a gutted pig. Each representation, from the folding paper being compared to breaking buffalo wings, to the oddly grotesque image of a reverse paper face, signals a strange violence. This persona is unpredictable and fanciful, a ‘wild lyric I’ (Lasky, 2015) that shifts its focus to the sudden desire for a bank robbery to be occurring. It is also an unimaginable ‘I’ that somehow remains believable, an ‘I’ that is ‘so close to a self, as *a* self or *the* self’, and so far away from it at the same time, that the reader can’t help but see a real self in it.’ (Lasky, 2015). ‘Paper Bird’ continues: ‘my thief sweats (...) closing his hand around hunks of soft banknotes cut like hair’, its ‘I’ now appropriating and objectifying the imaginary thief. The ‘I’s’ fantasy then triggers a memory, a friend ‘Emma’, who sends a postcard whose message appears in a similarly irreverent and unreliable voice to the narrator. The form moves between speech and action, and is dictated by content – with one perception immediately leading to the next (Olson, [1950] 2009):

*Don't move,*

he says. Hard to say why it's delicious  
except to mention that my friend Emma  
touched down on the same mood once:

*Flew to Vietnam to have sex in a parked car  
with a man I met online,*

the postcard read.

The collection's first person maintains an intimate, graphic and at times grisly connection to the body. This can be seen as an internalised experience in 'Leda and the Ostrich', where 'I search my body until I know it's illegal', or in 'Immediacy', where 'I must have swallowed words' hold: that push and juice and gesture'. The body's presence can become performative and gory in public spheres: the poet tries to provoke her own murder at the cinema in 'Kindly Remove Your Hats', describing 'my murder flick[ing] across soft millinery, bang against the auditorium'. Similarly, the body performs and is exposed, as 'a levelled field of wooden crosses' becomes 'a field of scarecrows, stripped and arranged open armed in the sun' in 'We Killed Two Flightless Birds'. Conversely, the body becomes weary and depleted in domestic settings, talking about 'all the years I went home, and drank coffee standing up, and did the dishes before turning on the radio' in the poem 'Fabric', and explaining in 'The Crying Room': 'I walk home and run a bath. And when the taps are full and going, I put my head completely under; I can hear the crying rooks.'

This internalised and oppressive experience of the body is further captured and extended in the way pregnancy is depicted. From the point of view of the mother and the point of view of the foetus, pregnancy is at times situated in uncanny and imprisoning domestic settings. In ‘Margot Don’t Travel’, a bird/foetus that cries out Margot or Mother inside ‘a hundred layers of skin’, lives in ‘a red brick house/ that is pregnant / with a floral room/ and the damp room is pregnant/ with a birdcage/ and the antique cage is pregnant/ with a caged bird’. The poem is driven and composed through content and breath (Olson, [1950] 2009), with the percussive repetition of ‘pregnant’ at the end of each line to increase the kinetic sense of imprisonment and repetition. This can be observed inversely in the poem ‘Karen Carpenter on Drums in the Azaleas’ where ‘the drums spread through the garden like blood moves through snow’. This sense of expansion appears on the page, as the lines spread out through the poem:

Your body is the half-second before thunder

when air is cleaned.

Without its breath-cushion

the outside world is binned electrics and unpredictable lasers

planted in the ground

over time.

It’s itchy

and unsustainable

but you weave the sediment poles  
and master your sticks  
like a slalom skier.

Returning to ‘Margot Don’t Travel’, the poem expresses the ‘familiar conflict between individuality and domesticity’ (Astley, 2019) found in Rachael Allen’s work, particularly her collection *Kingdomland*, a poet who discloses that ‘when [she] had a husband [she] found it hard to breathe’ (Allen, 2019, p.6). Allen ‘takes a sledgehammer to the familiarity of the trope [of domesticity]’ (Astley, 2019), at one point saying ‘in among all the crying, I see a burning child on the stove.’ (2019, p.6), and later talking about a ‘burnt five-year-old without eyelids’ (2019, p.49) turning cartwheels through a heatwave. A similarly unsettling combination of ideas exists in ‘To be One of your Things’, where the images of a sleeping child and a plane wreck are brought together:

There’s a plane  
draped over the beach.  
Wings out, on its front— a toddler napping,  
three windows missing.  
And the very tip of its nose  
might be gone.  
It's no beast  
  
in silence like this;  
the sun  
draws dark circles

under two white wings— a miscarriage.

