

[Autumn Birds]

The wild duck startles like a sudden thought
& heron slow as if it might be caught
The flopping crows on weary wing go bye
& grey beard jackdaws noising as they flye
The crowds of starnels wiz & hurry bye
& darken like a cloud the evening sky
The larks like thunder rise & suthy round
Then drop & and nestle in the stubble ground
The wild swan hurrys high & noises loud
With white necks peering to the evening cloud
The weary rooks to distant woods are gone
With length of tail the magpie winnows on
To neighbouring tree and leaves the distant crow
While small birds nestle in the hedge below

—John Clare

Lyrebird

Liar made of leaf-litter, quivering ribby in shim,
hen-sized under froufrou, chinks in a quiff display him
or her, dancing in mating time, or out. And in any order.
Tailed mimic aeon-sent to intrigue the next recorder,
I mew catbird, I saw crosscut, I howl she-dingo, I kink
forest hush distinct with bellbirds, warble magpie garble, link
cattlebell with kettle-boil; I rank ducks cranky presidium
or simulate a triller like a rill mirrored lyrical to a rim.
I ring dim. I alter nothing. Real to real only I sing,
Gahn the crane to Gun the chainsaw, urban thing to being,
Screaming woman owl and human talk: eedieAi and uddyunnunoan.
The miming is all of I. Silent, they are a function
of wet forest, cometary lyrebirds. Their flight lifts them barely a semitone.

—Les Murray

Flamingo Watching

Wherever the flamingo goes,
she brings a city's worth
of furbelows. She seems
unnatural by nature—
too vivid and peculiar
a structure to be pretty,
and flexible to the point
of oddity. Perched on
those legs, anything she does
seems like an act. Descending
on her egg or draping her head
along her back, she's
too exact and sinuous
to convince an audience
she's serious. The natural elect,
they think, would be less pink,
less able to relax their necks,
less flamboyant in general.
They privately expect that it's some
poorly jointed bland grey animal
with mitts for hands
whom God protects.

—Kay Ryan

Sense Of

When, only later, the tawny owl called—
(is it a night hawk? is it hunting, what does
it want? or the cry of an animal not above
but beyond us, through the tree-line,
from the long field we'd walked that morning)—

it takes no time to lose the sense of things . . .

What I mean to say is, only later, we consulted
the book of answers. We knew what we had
heard, only then, the source of the hunger
out of which the call came, and the other
we did not hear, who had no need, to be heard—

—David Baker

Snowy Egret

A boy walks out in the morning with a gun.
Bright air, the smell of grass and leaves
and reeds around the pond October smells.
A scent of apples from the orchard in the air.
A smell of ducks. Two cinnamon teal,
he thinks they are teal, the ones he'd seen
the night before as the pond darkened
and he'd thought the thought that the dark
was coming earlier. He is of an age
when the thought of winter is a sexual thought,
the having thoughts of one's own is sexual,
the two ducks muttering and gliding
toward the deeper reeds away from him,
as if distance were a natural courtesy,
is sexual, which is to say, a mystery, an ache
inside his belly and his chest that rhymes
somehow with the largeness of the night.
The stars conjuring themselves from nothing
but the dark, as if to say it's not as if
they weren't all along just where they were,
ached in the suddenly swifter darkening
and glittering and cold. He's of an age
when the thought of thinking is, at night,
a sexual thought. This morning in the crystal
of the air, dew, and the sunlight that the dew
has caught on the grass blades sparkling at his feet,
he stalks the pond. Three larger ducks,
mallards probably, burst from the reeds
and wheel and fly off south. Three redwings,
gone to their winter muteness, fly three ways
across the pond to settle on three cattails
opposite or crossways from each other,
perch and shiver into place and look around.
That's when he sees the snowy egret
in the rushes, pure white and stone still
and standing on one leg in that immobile,
perfect, almost princely way. He'd seen it
often in the summer, often in the morning
and sometimes at dusk, hunting the reeds
under the sumac shadows on the far bank.
He'd watched the slow, wide fanning
of its wings, taking off and landing,
the almost inconceivably slow way
it raised one leg and then another
when it was stalking, the quick cocking

of its head at sudden movement in the water,
and the swift, darting sureness when it stabbed
the water for a stickleback or frog. Once
he'd seen it, head up, swallowing a gopher,
its throat bulging, a bit of tail and a trickle
of blood just visible below the black beak.
Now it was still and white in the brightness
of the morning in the reeds. He liked
to practice stalking, and he raised the gun
to his shoulder and crouched in the wet grasses
and drew his bead just playfully at first.

—Robert Hass

Meadowlark

Prayer in the throat of a non-believer
offered up to the absent hereafter,
his two long notes and descending warble
put him at the centre of things.

A partial method, he knows, is no method;
but when you are too weak for beauty's
startlement, when you desire not silence
but the peace of vague and benign

neglect, at decibels audible over
the wind, radio, tyres through gravel,
through the open driver's window
his song is like arrows of pure math
straight into whatever the heart is,
its still unbroken land, its native grasses.

—Karen Solie