

JOYOUS MESSENGERS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

‘Sundown on the high stonefields!’

My imagination soars into Arctic air up on the light-lashed Cairngorm plateau. In five words the poet has caught my imagination: Edwin Morgan, the ‘Voice of Glasgow’.

And then down I go, swooping onto his reorientating second line, ‘the darkening roofscape stirs’, and I drop, as the poem’s title suggests, into George Square. Cliffs loft around me – the General Post Office, the City Information Bureau, the City Chambers.

The Square is ‘alive with starlings’. It doesn’t matter if I know nothing of these birds because he reveals their ‘starling-ness’ against the flash of a western window. In their collective, dark energy they cross it ‘like a shower of arrows’, then settle on wires as jet beads.

Light slicks these iridescent birds. I see the gleam of jet, but hear it too in the hiss of a couple of lines of shiny ‘s’s. Then the starlings’ clamour on those cliffs, their deafening warble, rises before they scatter again.

But it’s what this gathering stirs in humans, first the pedestrians below and then those inside the cliff-dwellings, that really matter in ‘The Starlings in George Square’. At first there’s delight, especially in a wide-eyed boy to whom it will be a life-changer – he will never forget. But later they cause confusion in the Post Office where the word starling messes with Sterling, and in the City Chambers where the Lord Provost can’t hear herself think. So begins the application of repellents and armoury against the avian mob: ‘Send back the jungle!’

The spectacle of a vast murmuration of starlings knotting as one airborne gauze into a dragon, stretching to form a ship, and now whirlpooling away in a column, is one of our most breath-taking natural phenomena; up there with Northern Lights. But we’re double-handed. ‘I wonder if we really deserve starlings?’ the poet asks as the humans claw George Square back with ‘indignant orderliness’ and the poem playfully makes its serious point.

So, are starlings affectionately-regarded wonders? Or invaders who steal crops, leave noxious waste and are simply too noisy? In 1949, by flocking with such density onto its hands, they stopped Big Ben. When Morgan wrote this poem in 1968, they were not always welcome in the cliff-ravines of cities and were treated as pests. Out of many regional variations, the ‘star’ in the common name, referring to the birds’ white-flecked plumage, is retained in Staris in Shetland, Starnels in North East Dorset and Eurostars in Cape Town where they were a 19th-century introduction. Or they are Sheep Stares and Shebbies because they pick parasites from the backs of sheep. The names Wizards and Wheezers sing of their airy whistle. But then we have Greaseballs, Shitlegs and Stinkers.

With a relation in the myna bird, starlings might mimic a car-alarm or learn the exact note and intonation of that man who, on returning from work, whistles from the street up to his partner to throw down their only key from a first-floor window. How many times a day is she summoned to find no one there? Perhaps they are too clever, not humble enough, getting one over on us like this.

In the 2020 RSPB Gardenwatch survey, the starling was the second most recorded bird, belying its 80% decline since the scheme began in 1979. The huge numbers of us who engaged with the 2021 survey reflect new enthusiasm for our avian neighbours during a year of more or less domestic confinement. They’ve been a constant, sometimes seeming in more boisterous voice due to our own stillness. Rather like poetry, they bring solace tucked amongst wing feathers, swoop delight into gardens, parks, and less crowded places as well as into our hearts when we choose to notice them; to *really* notice, as a poet must.

My own heart lightened in early February when I woke once again to birdsong in my garden and watched blackbirds in their flurried mating chase. Later that day I looked up into a roadside tree, its leafless branches punctuated by silhouetted birds as if they were notes on a stave. The tree itself seemed to vibrate with song; an orchestra suspended in the sky – one of those everyday miracles that stopped my feet and is available to all of us.

Whilst interest in the natural world can seem the preserve of middle-class white people in the countryside, birds give us a collective cause for wonder wherever we live. Like the ‘wide-eyed’ boy in the poem, Mark Lindo looked through a north-west London window as a child of Jamaican parents, and saw that birds were everywhere. Just as Morgan’s childhood was short on household literature, Lindo grew up without bird enthusiasts at home or school, and so on his daily pre-breakfast watches, he gave birds his own names – starlings were ‘mummy-birds’

at first. Now known as the ‘Urban Birder’, he is a broadcaster, writer and educator with a mission to engage city folk around the world with the environment through the medium of birds. As he says, out of 620 species recorded in Britain, 95% of them can be found in urban areas. And it’s there that humans and birds are true cohabiters and may test our neighbourliness.

Morgan’s play of black letter and white space often sings with mischief. Through penetrating observation and wordplay, his poetic output over a lifetime brings close attention to anything and everything, including the non-human. He steps beyond the City to spring a hyena bloody-fanged off the page, gives voice to the terrible loneliness of the Loch Ness Monster, maps Scotland in regional names for the chaffinch. An elegy for a poet lays out the qualities of Basil Bunting against avian buntings in ‘A Trace of Wings’. But the non-human more often animates his City. He coaxes wolves onto Blythswood Hill, asking for ‘a little wildness please’; a gull at his window unnerves, stamping and assessing him through the glass. And then we have the ‘confused sweetness’ of the starlings.

They are a fine match, poet and bird: songster and magician, mimic and tease, making minds dance, hearts soar, taking us on linguistic adventures and making us ask how we should live together.