There is a sensory focus in Allen's poetry and a yearning towards the body, often strange and brutal. Like the origami bird's 'reverse face' from 'Paper Bird', inanimate objects take on a distorted life, as Allen describes 'small white socks [that] bob into the dark like teeth in the mouth' (Allen, 2019, p.5). Similarly, the physical appropriation of 'my thief sweat[ing]' and closing his hands around 'banknotes cut like hair' in 'Paper Bird', there exists a sense of desire and ownership over other bodies, as Allen asserts when she says that she 'will know the pattern of your knee' (2019, p.40).

Linking domesticity and the body, themes of pregnancy, sex and birth are accompanied by arresting images of menstruation in Allen's work, 'when acts of creation begin to look like a cruel mix of power and powerlessness' (Astley, 2019). The mordant gesturing towards menstruation in a household setting feels weary and darkly comic in 'No last kiss':

lilac leaves of my drooping spider plant  
moulting on the bath mat  
so it looks like I've had my purple period (Allen, 2019, p.23)

Later, as Allen speaks of family and impregnation, this is steeped in language of illness and misappropriation. She says in 'The Girls of Situations',

I will steal from my own Mother to make myself feel richer, and smoke her old cigarettes to make myself sicker, become impregnated with ideas and resist her own impregnation, cut anything out of me that starts to grow in there. (Allen, 2019, p.44).

The mother figure reappears in Allen's final 'Landscape for a dead woman' (2019, p.53). The title is inspired by *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Steedman, 1986) – a dialogue between two biographies, that of Steedman's mother and her own, which was intended 'partly as a corrective to the masculine tradition of working-class autobiography' (Charman, 2019). Steedman describes the book as 'about living lives lived out in the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don't quite work', and in this sense Allen and Steedman's books come together in their expression of place, with 'Kingdomland' (an old name for Cornwall) situating itself and operating 'within [Cornwall's] geographical borderland' (Charman, 2019).

The personal feminine experience anchored in a particular geographical landscape is a key feature in Pascale Petit's collection *Tiger Girl* (2020), and the poet's female relatives, particularly her mother and grandmother, interact with the landscape. In the poem 'The Tiger Game', Petit describes the game she would play when she went to live with her mother, where the poet would sit in a room with all furniture removed and be the tiger, and the mother would 'sit in the centre of the room with a revolver' (2020, p.71). The landscape slips between external and internal, real and imaginary. Petit moves back through her ancestry, calling on images from her French/Welsh/Indian heritage, juxtaposing them in unexpected and luminous ways. She describes her grandmother as a 'hybrid rose (...) her face the map of India when it's summer,/ the map of Wales in winter.' (2020, p.29). As in *A Different Cage with Words*, animals' plight can be aligned with human plight, with the poet bringing together and finding a place of articulation through and with other marginalised figures. In Petit's poem 'In the Forest', she sees a man sewing an owl's eyes shut. She says:

I saw another man who led me to a cave

which he called his vault  
and there was a tigress inside  
giving birth to striped gold.

I said my eyes are stitched  
and my lips sealed  
and he placed coins in my hand  
said it was jungle currency

and I knew I was holding  
the eyes of cubs.

(...)

so I ran through every coppice  
and every clearing  
and looked at the moon  
whose eye was sewn shut. (2020, p.16)

Here, the child protagonist is observing the violence, trade and appropriation of the tigress and cubs, while simultaneously experiencing her own suppression and marginalisation. A child who isn't 'from here' – her lips are sealed and her eyes are stitched, in a place where there seems to be no escape and no guidance or authority – even the moon's eye has been sewn shut. The sense of children's disempowerment being aligned and complicit with animals' is captured in *A Different Cage with Words*' poem, 'God is an Ostrich' where

[The ostrich's] mute body-song left a moon-clock



under the stairs. We'd sit there and upright

our faces with a torch, the little door left

oblique and ajar (ostrich tells time by casting a shadow

over one of an infinite number of torch-lit eyelashes).

Later in Petit's collection, the poet comes to embody the landscape, as the 'hairs on [her] body/ rise like wind in a storm (p.24). Her descriptions become zoomorphic, saying 'my hand is a brave monkey/ reaching up to touch [the tigress'] fangs' (p.24), describing herself as submerged, with 'only [her] eyes and snout /above the quilt (p.25). In the poem 'Flash Forests', familial love, ancestry, and animal/natural imagery come together in a plea, set against the backdrop of burning forests. The poet clings to her grandmother, and says 'Let me be your bat pup/ and you can be/ my ficus religiosa' (p.48).

