



THE BELFAST REVIEW

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Please note, we have modified some elements that appear in the published magazine, especially where works of other authors are included.

NONFICTION

BIRDSTRIKE MARIANNE DAIGH



Tuesday

The airport air is on me. It smells like if you bathed in petrol-station coffee, slept a hot night in a corporate basement, then woke up ready to set yourself on fire.

My senses rot.

I want to become senseless.

I am going home again, for the first time in five years. To excavate my decaying New York storage space, and make my change complete.

If only I could do it under anaesthesia.

And that is, after all, the function of these tall departure-gate windows through which we track patterns of aeronautical action: not entertainment, or transparency, or demonstration of industrial civilisation's awesome pinnacle. Planes arrive, planes escape; luggage is loaded, luggage removed; passengers crawl, herd, and shimmy. By viewing these hypnotic repetitions, we numb out.

Anaesthesia, in an airport, is a kindness.

I am warmed by the satisfaction of thinking one clear thought.

I'm on a roll, figuring things out.

As I lounge, feeling warm and clever, a seagull soars past the window, high and very close. I fear the tip of her wing will clip the glass. Far behind her, a plane takes off.

What do you – I address the seagull, attempting telepathy – what do you, bird, think of planes?

She passes and prepares to double back. I open my mind to receive her answer, but there is none.

Millions of birds are killed each year by birdstrike. Planes are, essentially, a monstrous mechanised species of avian predator. (Birdstrike is what they call it when a plane hits a bird. Sometimes people die, too, in crashes caused by birdstrike. But mostly birds are the victims.)

Death is straightforward. If a bird hits the window of a house, the bird might die. If a bird hits a moving plane... The mystery is here: how do birds conceptualise planes? (*cont.*)

Birdstrike



(Cont.) As individual, weird animals who represent a normal danger in the big, bad world of ether birds call home? Or as extensions of us – another weapon in our hands, another facet of our relentless predation?

Do they even realise a plane is the same shape as themselves, or is it one more shapeless metal object among shapeless metal objects with which we have littered the planet?

Do they think each plane is alive with brain and blood? Maybe they imagine planes as gods, enraged enough to kill on occasion but mostly indifferent as they glide through deserts of open-ocean sky.

Are birds aware that we are packed inside the planes, knuckles white and faces slack and bellies rumbling from food that looks like sick and feeling sick from the food and trying not to spread the aromas of our plane-sickness into the limited air supply, all in our attempts to imitate birds who sip free air and spread their aromas without worry?

Are they fascinated? Disgusted? Amused? Exhausted? Annoyed? Gravely worried? Planning our demise? Trying their best to avoid our killer machines but otherwise thinking of us as little as possible?

I don't need to tell you that I won't be answering these questions here, or ever in this life.

When I put the question to a friend, she said: nobody nowhere knows this.

*

Arriving into New York JFK, I apologise to Dublin Airport for my overwrought critique of its air and windows. Dublin Airport seems to me now a gem of freshness, a beacon of sleek new gorgeousness.

The moment I step off the plane into the wrinkled, choking throat of JFK Terminal 7, I regret the entire trip. Let them burn the storage space; no theology textbook or Nineties metal CD or moth-eaten childhood teddy is worth all this.

There's no signage. No exit, except for a banged-up door with a metal push bar, like the door leading out of a school gym or into the disused ward of an old hospital. No WiFi. I'm no terminally online zombie, but I do expect usable WiFi

at a major airport.

Once, I travelled to a non-existent mining town in Arctic Sweden – non-existent, as in, the entire town was being relocated and the section wherein I stood, waiting for a bus in a blizzard, no longer existed. It was a ghost neighbourhood in a town full of mine-ghosts in a ghost-grey landscape on a ghost of a whiteout Sunday morning. When the bus did come, it had WiFi.

*

Wednesday

It's five-thirty in the morning and the carpet is rust-brown psychedelia. One wall is rust-gold mirror and the other is a kitchenette and the other is blackly spackled with mould. This is my Midtown hotel room. I have not slept. I brew weak filter coffee. I sit at the kitchenette table and watch the coffee develop a blue-grey sheen. It smells rank. I hope it will somehow repair itself.

I put my feet in their fresh socks up on the table and watch a video wherein two small birds, type unknown, cling to the wing of a moving plane. The plane moves faster. They cling harder. The plane prepares for take-off: down the runway, wheels bounce, bounce, bounce, ready for up. Who filmed this video, another bird? It's so clear, unmarred by window glass. Did someone run alongside a speeding plane, videoing the wingtip? Surely that would be insane. And yet.

The coffee burns my upper palette. Strange how the hard upper palette is easier to wound than the otherwise soft and yielding mouth flesh.

