

**National Unitarian Fellowship**

# **Viewpoint**



**O ye birds of the air:  
praise ye the Lord**

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## Invitation

Across the green of the sea kissed downs flies my bird,  
cushioned on winds first warmed by desert sun  
    where camel and Bedouin ever walk  
into a shimmering horizon, mysterious and bright.  
    Up and up he rises, my bird, a speck of dark light  
in a sky of cerulean blue, a day star in the stillness  
    of an afternoon. He hovers now, my bird,  
oh so gently, like an idle leaf in the soft June air.  
Then, tumbling from the sky, whirling and stalling,  
    an acrobat exuberant, my bird beckons,  
a pinioned king wonderful in his dignity and power.  
And we can only marvel at this Malachi pointing us to heaven.

*NL*

*A group of us, members of the NUF and Unitarian Earth Spirit Network, have made this small collection of poems about birds - and one bee.*

*Liz Foxbrook painted all the pictures.*

*We thank Joan and John Wilkinson for their advice and assistance, and Tony McNeile for his encouragement and support.*



## Kremer's Ring Necked Parakeet

In a flash he lets his body fall, iridescent green crowned  
with soft violet haze, long wings like furled sails, hooked  
scarlet beak and laced claws, hung powerfully downside up  
from the telegraph wire outside my cold attic window.

Around his neck a band of feathers tipped with rose and black,  
he watches me with unwavering ringed eye, glass-button bright,  
secure on hanging circus perch, replete with plundered blossom  
from my apple tree, exotic thief safe In the afternoon sun.

Neither anxious immigrants nor anonymous passing strangers,  
these exotic escapees from open parrot cage or careless aviary  
colonised our southern coast, painting our muted landscape  
with their vibrant colours, mocking us with their banshee screech.

From prize fuchsia bushes and lush strawberry beds they steal  
berry and petal, swooping and circling about the ravaged gardens  
in an exultation of raucous song, and dance a triumphal polonaise  
above our old slate roofs and sombre flint walled Victorian square.

The jubilant flock gathers high above the tall chimney stacks  
and my acrobatic friend is gone, just one minute speck of green  
in the flock that rises into the morning, a cloud of lustrous silk  
floating majestically above the cliffs, back to their wave fringed  
park.

High In the treetop roosts they will gather in their hundreds  
to squabble and preen, to sleep opalescent beneath the moon.  
My day was made glorious by the parakeet outside my window,  
by his shining beauty and his blithe confidence in his new world.

Long may this be.

N.L.

## Christmas Buzzard

*Lochwinnoch Bird Reserve, December 1999*

A buzzard has chosen the Loch's verge  
as his winter habitat  
unaware  
he's acting out a role  
as star performer  
in the focus  
of binoculars.

His Dark-Prince flight above the frosted rushes  
and the silver plane of water  
is pure Nurayev  
in its power,  
an encore to his summer soarings  
over the high wilderness of moorland  
when he lives out time on the caressing air  
forever above us.

But here he lowers himself  
comes down to earth  
gives value  
to admirers in the stalls,  
plays the clown, even,  
landing on his pole  
front-stage,  
holding out his wings to dry  
after December rain  
like a vain cormorant.

He'll come again,  
we've rumbled him;  
we've seen  
that he's an opportunist  
like the rest.  
That wild spirit of the sky  
has an eye  
for the festive-season food supply.

*Betty McKellar*



**1. Buzzard** [Buteo buteo]



## 2. Herring Gull [*Larus argentatus*]

## Herring Gull Walk

Up the Square they came,  
two herring gulls  
out for a morning stroll,  
heads nodding  
and toes turned out,  
feathered hands clasped  
behind feathered backs,  
like fellows of The House  
taking a matutinal turn  
in Christ Church Meadow,  
dissecting the niceties  
of Kant and Schopenhauer.

Down the Square went  
a warble of finches,  
rose-pink, green and gold,  
decorous like convent girls  
dressed in their best,  
children of Mary going  
to Sunday Mass, who  
nodded and curtsied  
to the scholar gulls,  
then fluttered away  
to the old bandstand,  
hoping for hip-hop and rap.