*A Different Cage with Words* begins with a slippery first person and from there extends out into poetry that speaks through and with several voices: these can be the mournful marginalised voice of an extinct animal, or the irreverent voice of a person wearing the feathers of a dead animal in their hat. Uncanny violence appears throughout, with a focus on how the body and violence appears and is experienced from a female perspective, thus aligning itself with themes from Christle and Allen's work. Finally, the physical often finds expression with and through the environmental, and in

this sense, stories of marginalisation come together, transcending the boundaries of species, as with the achievements of Petit's compassionate and deft poetry. Finding ways to encompass, describe and understand what happens to subjugated bodies is at the heart of my poetic practice.

## A Different Cage with Words – Poetry Collection

## Preparing Game Bird- Notes to Self

mix sugar, syrup and bicarb in a deep saucepan

while she bubbles, shrink a good tree (if you don't have a whole tree, the bonsai's fine)

cover the shrunken tree with slabs of the hot toffee mixture { as though  
making

leave to cool Papier-  
mâché

*carefully* remove the branches from inside the cinder toffee casing

when the honeycomb frame feels weightless in your palm, you know you have the  
skeleton \*

for the feathers:

julienne a bridal veil then iron out the splay with starch

break off a high heel for the centre spine of each plume

have a friend play a continuous tremolo on the violin to get everyone in the mood for  
flight

if you run out of wedding train, flatten a pompon and comb out its threads

hook the barbs with corset eyelets to resist the wind- ruffle

next, assemble:

- any pocket you ever kept conkers in	4 CHAMBERS
- a burnt out lightbulb	OF
- the envelope from a letter you still keep in its envelope	THE HEART

- a heart shaped balloon

cover your hands in bitter, dark marmalade

wind up angel hair pasta like a ball of yarn to make the brain

place it against the keyhole on a windy day so she starts to get a taste for breeze

make the legs

lock the legs

(so that it doesn't fall off a branch when sleeping)

get up early, go outside and hold her

good

make it last before it goes

then hold her up into the half light

\*if it's still any heavier than a box of matches, fill it with sound absorbed by books until

it begins to coast a little on your skin

## **Karen Carpenter on Drums in the Azaleas**

Your body is the half-second before thunder

when air is cleaned.

Without its breath-cushion

the outside world is binned electrics and unpredictable lasers

planted in the ground

over time.

It's itchy

and unsustainable

but you weave the sediment poles

and master your sticks

like a slalom skier.

And you can get to the core of the earth

even in a small garden.

When you get to the very centre

(which can be anywhere)

you surprise a wild animal there—

it's rude and brief and for me it's a bird but it's only  
the wildness that's important.

A circus poet once told me that the thing she loves most about  
birds is that they're constantly in their essence. So listen,

I want you to know,  
you hit that for me.

And I know it's real  
because your drums spread through the garden like blood moves through  
snow.

The beats got right in  
the interstices of the crazy paving,  
seeped into the wood of the bench,  
filled the garden gnome's eyes,  
coloured the contents of the water butt so rain came out  
pink.

It felt like a bouncy castle inflating around me,  
and the moon,  
breathless,  
blew it up  
through a telescopic straw— an unseen aliveness—

like when roses relax overnight.



## Paper Bird

There is a moment  
in the folds  
when the paper torso resembles a cut diamond,  
or a gutted pig.

From here I bend the sides  
like breaking buffalo wings  
and cave in the neck with my thumb  
to make a reverse  
face.

Once assembled, the body  
is a live riddle. I hope

that someone robs a bank  
in the time it takes to make this bird.

Time speeds up  
when you build a flightless afternoon. My thief  
sweats—

the soft hair on the skin of his heart.

Closing his hand  
around hunks of soft banknotes cut  
like hair—

from the safe to the bag to the car.

*Don't move,*

he says. Hard to say why it's delicious  
except to mention that my friend Emma  
touched down on the same mood once:

*Flew to Vietnam to have sex in a parked car  
with a man I met online,*

the postcard read. She met him there  
in that place where *don't move* means *move*,  
a little.

Crime

is a paper bird.

I hang it with cotton string and watch it slowly spin. I'm reminded  
of a story  
where children thought a rabbit  
they dug up was alive  
because it moved around in water. Their teacher  
placed a stick in the stream to teach them something.

## **Margot Don't Travel**

The hanging cage by the tumble dryer  
is pregnant with a bird.

She grows inside it like a foetus  
or a finished book being annotated.

