

MICHAEL PACEY

STERNE'S STARLING

From a passage in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*

Down at the bar, his hotel in Paris,
Sterne spots a caged bird; on a whim,
decides to free it;
the starling screams, in sharp italic,
"I can't get out, I can't get out."

Taught a few pathetic words, what
a man, in his place, imprisoned,
would shout; a phrase to melt
the sentimental heart,
"I can't get out, I can't get out."

"Never have my affections more tenderly
awakened." Stirred, beating in its cage,
his heart flies out to the bird
beaking against the bars,
"I can't get, I can't get out."

So his man buys the starling
from the barkeep for a bottle of burgundy.
Sterne takes it home in a cage
underneath a cloth in his coach;
"I can't get out, I can't get out."

But then the writer tires of it,
stuck on a bureau in the parlour
with curios and bric-a-brac
covered by an old coat;
“I can’t get out, I can’t get out.”

Sterne tells the story: “Lord A
begs the bird of me, Lord A
gives him to Lord B, whose man
sells him to Lord C’s for a shilling;
“I can’t get out, I can’t get out.”

Bedraggled through the alphabet,
the heart’s novelties wear thin,
the trick now tiresome irritant;
stuck in its cell, still it pouts,
“I can’t get out, I can’t get out.”

“I’ve nothing to add, but that from now on,
I bear this starling as the crest to my arms.”
Locked in his lineage, perched on his shield,
beak open, crying out, no doubt,
“I can’t get out, I can’t get out.”

A few years later, students at Cambridge,
about to slice open a fresh pauper,
recognize the author of *Tristram Shandy*
—grab whatever saw was handy—
then pause, staring at his withered heart.

. . . Though its not there on the page,
some say a last gasp of breath whispered,
“I can’t get out, I can’t get out.”