*N.L.*

## Graveyard Crow

The crow is such a noisy bird.  
Its strident screech is often heard  
Shattering the early morning calm  
Filling the air with wild alarm.  
Black crow, your draggled, flapping flight  
Seems but an echo of the night,  
But now you strut with nodding head  
Seeking for worms among the dead.

*Margaret Hazel*

## Eleven Lapwings Lapwinging

They appeared from nowhere ...

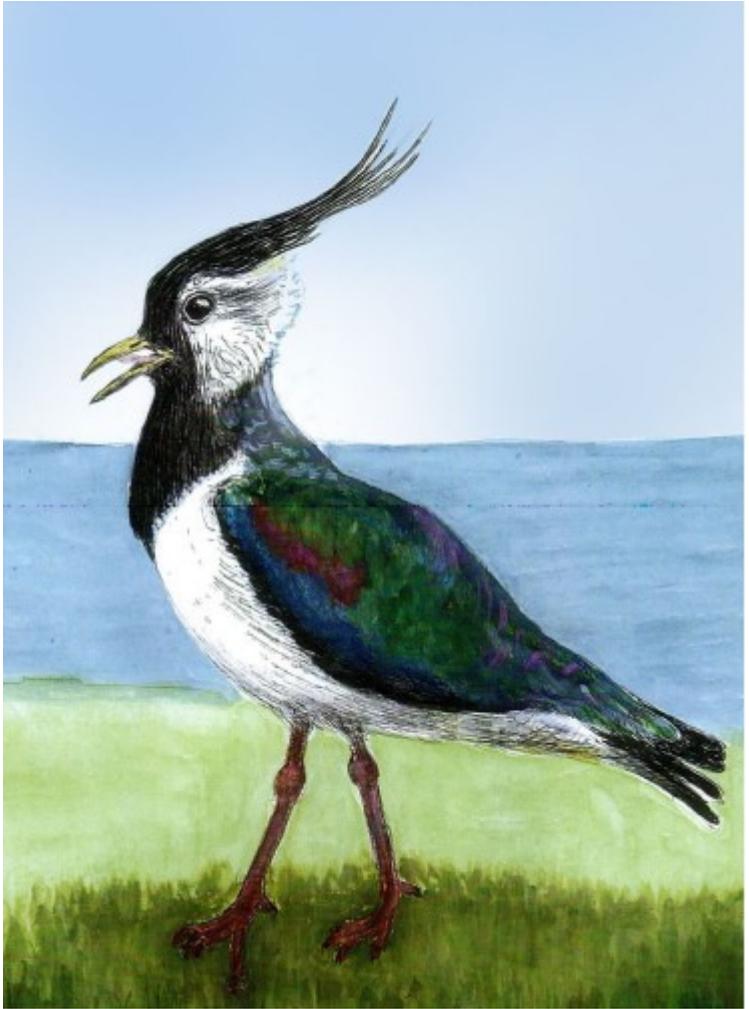
maybe they were fashioned in the skies  
from minglings of lost molecules  
invisible and spare  
floating on air  
fusing.

They materialised  
over moorland void -  
eleven lapwings  
lapwinging  
shimmering  
softly dipping and skimming  
hoisted upon the shoulder of the wind.

I'd watched and waited for them  
in March  
all through 'til June -  
never a one  
under the spring sun;  
only the bullying hoodie  
flying,  
and the sly fox  
multiplying  
under the spring moon.

But here they were come  
from the secret place  
over moorland space,  
air-swimming en masse  
eleven lapwings lapwinging  
peeweeting  
in a joy of belly-flaps  
and laughing the last laugh.

*Betty McKellar*



### 3. Lapwing [*Vanellus vanellus*]



**14. Greenfinch** [*Carduelis floris*]

## **The Wild Swan**

Wild white swan  
West wind bringing  
Under the dark sky  
Singing, singing

Your spirit calls  
White swan winging  
Under the night star  
Singing, singing

Follow, follow,  
Round world ringing  
Under the high heaven  
Singing, singing

*Mark Allaby*

## **Bee**

Forebear to despise the random blundering  
only in seeming.  
Remember the diligent voyages  
the gathering of sweetness  
from the brilliant islands  
that float in the green deep calling.  
Sip from the golden chalices  
the lagoons of sapphire  
shimmering in the seas of morning.  
On delicate wings unwearied with whirring  
minister to the multitudinous kingdoms  
murmuring their testament of leaves  
their miracles of sunlight  
their intricate archipelagoes of grace.

