

BIRDS OF EAST LONDON, Stephen Watts

When you live on the twenty-first floor of a tower  
and way past midnight you hear a fracture  
of wings and in the morning there's  
a collar-dove on your balcony

is that a dream ?

When you live on the twenty-first floor and you get  
home just at dawn from a party - or you've  
been working at the desk all night, the  
desk of words I mean - and the  
mist you've travelled  
home through

lies

flannelled just beneath  
your feet so you cannot see the  
ground and yet the whole  
sky is king-fissure  
blue

from the palest horizon to the most golden baroque

is that also a dream  
but is it not also  
the most real ... ?

And out of such skies come birds and bombs ...

When you live on the twenty-first floor and you  
notice that in a crack in the cladding  
a few metres down a kestrel  
has made her nest

and when you see that kestrel  
pinioned on its wing-bone, sitting at ease in  
the middle air, shifting sideways on sudden  
gusts - its unperplexed ligaments  
ready to dive it through  
skies of reality

through torn webs of nerves

and when you catch  
the feather of the collar dove  
floating past your eye ...

is that not a dream and  
is life only a dream ?

Or when you see Arctic geese flying beneath your feet  
toward the landing stage on the Camargue just  
as once you saw them flying

between the mountain and the sea - in  
the gap between sight and nothing  
right there above your head -  
on those far islands of  
mica schist

way out west and beyond  
the times of  
clearance  
is that only a dream or does life  
just dream us ?

And language has broken down, language has been  
bandaged - like the sun, like the bandaged  
sun - and we speak in chunks  
of betrayal words  
when language itself  
has become .....

Or when at eye level from your balcony you see black  
darting swifts mewing in the fine drizzle or  
turning their sleek bodies in the  
sun as they bite tiny insects  
simply for sustenance

is this just a dream of  
life ?

Or the gannet that plunges down cliffs of light  
(as a broke lift might through shafts of  
darkness) and breaks the surface  
of the curdled water leaving  
its tongue's graffiti on  
the shoal beneath

having picked out just one fish  
for its gizzard and gullet

O my toppled sanity : O my maytime  
market : O my bridge of  
dreams

Or as a cormorant might  
fly straight into the sun  
and either it will crinkle and fizz in the black  
heats - or else it will heal the sun's  
bandaged  
wound :

(for this is what birds know that we  
no longer know)

Or the stormy petrel sleeping on the heave of  
the ocean, giving countenance to  
the wreck and the wrack  
waiting for the spigot or flag  
of seaweed or the onrush of  
maritime tide

One time in my house on the burnt island a wren  
deep-dived by a buzzard fled in through  
my blue open door but then was as  
bone burst by human space  
as by any beak or claw

though I spoke to it  
in bird words from the piece of  
my hearth

and I cupped it in my hands  
in bird words from the piece of  
my hearth

and I cupped it in my hands  
until off it flew  
but my mind is a burnt island : as is  
everyone's in this bruised world, or in this world  
of bruised minds  
and is everyone just a  
dream ?

When you live on the twenty-first floor and the old  
Ukrainian man twelve floors down keeps  
racing pigeons on his balcony -  
Popa he is called  
and he sings  
lullabies  
in the sunlit pub on Cable Street  
the pub that is not yet  
shut down -

and his pigeons fly in wide arcs, in circles  
from his balcony, but they cannot  
return him to the village  
near Lv'ov (shhh  
shhh :

this is his mother hugging him close

shielding his eyes, clasping him  
to her body lest he moan  
or whimper when  
the partisans  
piss in

the bushes she's hiding him in as  
they pass through the  
burnt village :

(shhh ... shhh)  
Is this then just a dream ?

Or when you live on the twenty-first floor and  
you see two cormorants sweeping the sky  
making wide arcs of their own choice  
bargaining with no-one and  
compromising nothing :

from one skerry to the  
burning sun

(corporations named cars after animals, government  
named bombs after birds)

even language has its final answer, even  
words fail - or else soar -  
where we most need them  
even birds fly in East London  
coming from Iceland or the Western Isles  
going to Morocco or Algeria or  
south of the Sahara ...

Is this just a dream ?  
this parliament of birds, these  
migrations

this flight path of swifts and swallows  
this discourse on the sanities  
this journey to be made  
across breath  
or

the stupidity of ever drawing  
boundaries

When you live on the twenty-first floor and down  
there in the paved market you can see  
your friends ...

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