She lives in a red brick house  
that is pregnant  
with a floral room  
and the damp room is pregnant  
with a birdcage  
and the antique cage is pregnant  
with a caged bird.

And inside the yellow bird  
is a beating heart  
and the heart is like the bird  
because it can move but cannot travel.

Margot Fonteyn is dancing  
inside the old TV set—  
the bird-heart ballerina  
whose pirouettes go nowhere.

The growing bird learns one word:

*Margot*. She calls it like *Mother*

over and over, making a different cage

with words. She says it

inside a hundred layers of skin.

## God is an Ostrich

No one strapped the feathers to her back, careful

to glue the plumes in even numbers

either side, so she might sit true and weighted

and understand the nature of justice. No,

she rose under my heart the Ostrich-god—

a kinky book under a mattress, the loaded daydreaming figure

glimpsed between two prison bars—

all the interstitial stuff, mixed up and left

to rise a soulful voice that does all the spaces

between the notes. Her mute body-song left a moon-clock

under the stairs. We'd sit there and uplight

our faces with a torch, the little door left

oblique and ajar (ostrich tells time by casting a shadow

over one of an infinite number of torch-lit eyelashes).

She was sultry, even then— the liminal space between two types of weather,

when the elements go backstage and get creaturely— ostrich

only comes in an electric space of absence. I want to press a word

into being the way she traces divinity for fun in the sand.

With her formidable weapon-legs— robotic tree trunks

writing cursive stream-code all over the earth,  
like a sea tractor might write the word *crazy*  
in joined up writing on the beach. Her waxy eye, big as an orange  
  
or a second trimester foetus— how must the landscape  
look to her as she charges through the physical world, sparking  
fountains and negative lightning with her beaming, flightless charge?

## **Ladies Kindly Remove Your Hats**

Don't put me on a pedestal

because I will let you

down. I wear a plumed hat

to a silent film- the violence

of a feather draws close

to my body. Dense and bound,

amphitheatred with oranges,

the headdress blocks

the movie screen—

balanced erect with imitation

deadness; I'm no use

to fauxweathers.

It's probably that I'm trying

to provoke a murder. *My* murder

flicks across soft millinery, bang

against the auditorium. Bedeck me

good in meteor crêpe—

*she bought it to be looked at—*

my bad

heart, yes

arranges like a story. Or bordering collected

stories, asleep on each other's shoulders:

one a waxed clementine,

next the lacquered feather of a flightless bird.

I'll have it all at once

and one at a time. And the insides.



## Not the Sort of Thing One Gives a Name

The sublime figure

of a jumbo jet: at once fat

and incomprehensibly athletic.

Too big for a child

to look at really.

I tense my eyes into slits

as we step inside the plane.

Sat down breathing

baked-bean-air, I drift

and decide that there are words

inside words

(like love is inside the word clover)—

they're stuck but they flutter,

like moths in jars. And they crawl around the in-flight magazine—

soft bodied fireflies

with glow-in-the-dark organs: one flash

a broken Christmas light,  
the next a compressed musical. Because  
  
I won't see our garden again: so big  
it stretched past snack time. All the way down  
  
to an empty  
sunken pool, lounging  
  
in mustard leaves. Three metal steps down  
to no water. My sister  
  
and I, bare  
skin on the concrete, so young  
  
our feet are still opening out  
in little blooming fists:  
  
twenty curly toes being flattened and educated  
in the ways of being flat. I left  
  
my fingerless gloves  
to the mustard tree, because  
  
I was rushing  
and I hadn't given them names yet.

## **Flightless Bird**

you take me to that place you like where paintings are prenatal and développés of colour and oil extend up the chairs and flick up the door and the vulnerability all over your kiss gives off its own imaginary nationality silenced through language with a rich and muted culture your lips wear like an emblem when you order coffee beyond you there's a flightless bird lingering in one of the canvas' abstractions mincing in and out of sight like a cat she reveals to us with her silenced wings and magnificent body that useless and fully realised are the same thing I came across when I found a hair inside my ex-husband's Bukowski book from when I wore it long and curly when I'd mastered the colour codes on baby food and knew all the buttons on the pram I closed the book with shameful care and nestled it between two hardbacks knowing my old hair inside my ex-husband's book of poems is a maquette for an unrealisable project and the unbearable quantity of shatterable models bleeds off on me like the cabin pressure of your lips' biography and the broken bird all sex before it's converted into this hyper present rings with both hands ecstatic flash at the frontier between the imaginary and your physical touch me in the doorway of a black box installation

## The Menagerie

A flotilla of Great Auks  
embarks off the skerry;  
birds plucked for feathers and boiled  
for oil. We build  
two canoes the shape of  
two crescent moons, fill them with rocks  
to keep them upright, and cross the sea up and down  
the rookery, until it's too dark to see.  
For the journeys back, the rocks are replaced  
with the same weight in shoulder to shoulder  
dead birds. It's cramped when we inflate  
the Great Auks' windpipes, attach them  
to bladder darts, and make harpoons, to kill more, perhaps.  
  