The birds won't let go but cling hard, harder, rubber feet gripping.

Their motives are mysterious.

Are they having fun? Like crows, who fly out in front of cars to collect food they themselves have placed mid-street, guarded from afar, waiting to collect until a car is almost upon them, the driver too close to brake, possibly even ready to crash, and the crow likely to die from road-based birdstrike? You see this and you think: are crows really that stupid, are crows really that smart, are crows really that human, gambling their lives for a thrill?

(cont.)

Birdstrike



(Cont.) The two small birds, type unknown: they don't look thrilled. They don't appear to be playing a game. They look desperate. They cling to the plane as if to a mother.

It hadn't occurred to me that birds might see planes as mothers.

Let go, little birds. Let go, let – the video ends.

Maybe whoever filmed it was sucked into the engine and the video is what they left behind.

*

I take a cooler sip of coffee and think, as the city sky begins to fade from black to grey, of little kids in war.

From my heated hotel room, an ocean away from my intact home, I think of little kids, little birds, losing limbs, with no mothers to cling. Little war birds.

In a psychedelic hotel kitchenette, I cycle through an unresolvable theodicy.

A little kid has her leg amputated and feels every centimetre of every cut. She takes the pain. Tears flow. Tears dry. She turns to stone, with a touch of bloodlust. A child is, after all, more capable than anyone of a stone face in the face of pain and a violent reckoning in the face of violence.

Everyone says: she's lucky. She doesn't know about that. She develops a system to survive because, like almost every animal, she can't help wanting to survive. But the world is not her friend, and she's alone in it, since an essential part of her has been stolen, unreturnable. Imagine trying to cross rubble with a missing leg, forever. And everyone is right: she's lucky.

The theodicy – the paradox of unjust suffering – remains unresolvable. Unreturnable. In the face of all maimed little birds and all their dead or grieving parents and all the unanaesthetised amputations throughout history, and all the pain in the belly of even the luckiest human on earth, and the burned-up earth, stone-faced in the face of our insatiable violence – well, it all equals, either God is not real or God is a fucker. And since I'm convinced of God's reality, more or less, at this point, unfortunately, to my detriment, but nonetheless inescapably, then it becomes a case of, will I

actually reject God and defend my species against its cruel creator, and not just my species but the whole of cruel nature, eating and edible animals and plants, the whole cursed thing?

It's not even six in the morning.

I get up and go to the bathroom. I run the bath. It doesn't get hot. I fuck with all the knobs. It doesn't get hot. I run it for an obscene stretch, wasting water, and stare out the chip-white bathroom window down eight stories to the dark slick of Midtown street.

I must have truly unhomed myself from this city if I booked a hotel in Midtown, the worst possible neighbourhood to be in, for any reason, at any time. But it's close to the storage facility, which towers gleaming white above the Hudson River – beyond Times Square and Hell's Kitchen, all the way out on Manhattan's wild western edge. It doesn't open for another two hours.

Those clueless birds, clinging to the wing of a moving plane, cling to a God who they think is their tender mother but who, like a fairy tale witch removing her disguise, intends to roast them in a mighty mechanical whirl. Or, even worse, *doesn't* intend but simply *roasts without intention*. Eats, like its creatures, without thought.

That's Deism: God as a big steampunk wheel full of clockwork cogs. You're safe as long as you, like God, do the roasting. This is what Enlightenment materialism has produced. Not democracy, or freedom, or respect for personal autonomy. Just hierarchies, masters, roasting and eating. The founding fathers didn't eliminate tyranny; they buried it alive and made it fat.

This fucking country.

The water still isn't hot, so I take a cold shower. It's just like sea swimming back home in Dublin, I tell myself. *The ice water will soothe you. Spiritualise you. It will enhance your immune system. Bring clarity to your confusion. It will solve the theodicy. Bring down your eye bags. You'll lose weight.*

I get out and get dressed and don't bother with makeup since my eye bags are multi-layered like steps up to the great pyramid, and on my way down the F. Scott Fucking (cont.)

Birdstrike



(Cont.) Fitzgerald spiral hotel staircase I don prescription sunglasses against the emerging dawn.

Out into cold-hot rain after my cold-cold shower, hair still cold-damp, I stand on the corner and smoke a rollie and soak up the feel of clean tourist body exhaling grime-smell of smoke onto new-old grime of rot-smell sidewalk.

Above me there's a sign reminding everyone that gun usage in Midtown is a felony.

A pigeon, passing, rests on the sign. Poor pigeons. Domesticated, then thrown on the waste heap, to follow us and consume our waste. Abandoned pets.

The pigeon coos and flies off.

My stomach rumbles, cooing in answer.

