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Minding Birds

***As If a Raven* by YVONNE BLOMER**

Palimpsest Press, 2014 \$18.95

Reviewed by **KELLY SHEPHERD**

In *As if a Raven*, her third collection, Victoria writer Yvonne Blomer cormorant-dives into the literary and religious heritage of the Western world—with a book of poems about birds. These ornithological parables and portraits draw from classical art and architecture, field guides and nature writing, biblical and apocryphal literature. There are some perhaps predictable bird-lore references: catalogues of species on the Ark, and birds mentioned in the Psalms. There is also an emphasis on the book of Job, which is anything but predictable.

In a blending of the flood stories found in Genesis and on the Indigenous West Coast, we are reminded that Raven appears in both:

why would anyone trust this bird
to come back
and not flap its crooked wings
in the new wild earth
making mountains where none were
and monsters
("As if a Raven" lines 3-7)

On the book's cover and in the poems Raven is dishevelled, humorous, frightening, wild; if the cormorant (the "sea raven") plumbs the depths of Western symbolism in these pages, Raven tests its boundaries and breaks its rules. Yet waterfowl and corvids do not get all the attention: Blomer also focuses on unexpected birds, for instance in "The Book of Ostrich" she writes:

how can any omniscient tell
if it made man from dust
or if it shaped an egg
and from it something winged
yet flightless fell (III, lines 1-5)

Some of these are reminiscent of Ted Hughes' dark creation myth *Crow*.

Beyond their ideas and their (possible) origins, though, these poems should also be acknowledged for their careful music: they are alive with wordplay, assonance, alliteration. Their images and songs flit from place to place, and are gone in a flash, but they are worth seeking out again. With its precise, sensuous language "The Turtle Dove," an avian meditation on the biblical Song of Songs, might be comparable to Russell Thornton's "Book of the Dark Dove." Its seven linked sections seem to breathe, and take pleasure in their own sound and rhythm:

and flit, and flit up over springs of
cool
you small, you lost, you fool.

This fountain: me in bloom,
your garden: doom of doom.

I trill, I catch my voice
this fountain ear of ear

you hear, so fly to free
your heart, that flutter thing.
(VI. lines 1-8)

The palindrome poem "Audubon: still life" is a mirror in which form reflects content, live birds are compared to dead, and wild birds are juxtaposed with their idealized beings. "One Raven" is composed of haiku-like gestures on the page, evoking "silent prairie winter" and a "scruffy coppered

Raven thing / stark as a city's lost sky" (lines 17, 24-25). "Bird of Freedom" likewise employs brief images and forms, building upon itself, adding sentences and species like pieces of a puzzle: "Finger to nail: / skein that holds blood in, / vane of wing" (lines 17-19). Even the shortest lines here are imbued with multiple meanings: a "skein" is a length of string or yarn, and it implies a tangle; it also refers to the V-formation of flying geese or pelicans. A "vane" is a part of a wing, and more specifically a feather; it also evokes "vein" which, like the skein in the previous line, "holds blood in"—like any birdwatcher, the reader will want to listen closely and move in for a better look.

In stories and paintings, pecking and flying, swimming and chirping—whether we make an effort to observe them closely through binoculars, or ignore them from behind the glass of speeding cars, or understand them as spiritual metaphors—birds are all around us. Their world is our world. Birds people our dreams and vocabularies, and feed our imaginations. Indeed, according to environmental philosopher Paul Shepard, the deep significance that birds hold for humanity has emerged "over an immense time of

minding birds and being endowed with mind by them" (34-35). Birds, in this view, have played and continue to play an integral part in the emergence of human language and thought. They "flit through consciousness, connecting with this twig and that branch, are attended to momentarily, and in a flash are gone. Birds are not *like* ideas—that is a literary simile. They *are* ideas" (Shepard 34, emphasis mine). With both a mythopoetic imagination and a naturalist's eye, Blomer reminds us that birds are metaphors and ideas and more: in her poetry they are creators, angels, omens, people.

Works Cited

- Hughes, Ted. *Crow*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971.
- Shepard, Paul. *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*. New York: Viking Press, 1978.
- Thornton, Russell. *The Hundred Lives*. Toronto: Quattro Books, 2014.

KELLY SHEPHERD's first collection of poems, entitled *Shift*, is forthcoming from Thistledown Press. He lives in Edmonton.