It's because it's the year of the animal.  
Like the royal menagerie's  
black-crowned heron,  
its boney stork and sexless flamingos,  
these sickle shaped cages full of flightless birds find  
weary elevation in pictures and pendants. Oeuvres  
brightly ringed  
by concertina wire and you can smell it – the warehoused  
seeking asylum – sketched, spun,  
sculpted, debated – this sudden presence

of a collection  
of recorded animals – one of their bodies, clothed only  
in dark pants and socks, was left on a breezeway  
for two hours. Wrapped in baggy lemon skin,  
the bodies laid down.

Eyes up or aslant – no more glare-blind  
than water, each slips  
back and forth between the islets.

## **We Killed Two Flightless Birds**

I understood later

that the birds matched a pair of coal eyes

I had pressed into a snowman in my family home.

You take one real thing out of the world

but you don't know which imagined thing shares its coordinates.

And when we clubbed

the birds for real in the world, two floating black eyes

were scooped from a soft white drawing.

I awake

from a nap where snowman faces make no sense

and go outside to check the cemetery is still the same.

Relaxing my eyes

over the rows of grave crosses,

it's like the swathe of bumblebees that emerges

when you adjust your focus on lavender flowers.

And this levelled field of wooden crosses

becomes a field of scarecrows, stripped and arranged open armed in the sun.

The hot force

reserved for hammering guitar chords

graduated to something more sibilant that morning.

They were so tame

when we killed them; it felt like undressing a scarecrow.

## Prophet-like that Lone One Stood

A section of low cliffs

sunk in

by caves and natural arches.

Papa Westray—

where bird feathers

fill pillows.

The sac of stone painted pink

could be mistaken

for a bouquet of thrift in the sea-haar.

But it's the Great Auk.

It stands on the cliffs of Fowl Craig,

gentle cairn, made by children

in the shape of a bird.

Beaks strewn

over maritime archaic coast;

this auk is made of rose stone- all wrong,

a concrete mute

and yet still

a tremendous effort of exactness

pushes forward

like sex:

the desire to resurrect,

energised by anxiety.

You weigh the same



as a 6-month-old and you will not withstand  
any psychic slackness.

And you embody  
a wholly private language-  
like meeting a baby,  
seeing you is an act  
of seeing  
and of being exposed  
at the same time. This daft scrum of pink  
painted sea stones-  
anarchic even at its most canonised;  
your small body will bear  
terrible inspection. And your nutcracker beak  
will be with the unheard.

In summer,  
your plumage shows  
a white patch on each eye: two eggs. Twins.  
Exotic  
animal capital. In winter you lose the patches,  
instead developing a white band  
stretching between the eyes.  
A charismatic icon of extinction,  
with unseen stealth.

Your body will only ever be known  
by water.

## **Leda and the Ostrich**

When you rub your neck,

sneeze,

or drink coffee,

some banality

beacons my body

into a temporary moon— furious

and far-reaching

as the bat-signal.

It happens

when I write your name

in condensation.

The beam is strong enough to change

a painting in a gallery,

a Type A oeuvre like Leda and the Swan,

into something breathtakingly bastard: half-blood

gorgeous, treacherous lovely mongrel

sexy fresco and oils where plaster

forms a physical bond

with paint. And the painted swan

becomes an ostrich. And all

the gallery birds go monster— a camel-sparrow neck

snakes around Leda where a swan once stood:

this is the pull of your honeytrap mouth on the lip of a cup.

I search my body until I know it's illegal

and Leda skirts a bird-beast in a painting in a gallery.

## Immediacy

I liked it when you said the word *immediacy*  
because the clock

and me listening and your knuckles near my legs  
all met the word and held it locked. I don't know

to what extent these moments of fluke exactness  
occur. If they're rare, I'll save them

for you.

