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winged taxonomy

Gull identification represents one of the most challenging and subjective puzzles in birding and should be approached only with patient and methodical study. A casual or impatient approach will not be rewarded.

THE SIBLEY GUIDE TO BIRDS

My brother, on every morning of our childhood, entertained me with a rendition of his previous night's dreams.

And I, his sister, adorable and adored, precocious and pretty, wearing his flannel footed pajamas sliced off at the ankles, would reward him with a title, a name, a label for each of his episodes.

But I would not stop with that. For although his dreams would seem singular and self-contained to a casual listener, there are connections and continuations. There are the winged dreams, for example.

My reader: I need to ask you a question.

Please categorize the above passage.

fiction

prose-poetry

creative nonfiction

If you have selected either of the first two categories, fiction or prose-poetry, please proceed, skipping the material that appears in the box below.

If you have selected the last category, creative nonfiction, please pay attention to the material that appears in the box below.

The brother, I must confess,
is not a fact, not a living creature, not even a composite.
The brother is a symbol.

(I did, however, once wear pajamas with the feet cut off, but I would guess that they were my own, outgrown).

My brother and I are walking along the shore, the birds flocking around us as if we are lost pieces from their puzzle. The Laughing Gulls caw across the sky, looking white and majestic, like the birds a child would draw. The Lesser Black-backed Gull, not to mention Bonaparte's Gull and the slender Herring Gull, giggle.

My brother and I are running on the beach when we see names written in the sand, just beyond the reach of the sea. They are not our names, just to clarify, but we know this writing is the product of some intelligence similar to our own. We do not think they *arose from the action of the waves, or from the interaction of the grains of sand*. No, my brother and I are smart that way. And we have, after all, written our own names here, squealing when the foam of the water erased them.

Whenever we recognize a sequence as meaningful symbols we assume it is the handiwork of some intelligent cause.

My reader: italicized lines will be correctly sourced at the conclusion of this piece. You should conclude, this is, indeed, an essay.

From an interview:

In Philip Lopate's mammoth anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, he includes a table of contents of the essays organized by "form", among them a "mosaic" form (the only entry being Richard Rodriguez's "The Late Victorians") and a form Lopate calls "Prose Poem and Reverie." Both of those two forms are similar to the form called "fiction-theory," a label I have borrowed from the Québécois lesbian feminist writer Nicole Brossard. Brossard, I know, was not using "fiction-theory" to denominate only form, and these different forms do not always have the same substance which animates Brossard's work.

Yet I want a new form, however we categorize it, that can incorporate not only the narrative (as in story) and the theoretical (as in argument/essay), but also the lyrical, as well as the personal and factual, and even the absences and interruptions where meaning sifts and shifts.

My brother asks me to name my favorite bird. I am flattered that he has asked, but flummoxed.

How can I answer when I have not seen them all?

Birds I have not seen in the wild: albatross, penguin, bluebird, Ivory-billed Woodpecker, flamingo, Elegant Trogon.

Birds I would like to see in the wild: flamingo.

He raises the wings of his eyebrows.

My brother does not believe golf courses and neighborhoods and national parks and county trails and farms and campuses and ranches and sugar cane fields are wild places.

But I have seen a Great Blue Heron, in its dark morphology, standing in a Florida yard like a lawn ornament. And I have seen an Hadedda Ibis at the entrance to the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. And I have seen a Steller's Jay on a farm in California. In Ottawa, I saw a common loon; on a trail in Australia I heard and then saw parrots; in a cane field I watched hummingbirds flit.

In what passes for the wild, I have seen eagles and ospreys and owls and egrets and flickers and tanagers.

Sparrows.

Museums, I will concede, are not wild places.

When I was a girl, I loved Winged Victory, Nike of Samothrace.

A poster of her graced my wall; a longing for her brushed my dreams.

It took me years to learn it is not a good idea to love a headless woman with no arms, even if she does have nice wings.

I once loved a woman with a tattoo of a phoenix at her tailbone.

I once loved a woman who was afraid of pigeons.

I once loved a woman who collected statues of pelicans.

I once knew a woman who raised pheasants; I could not return her love.

My brother liked to categorize my lovers. He never used their given names, but spoke of them as challenging specimens. Genus: *Craziness*.

Museums I have not seen: the Louvre.

Home of the marble sculpture, Winged Victory of Samothrace.

The Greeks want her returned. They keep a plaster cast of her in a museum in Samothraki, near where she was discovered by the French archeologist, Charles Champoiseau, around about 1863.

Whenever we recognize a sequence as meaningful symbols we assume it is the handiwork of some intelligent cause. We make that assumption even if we cannot decipher the symbols as when an archeologist discovers some ancient inscription on stone.

Museums I have seen: the Guggenheim, Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art. These are all in New York.

I have also seen museums in other cities (Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco) and other nations (Great Britain, Mexico, New Zealand/Aotearoa).

AH 324 MODERN ART IN CONTEXT
FINAL EXAMINATION

Artist: Brancusi, Constantin
Title of work: *Bird in Space*
Date of work: 1919? (check before handing in)
Nationality: Romanian
Movement: Abstract Sculpture
Mediums: Marble, Bronze (brass?)

The streamlined form is stripped of its individualized features, communicating wings and flight rather than the realist individuality of particular birds or bird species.

It is part of a series, of at least fifteen, some in marble and some in bronze.