*Mark Allaby*

## A Blackbird Sang in the Hawthorn Tree

Ten years the little hawthorn  
languished  
behind the shed  
where healthy, rampant honeysuckle clambered -  
not dead but not quite flourishing.

"Red Hawthorn"  
the label on the pot had said  
and never a flower.  
We forgot it was there.

This year, in June  
it bloomed  
a riotous, rare rich crimson  
to beguile the eyes.

The blackie lyricised.  
He chose a rosy place among the blossom,  
to serenade his mistress  
in her honeysuckle nest  
and sang his blackbird song ...

And in the looking and the listening  
I was blessed.

*Betty McKellar*



## Skylark

In my mind's eye  
he lies, sad small bundle,  
amongst the wildflowers,  
on a bank of grief and death.  
He was a skylark,  
rising into the air,  
singing of his love  
to his love, in notes  
as clear and bright  
as a mountain stream,  
sweet like swansdown  
drifting across a lake.

Heaven listened, and  
reached down to earth.

Bored with the day,  
a boy with an air gun  
turned upwards to the sky,  
fired an aimless shot.  
A pure high note  
lingered on the air,  
but the singer fell,  
a broken leaf fluttering down  
to his fragrant flowery bier,  
his ragged silhouette  
tinged with morning glory.

His song was done.



*N.L.*

## On not Seeing the Waxwings

Twitchers in the gardens  
self-indulgent in their twitchings  
are lurking in the bushes  
like brown birds in their flitterings  
binoculars at ready  
eyelids fluttering and blinkering  
they're whispering and twittering  
eyes positively glittering;  
and their ears are concentrating  
on listening  
and listening  
for a very special trillering and chattering and wittering,  
for they read it in the newspapers in print all straight and clear  
"Carry your binoculars  
for it's a waxwing year.  
They'll fly in from the bitterness  
of the stormy northern seas,  
they'll be carried on the breathing  
of a softer Scottish breeze.  
Our rowans and sloes and hips and haws  
and bright cotoneaster  
all taste like wine  
and save them from starvation's bleak disaster,  
and while they are partaking  
of this feast of vitamin C  
bird watchers can observe them  
from behind a bush or tree."  
I'd like to be a witness, this glorious sight to see,  
but those dratted birds -  
they always seem to hide themselves  
from me.

*Betty McKellar*



**5. Waxwing** [*Bombycilla garulus*]



1. Grey Heron [*Ardea cinerea*]

## Languid-Lily-Long-Legs

Talk about a heron  
and you'll use the jargon  
of today-  
cool  
laid-back  
never in a flap.

In the air  
he hardly seems to care  
whether he gets there or not,  
languid-lily-long-legs trailing grey  
wings languorously flailing up and  
down  
neck drawn in towards his chest  
like he's having a rest -  
he's quite unstressed.

And when he comes sloping into land  
in sedge  
at the edge of the Loch  
he'll stand  
just stand  
still as a sculpture by a garden pond  
silver in his gear  
and elegant but nonchalant.

Strange how he'll change  
When a puddock comes in range.

*Betty McKellar*

## Barn Owl

We came upon you  
in the hot haze of a June morning  
perched motionless on an old tree trunk  
at the edge of a still dark forest.

White feathers unruffled,  
you turned your head slowly  
in an ark of soft silver down.

Eyes unwinking, placid and knowing,  
unafraid and unminding  
in the presence of strangers.

I touched my child's hand;  
"Come away," I whispered,  
"this place is his kingdom,  
we are merely guests."

A meeting of two worlds  
in a mosaic of shadow and sunlight;  
four brief minutes of magic,  
forty years long in the memory.