*I find you exciting* burning up my letters –

it was a similar day I must have swallowed words'  
hold: that push and juice and gesture. I know

because I was sitting on my hands  
to stop shaking. Later

I'll hear the shard of a song  
through the closing door of a commercial kitchen:

the backs of your fingers along the soft side  
of my arm. Bad heart

speculation yields so fast –

your mouth was a wave leaning back into its momentum.

It's when you're radiant this way with different paint  
on your callus fingers that things

section off. Like all the sprawling  
absent nights I've watched people have sex  
with me were scrupulously ordained  
to appear  
in stunning contrast with you pulling my hair.

## Fabric

The urge to rip the bedroom air in half is met with a vision.

Spreading all the clothes apart inside the wardrobe,  
I think of nothing  
but fabric— the hangers' concertina racket  
as I push inside the clothes,  
the draft's easy exhale through linen shirts.

Fake fur unbreathes,  
itchy and electric and there's  
discontinued  
fragrance stuck in the fibres.

The hanging outfits look like a queue of cartoon characters.

In the way cartoon characters'  
paunchy arms  
and clashing clothes  
merit no  
particular notice.

It's as though their fluorescence and blindness to physical pain  
are the manifestation of an internal might— the same  
deep declaration  
that beams inside  
blues singing—  
the steel anvil  
inside the ostrich's throat.

The duck down inside

a hanging quilted jacket handles like a stress ball,  
and I knead the breast feathers  
tucked within the nylon pockets. And I think  
of Donald and Daffy Duck playing that Hungarian Rhapsody,  
their duelling pianos rasping like two knackered lungs,  
smashing out some blessedness  
with their arms and legs and beaks,  
and it feels  
like a frenzied and vital  
opposition to all the years I went home,  
and drank coffee standing up,  
and did the dishes before turning on the radio,  
and rejected my husband's advances  
as if all pleasure must be paid for.  
I'd like all this stuff to fall on me  
  
from a great height— hot pink taffeta  
on giant leather and sheepskin bent off  
the copper wire hanger. That this wardrobe might function  
as the opposite of a portal: a place to be smothered  
in pantomime clothes,  
the sneezing thump as they come down together,  
the slipping sound of one arm off a hanger,  
then later the other— and the wardrobe floor would relent,  
and receive  
its troupe of collapsing ghosts.

## **Go as Slow as You Can and Do Everything You Want**

the disco lights

make palm trees look like fireworks

staring into the eye of the tree's boom

is like moving

through two parallel fields on the top deck of a bus,

(where backwards

and forwards

are the same)

or being born

you could feed acres of soil

then fire a gun with the volley

of unmet desire in the world wasted

eroticism into a curtain

of fire and longing

will now appear backwards

historically like time before the birth

of Christ a countdown rewinds



## **I'll Invent an Emu**

I'll spread out an ostrich, then shrink its frame.

Until it's tall as a man, comely as a girl,

and beefy as an emperor penguin.

I'll humiliate its bones then dress its feet

with bustard or burnt quail slippers.

I'll tend to a cassowarie's triptych claws,

and slip the bird four working bellies.

I'll call its song a straight blues drum beat,

un-render bush medicine and the oil from lamps,

cut open soft capsules to set its cushy fat in motion,

uncurl a ball of string to substitute its tendons.

The steak knives will assemble into the shape of its skeleton,

while its meat slowly grows the same ph value as beef.

The blue moon will come. All the way down to earth

without rolling or adjusting or getting any bigger.

And an egg will land as softly as a cat

inside my emu's nest. I'll tuck in my arms and claim

I was the first to be flightless, then steep a 747

in imbricate petals. I'll roll a beluga in soot and scales.

I'll ask that we look up to the dark cloud lanes  
when the Milky Way is clear and dying, and I'll demand  
we see an emu reaching out for itself in a trail of running dust.

## **Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird**

Blackbird splitting

the Nevada brume;

dipped to trip in noir

designed to zoom,

rave and heat—

camouflaged at sundown

in the owls and the beets.

Lockheed rising

80 000 feet;

busting

for its one sortie a week,

over Loas—

patterns on the radars,

joined up writing looping free:

SR fly!

Blackbird fly

into the arms of a baby bat!

Mach 3 rifting off

and straightening out

giving it some lip

and spinning out

*Twist and Shout—*

fledgling did the distance,

Christmas 1964.

## **St Kilda**

### **1.**

I only see her picture, but it feels like looking at a photo  
of myself as a child – her carriage so much more sober  
than the other extinct birds.