A lone early-morning smoker feeling dirtier by the second, I turn down a garish block full of shuttered neon entertainments. The Scientology sign, with its old-timey gleam, dominates the streetscape. Must be their East Coast headquarters. On the side of their building, they've painted what I suppose is their catchphrase, or, what do you call it, for advertisements? Last drag off the rollie, only filter now, the term what is it, burning my fingers, burning burn smell into my swollen no-sleep fingers. Not catchphrase but a simpler term, what, where can I put this out, there's nowhere to put out cigarettes in this town, and no one's smoking, except no, they're all smoking weed, what is the word, they're all high as fuck that's why they're like this, that one word, antisocial, no, disturbed, no, not that either. Beat down, that's the word, by the fascism. I won't throw it in the gutter, filters aren't biodegradable, beat down by the fascism, beat, exhausted, hypocrite, got to quit smoking, fuck, so tired, a real hypocrite, but the word. Just roll the last hot spot of tobacco out onto the ground, smash it, there, filter in your pocket, dispose later, smell of your pocket later, there is no dispose, rotten, like the gutter, like your lungs, but what is the word, the word for these aliens around you, these sad covid-beat fascist-beat gun-beat no-eye-contact aliens, oh right, filter in pocket, smell of it later but expedience now, for ads the word is, tagline.

The tagline on the side of the building, its romantic old-time building façade facading the blackest of starless vacuums, is:

You don't need to be a Scientologist, you just need to be curious.

*

Sunday

The taxi driver ended an all-night shift in the Dublin Airport queue with one great heave of my suitcase into his boot. What you got in here, a dead body, he said, and I said, in a way. And all the way out to the Northside coast he's pure *I won't be voting yes that's for fuckin sure and this country is a joke and refugees I've driven to the airport to go on their holidays it's holidays they're on refugees da fuck and look they're sayn nothin nothin nothin* and turning the radio up.

And, he's right about the politicians sayn *nothin nothin nothin* as they analyse the upcoming constitutional referendums with maximal empty erudition.

The mid-level fuckery of the Irish state is balm to me after the apocalyptic brain-eating amoeba that is today's America. I'll never go back, I keep saying to everyone, especially to the right-wing taxi driver who has quit impugning refugees (maybe it was my point about how if, for example, I set his house on fire and chased him through his own street with a big American gun and tried to shoot him in the head but, thankfully, he survived and escaped and sought shelter in a foreign neighbourhood full of people who treated him like shoe-scum, he might need a fucking holiday, too) and entered on a byzantine narrative about the time he sued a hooker hotel in Orlando, Florida.

I say that's what you get for going to Florida and we share a hoarse laugh and I ask him to drop me by the entrance to the hidden concrete beach, behind the train tracks.

I can smell the lowering tide and want to get the smell into me.

My suitcase waits at the entrance to the beach, full of once-prized possessions. I can't recall any longer why I bothered to rescue these few mementos of unhappy youth, dragging my old books all over Manhattan, looking to sell, books so pen-marked as to be almost worthless. Surely it's all worthless in the face of such a seascape.

My body absorbs the post-sunrise beach like a lost cog clicking back into its beloved black-oiled wheel. The sand, as it transforms from sea floor to open terrestria, gleams (cont.)

Birdstrike



(*cont.*) like a frozen plain.

The low tide smell of ancient rot is appetising and horrible. Appetising not to the mouth palate but to the subtle inner palate which rests in the mouth of the subtle body and hungers for tastes by which to remember itself.

It smells of my own sea body, old, rotting, unused to oxygen. It smells of becoming landed: a half-breathed breath, gravity resistance, memory of where I used to live, before the blunder where we came up here, fully onto land, and mistook novelty for freedom.

A plane roars above and, as it rides, a seagull crosses. The two make a near-perfect X. I address the seagull, again: do you, bird, remember a time without planes?

Every bird alive has grown up with planes, just as every human has grown up landed. And the real answer to my first question about birds and planes – how do birds conceptualise planes, as animal, machine, god, or mother – depends on whether they can imagine life without them.

People who love talking about trauma say you can remember in your body your ancestor's trauma and this memory traumatises you from birth.

People who love to talk about groups and nations say you feel unaccountably at home when visiting your ancestral land.

This all goes under the category of genetic memory, and it's obscure.

What is not obscure, what is clearly true and provable as anything, is that birds migrate.

Baby robins raised in captivity perform the same migrations as their wild comrades. They know where and when to fly without being taught. Somehow, they remember.

Or take the cuckoo. Cuckoos are nest-thieving absentee parents. They actually sneak their eggs into other birds' nests to be raised by them, apparently without controversy.

And yet, baby cuckoos raised by non-cuckoos follow the exact same migratory journeys as their unknown cuckoo families. They migrate from Africa to Mongolia, Northern

Europe, and Korea; from South America to North America; from New Zealand to the Pacific Islands; and back again.

