

ANTHONY PURDY
BIRD BONES

It started with a false position of the thigh, he said;
but already all idea of starting,
all back and forth of he said she said,
all human traffic of thighs and whispers,
had fallen away,
leaving only a position and its falseness,
a disposition, perhaps of time
or words on the page or in the head,
of worlds in an oversized teacup lined
with not fur but partridge feathers,
grass, and straw, deep in the woods where
a small girl,
a girl with tailored clothes and tailored hair,
parted the long grass to lay bare
fourteen flecked and mottled objects of desire.

Object lessons, too, of sharing,
a pact of self-restraint. But someone
stole them anyway, for by Monday
they were gone, the teacup bare
but for the bird bones of flights unflown.

A LOVE GIFT

I

Was it the way they nestled snug and tight
between finger and thumb, the shape and feel
of a day return, that sowed a child's head
with dreams of hedgerow, shore, and open field?

Or was it the colours you felt as much
as saw, rich yet muted, soft as feathers
in the hand, warm as elfin bodies,
more vulnerable even than yourself?

You learned your birds from cards when you were six,
your first (unofficial) foreign language:
pictures with subtitles, archaic, obscure,
yet so startlingly themselves that not once

did you turn them over to read the text.
But if you pressed oh so gently from the back,
they would rise by magic from their frame
and stand in full relief, a child's vitrines.

Deployed across the kitchen table
they jostle for position, establish
affinities, principles of order,
the elementary syntax of your world.

The small birds you gather close, innocents
seeking shelter—yellow-hammer, linnet,
pale and unassuming choristers;
chaffinch, stonechat, the impertinent wren.

Centre stage the picturesque strike their poses:
kingfisher, sovereign, squat and glorious
on its branch above the river; kestrel,
caught *in flagrante* as it takes its prey.

While over there, in the shadow of the wings,
raven, rook, cormorant, chough pay sinister
court to razorbill, saturnine yet flash,
all teddy boy in his Whitechapel drapes.

II

You have them still, your set of Ogden's British
Birds, though the biscuit tin your father kept
them in is now a painted wooden box.

There's an album, too, in which he wrote his name,
where he lived, and the year "1925."
A generation later you followed suit.

It's what they call transmission. Your grandad
smoked the cigarettes, your dad collected the
cards, you learned your birds. Later, like any
immigrant, you learned a whole new set.

Before you die you'll pass them on perhaps.
Or bury them with the birds that fall
unasked for from the sky. Or burn them
with the elfin bodies nestled in your hand.