Where the red rail arches its talons, and the little bittern  
pouts its chest, the Great Auk holds no internalised mood.  
No anchor to herself. It's like she's waiting

to ask permission. She is black on one side  
and white on the other, like a sea stack at sunrise.  
I love her dark hair against the white dress.

She models herself: a sexual bride with instant history,  
a moving story, if stories become moving  
the moment their contents are released.

Extinction – the hand that just now held a gold coin,  
opens up and vanishes.

### **2.**

I love to imagine the family prayers

spoken softly for the last time –  
the delicious black image  
of a bible left open in each house.

We boarded a steamer for the archipelago  
of St Kilda, to obtain a postmark  
before the island was evacuated.  
Later that year, its inhabitants

were gathered and removed.  
It's a scene that begs

the same terrific yearning  
for a storm so severe  
it leaves you deaf for a week.  
For the island bay's conflicting winds  
to see a dozen sheep blown over

a cliff. For the timbre  
of the seabirds' screamings –  
the one remaining unmuted frequency,  
to unlock the weather and foreshadow  
its decisiveness. To be free  
yet to freely espouse

an island fit for prison,

fit for good impartial justice – the factor  
dressed in a long tweed trench-coat  
beside the heap of harvested gannets.

**3.**

Before humans vanished from St Kilda,  
there was a golden hour  
in which their paucity was rehearsed,  
with seabirds enacting the dry run  
of what it means to be flatteringly scarce.

Each year, the Great Auk  
slipped ashore to lay one egg  
on bare rock. And as the value  
of her diminishing body increased,

her single egg came to function  
like a postmark: a collector's record  
timestamped in the dark – inkless,  
mineral and freeform.

It wasn't difficult for the three islanders  
who found her asleep.  
These were the same alpine cragsmen  
who hammered bolts,

fastened ropes around their chests,  
scaled barefoot to better grip the familiar,  
soaking descents. The same men  
who years later would pay in felt and oil  
for their own evacuation.

#### 4.

They caught her asleep and for three days  
the Great Auk hovered, like witchcraft –  
pre-liminal and blaringly realised  
with her legs tied together.

As a storm reached its bleakest  
they beat her for an hour. Broke her  
short sleeves with two large stones,  
then placed her behind the bothy –  
each shaking with the extraordinary heat  
of touching a family member  
as she goes. Later, dead gannets

were slipped through the gaps in their belts,  
and their bodies snowed occasional feathers  
on their way back up the rock face.

By evening, they had cleared a fulmar roost  
so dense it blanched the rocks,



gently dismantling

the seabirds' concrete poem

to open up a path along the ledge.

## The Word Kiss

You look so good stood up.

To lie you down  
would be  
to fell a tree, your face  
encrusted with your eyes. I kiss  
the word *kiss*  
in a book to calm down. You place

a conch shell to my ear—

*Sounds like the dark*  
driving through rumour  
in the realest pretend things.  
Some knowingness, yes,  
the grey breath in the shell  
is the edge of sleep. The torture

of being a personality—

you upturn an answer,  
an aperture in the hell of it.  
And when that happens  
it is immediate love. My ears

exhale; you read aloud.

And somewhere else,

marching songs

relent to the floor,

and use their feet like hands.

## **Dodo**

My skull rests  
in the oldest zoo  
in Copenhagen.

Believers lick their lips  
behind the glass  
at my brain's cradle,

and chew over who  
could have arranged me  
this way-

dysfunctional.

*The ungodliness  
of a flightless bird,*

they prattle.

She has  
no working wings.

Just three or four  
black feathers  
branded nastily

either side,  
to mark  
where wings aren't,

and to imply  
that she broke a promise.  
Wet descriptions

can be found of her  
in wrecked ships' journals.  
Each log

reads a little different,  
but they always end  
the same-

*Note:*

*The longer I am cooked,  
the less tender I become.*

I want  
to know my tail plumes  
may  
smell of ash.  
I may be  
um

sexually dimorphic,

and my biology

may mis-sell

levitation like a joke,

but my design is full.

As natural and legitimate

as a free bird.

There are seventeen of us left.

Dozing in a swamp

covered with hard core.

A flight

of grounded beauties

holidayed

under concrete,

sat tight for years.

We love to imagine

white bones enmeshed

in the trees and palms

along the bay

where explorers have died  
and disintegrated  
trying to reach us

for a kiss.

I keep a handkerchief  
from one of the ships

with the words

*Hurry Slowly My Love*

sewn into the cotton.

## **To be one of your things**

There's a plane

draped over the beach.

Wings out, on its front— a toddler napping,

three windows missing.