*N.L*



**7. Barn Owl** [*Tyto alba*]



**8. Golden Oriole** [*Orioles orioles*]

## Sparrows

Here on the edge of the promenade overlooking the Bay  
a hundred small warriors, incessantly chirping, serious,  
bright eyed and brave, live out their unremarkable lives,  
in an unremarked area of our avian landscape.

Ubiquitous sparrows, drab but neat and comely  
in coats of many shades of cream and dusky brown,  
mottled, striped, patched and barred, white collar  
or mahogany neckerchief, grey cap or burnished hood.

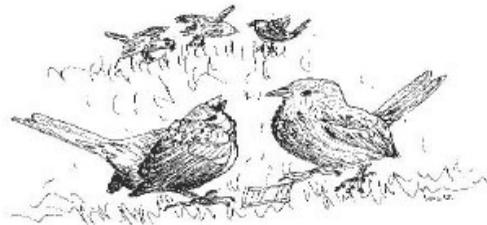
Undeterred by hoarse threat or cold unwinking eye  
they dart beneath the curved beak of a bullying gull,  
and scorn the plaintiff cry of an importunate pigeon.

Unafraid they scramble for crumbs fallen around my feet,  
stubby beaks at the ready, tiny urban street cleaners,  
but with the hearts of eagles patrolling the wilderness.

Had we but time enough to look and eyes open wide  
enough to see their shining presence in our lives, then might  
we glory in their zest for living, their unquestioning  
accepting of the primeval rhythms of birth and decay.

Sketched on a faded backcloth, lit by shadowed candle,  
these stubborn survivors in a newly alien world, invisible  
garlands of innate wisdom hung about their feathered necks,  
are our brothers and our sisters, and we should cherish them.

*N.L.*



## Turnstones

They flow past like a stream escaped from Its banks,  
along the quay, beneath the cars, around the dingy trolleys,  
a bevy of turnstones on their morning turning over of pebbles  
and seaweed, searching for insects, small crabs and molluscs  
abandoned by the cold waves of a retreating February tide.

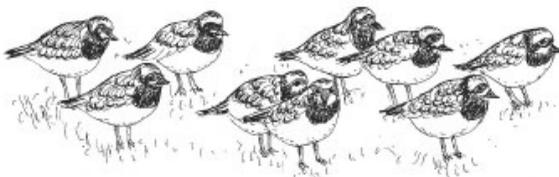
Running birds with legs like flying spokes in a fast turning wheel,  
chic birds In new breeding coats of chestnut and mottled black,  
funky birds with their spindle gaiters psychedelic orange bright,  
trusting birds brushing against the wheels of my chair, perfunctorily  
nodding neat heads to me, their equal on the grey stone quay.

They scurry down the slipway to where a solitary fisherman stands,  
black padded coat and fisherman's hat pulled low, motionless  
like some basalt Pharos guarding the entrance to the waterfront  
while the flock comes to rest at last as the thin February sun lights up  
the dark stones and tips with gold the blue dark waves.

Two thousand miles they have flown to winter on this old wharf,  
two thousand miles of vicious winds and stinging rain to reach  
our temperate shore, here until some mysterious power urges  
them back to the cold tundra to nest and cherish another brood  
while I, like a lowly suitor, wait for September and their return.

I am made humble In the face of these intrepid small travellers,  
who ride like feathery flotsam on the back of the northern gales,  
whose lives are driven neither by greed nor ambition nor fear,  
but sustained by a radiant ever turning circle of renewal,  
as brave and elegant as are these sweet joyful birds themselves.

N.L.





### **Taste a word**

"Murmurations"  
say the word and echo it  
mur-mur-a-tions  
whisper it  
let it loll and linger on your lip  
taste music  
In the feel of it.  
Words like this tell a story  
sing their own song.  
Play it along.

And in autumn when the myriad starlings  
in their far-off murmurations  
shift and drift  
and whirr  
and rift  
and close and veer  
and fall and lift  
in the wondrous one-ness  
of a cloud-kaleidoscope in shades of grey  
against the rose backdrop of a darkening day -  
delight in it ...

"Murmurations  
mur-mur-a-tions.

B. M.





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