Cuckoos raised by other birds do not learn where and when to migrate from their parents. The knowledge is given.

Maybe it's physically coded into genes.

Maybe it's accessible through some kind of Jungian-universal-cuckoo-consciousness or cloud – as in, *the* cloud except, instead of ones and zeroes, it's full of living creatures' memories.

Maybe both: DNA and cloud, together.

(Is there a difference between living memories and ones and zeroes?)

Maybe there is no difference.

(Nobody knows.)

Nobody nowhere knows this.

(If someone does know, they're not saying.)

Avian geneticists have a few theories about internal migratory maps. They all centre around the information being physiologically encoded into genes, though the nature of the information (visual/sensory map, electromagnetic signal, planetary gradient wherein birds compare landmarks with positions of other landmarks and celestial bodies to figure out where and when they need to go) is elusive.

(Nobody nowhere knows.)

What does it mean to be genetically encoded, or to be remembered?

Where is the relevant information (the map, the image, the sense, the smell, the story, the occurrence, the effect, the need, the trauma, the feeling, the landmark, the gradient) stored? Where, truly, is all the data?

Either: the whole of being-data (memory and instinct and waking awareness and dreamworld, every striation of pain and stinging desire, desire for exoplanets, new worlds, (*cont.*)

Birdstrike

(cont.) the feel of water-underness and wailing inside with inexpressible awe at the twitch of a tern's wing as she statues on a moss-covered beach boulder slick with new dawn green) is physically contained, lumped into some as-yet-unidentified memory pocket of the brain.

Or: memory and indeed all consciousness (worlds of thought and landscapes of dreams and fantasies) hover, are stored, pulsate, vibrate – whatever you like – in a cloud, and our material bodies, here now in this life, download stored being-data from the cloud as needed and run it like a machine runs a program. The data isn't identical with the machine; the data is vast and mysterious and profoundly available (as in, eternally). The machine is here for a moment, and it plays certain amounts of data in a way that is sensible to boundaried bodies located in time and space (as in, us).

I didn't come up with this. It's a common enough idea (see *Black Mirror*, for example, or any religion). One argument in favour: sometimes a person whose memory has been lost, whose brain is ruined by dementia, will, one day when close to death, suddenly come back to themselves and remember everything and know themselves again, to which everyone around them replies what the fuck, your brain is not viable, how can this happen? But it happens.

Inaccessibility does not equal nonexistence. (Just because I'm not answering my phone doesn't mean I've ceased to exist, contrary to some opinions.)

But back to birds. Imagine the vast constellations of memory in which birds travel from summer climes to winter climes, life after life, generation after generation, with or without instruction. Imagine the profundity of their task.

Imagine you are taken as a child and raised by aliens. They're not unkind, but they provide you no history, no model for humanness. When you grow up, they set you free onto a wild terrestrial plain. By means of some internal map, you walk a thousand kilometres to the town of your grandmother's birth.

Is that genetic memory or is that divinity? Or else, is there no difference?

Do birds remember a time before planes? I will wager: yes. In birds (within or without) there lies a vast map of time and

space. By it they glean the nature of planes: their hybridity – that is, their mechanical outsides (metal, fibres) and organic insides (us) – their usage, and their provenance.

I'd like to think birds know just what planes are about, and even what we're about, too (which is more than you can say for us).

Maybe, also, there is a map in me. If I learn to read it, I'll remember being what I was before I was what I am.

Someone is coming, distantly, a bright blur. I wonder if they will disturb my suitcase and the memories within. I try to picture the contents: a slim case of CDs, Black Sabbath and Rage Against the Machine. War songs, war birds, scratched and unplayable. My dead grandmother's jacket, death certificate, and cheap earrings. Old journals which ought to be burned. A teddy bear, back ripped open, wrapped in a scarf. Can I repair him, replace his insides? Can I sew him up and squeeze him at night as I used to, for comfort, as I lay awake afraid of the dark?

I walk down further to where beach becomes dirty old-tide water, avoiding the piles of brown stinking seaweed from whom innumerable stinking seaweed children have tried to escape and, caught by quickening sand, failed.

I stop at the end of the path and stand beneath a criss-cross of train wire and electrified metal. Above the cross, stark against huge pearl clouds, towering cranes rev up for another day of construction. They layer walls of unaffordable condos upon walls of cheap and ugly condos upon walls of unbuyable condos upon a sinking coastal strip.

I stop because there's nowhere else to go and then I stop in my stoppedness because below, in the weedy bob of sea, bobs the body of a dead gull. Her neck is bent back, beak sharp, feathers dull, wings tucked, belly exposed to the fullness of morning sun. ■