And the very tip of its nose

might be gone.

It's no beast

in silence like this;

the sun

draws dark circles

under two white wings— a miscarriage.

I don't wish

to do anything again.

Especially help.

I realise now

with brut salience

that I was never, ever born

to be useful.



## Spit

The stream at your sides  
slips away  
in one soft, disappearing arrow,  
  
as though your chest were sharp glass  
parting liquid glass. As long  
  
as you're alive,  
there is a closed door  
  
that holds a roomful of water.  
I'm sorry the scars  
  
on your face  
come up like snowflakes—  
like the pattern of a ballet corps  
  
seen from up in the gods.  
Without wanting, your whiteness  
shunts my pony tail,  
  
and spit-shines my eyeballs.  
And it's all I can do  
not to watch you all afternoon,

going, going

with your athlete's curves

and your glaring sad function.

## **Emus in Winter**

Your bodies encourage the mountain range to climb  
and gather snow. A balsam fir tail, dense with brown needles,  
curves and assures the deep valley of your neck.

It is as though each small part of your body  
signals something larger. A single blade of grass  
hangs from one of your beaks.

## Egg

Its shell is covered in calligraphy, like the writing inside  
the curly paper

that holds up cocktail umbrellas. Or a cave

turned inside out

with all its crevices unindented and pushed out into relief.

It's as though the punch and uprightness of morse code

has relaxed

on the continuity of it – this egg,

riddled with pores so a chick could breathe two hundred years ago.

The chap I meet keeps it in a drawer. And in this sense,

it engenders the same feeling of flatness

as when you open a drawer of butterflies –

the anticlimax,

even if they're abundant, teemed

and the colours are good. This egg that's not an egg,

that rolls about in the seat of an entirely different generosity –

a terrifying largesse

to gesture to your own obsolescence. Too assured

to be historical,

it holds a yellow eye, holds the absence.

## Tracks

In real life, the male emu squats on his eggs.

But somewhere else, a new man moves thickly

from out of a tall impersonation –

the waves wring out his ankles.

He makes the coastline and the inland desert.

Digs with a conch shell to reach water, leaving impressions

of his body and his efforts on the earth. Cupped leaves,

set like offering hands, simper down

and alight inside his footprints –

many cradles within a larger cradle.

He leaves

behind the grooved impressions of his tail feathers,

like the markings of a pheasant who has been walking through snow.

Perhaps he is half-emu, half-God,

but this separation

is as illusory

as the gatedness of the real emu's incubation. The whole

story gives way to a further offering to admire

and take fresh solace in –

all the footprints

continually weaving

illegible confessions extending, extending

along the coastline. Then installed in one of the earth's depressions,

a new chick, cream with brown stripes,

hatches from a dark green egg. The Indian Ocean

creeps up the full moon, sky-clear season staircase

of satellite wrinkles up, up across the ocean.

An emu. Within

its new nomadic family, following floods to feed.

**Perhaps she is being mindful,**

resting her eyes, transforming her life.

It is an oblique loneliness to watch someone this way.

Inside the lining of this loneliness is a picture of myself on a train.

I once sat next to a woman on a train

who was old with a young face, like a model from the sixties –

wholesome as eggs. And you could imagine her frying eggs,

in her eyeliner and the orange tint photos had back then.

And the feeling of this train's drive in my body

is muscular and deft and ungainly and very good

in the way heavy birds are often very good runners.

In the way strange looking animals are occasionally protected

in a symbolic way – roughly lauded for their unusual bodies,

appearing on postage stamps and such, a vague emblem of resilience.

On the train I am free in this way – a still shot of potential movement.

What a person might look like just before something changes.

## **The Crying Room**

There is a small room in this church  
called the crying room.

A place to take howling children  
who disturb the Sunday service.

A small flock of rooks  
flew over the room this evening.  
Their flight sounded like a waterfall,  
audible through the unlatched window.

Water rushing down  
through anchored rocks  
like still air gushing through birds –  
as if the world had turned on its side  
and a breeze had been  
poured through their wings.

I know what it is to lie  
because you have never been believed.  
How there is an oblique  
and panicked integrity  
to even the lowest of deceptions.

This room can hold the tension.  
A slow, deep place



for the rooks to beat their wings

slowly and deeply.

A different kind of flight

thrashes under the breastbone –

urgent, serious applause

trapped inside a handkerchief.

I walk home and run a bath.

And when the taps are full and going,

I put my head completely under;

I can hear the crying rooks.

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