It is one of my favorites!

headline:

“BRANCUSI’S BIRD IN SPACE SOARS TO NEW AUCTION RECORD FOR PRICE PAID FOR A MODERN SCULPTURE: \$27.45 MILLION.” (May 9, 2005).

quotation:

“The people who call my work ‘abstract’ are imbeciles; what they call ‘abstract’ is in fact the purest realism, the reality of which is not represented by external form but by the idea behind it, the essence of the work.”

legal ramifications:

Bracusi's *Bird in Space* was subject to an import tax of \$600 in 1927 because it was not considered a duty-free piece of art. Instead, the sculpture was deemed a propeller blade by U.S. Customs.

This assessment was later overturned. *Brancusi v United States*, 54 Treas. Dec. 428 (Cust. Ct. 1928).

My brother's ambition was not to be a sculptor or a poet or a professor or an archeologist. My brother wanted to discover - - - to rediscover - - - a winged creature now extinct.

With research, he should have decided on the Dusky Seaside Sparrow, last seen in Florida in 1980. Not so long ago, really.

The Ivory-billed Woodpecker would also have been an excellent choice. The controversy continues as birders tromp through the swamps of Arkansas, interrogating birds and narratives and even a video.

Or even the Great Auk, identified off Iceland in 1844, before Nike was unearthed.

But my brother insisted he could find a pterodactyl.

The poster in his bedroom was reminiscent of a dragon.

Pterodactyl means "winged fingers" in Greek.

They believe they lived much like modern shore birds.

They believe they were scavengers.

They believe the taxonomy is Order: *Pterosauria* (extinct).

They believe the first fossil was discovered by the Italian naturalist, Cosimo Collini, in 1784 in France.

There is no fossil evidence of feathers, but of hair, which is similar but not homologous to human hair.

The fossil evidence shows their bones were hollow and air-filled, like the bones of birds.

It is not known how the pterodactyl evolved flight, although the current hypothesis is that it is not similar to the manner of birds.

It is not known how the pterodactyl evolved, although the current hypothesis is that its ancestor is a bipedal, cursorial archosaur similar to *Scleromochlus*.

**Creation Information:
Your Source for Upholding the Authority of the Bible**

Vocabulary word for today:

Pterodactyls (terra-*dak*-tilz)

There is no evidence from fossils, biology, or any “science” that these flying reptiles evolved from other creatures or evolved into other creatures.

That winter I decided my brother and I would read *The World’s Greatest Poems* to improve our vocabulary. I skipped Yeats’ deaf falcon and rapist swan, Shelley’s skylark, and Keats and Eliot with their nightingales. But still we were grounded by Coleridge’s albatross and Poe’s raven and the twelfth of Stevens’ thirteen blackbirds.

He complained: Why can’t we read a simple poem about a simple seagull? An impatient approach will not be rewarded, I scolded.

There are twenty-seven species of gulls in five genera, all in the family: *Laridae*. The birds generally prefer open spaces such as beaches and lakes, and are often attracted to dumps, restaurants, and other sites of human-made concentrations of food. Identification is complicated by many factors, including hybridization. Most hybrids are intermediate between parent species, but backcrosses produce more variation, and there is continued frequent hybridization.

I would rather read something factual, he answered.

Like what?

Like “Ivory-Billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus Principalis*): Hope, and the Interfaces of Science, Conservation, and Politics,” from Volume 123, No. 1, January 2006, of *The Auk: A Quarterly Journal of Ornithology*.

Could you read it aloud?

He demurred.

My reader: by now you will have guessed.

My brother and I are Icarus.

Typical of a Greek myth to try to teach us that the way of youth should be

moderation. Too close to the sea and the spray will weigh heavier than rocks; too close to the sun and the heat will melt to glue.

Oh, we are thought boyish. Stupid, to be seduced by the blues of the sky and the ocean.

But isn't the blame our father's?

He who ripped us out of the ground of our Crete, of our mother because she was on the order of a slave.

He who used his cleverness to create a labyrinth to which we were exiled.

Why doesn't everyone name Daedalus when they speak of hubris?

Instead, they put me in their poems and their paintings and their poems about paintings (ekphrastic poetry is poetry derived commenting on a piece of art, not always a painting; from the Greek words for "telling in full").

Let me tell you this: About suffering they are always wrong.

(cf. W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts").

Consider the praying mantis.

(Correct name: *Praying mantid*; Genus: *Mantis*; Favorite species: *European mantid*, *Mantis religiosa*).

In our backyard, my brother and I hunched low in the grasses, writing our names in the dirt with bits of discarded glass, burying the hollow bones a cat had abandoned. The weeds by the cement wall harbored the thrill of small winged things we learned to distinguish: the fat bee and the buttery hornet and the glorious praying mantis, folded in imitation of a bright green stick.

After the insecticides, the praying mantis became extinct, at least in our neighborhood.

Like the ospreys and their eggs, at least in our region of the world.

We missed them, we mourned them, we yelled when they fell into the water and the sun never shone so brilliantly again.

Both a bird's wing and an insect's wing are used for flying.

Both function in the same way.

Yet the internal structure of a bird's wing is very different from that of an insect's wing.

Feathers, the poet Emily Dickinson told us, are essential to hope.

She did not write that bugs crawl in the soul keeping it warm. No, no, no.

That would not be a memorable metaphor, a lasting symbol.

Similarity in structure is homology.

Similarity in function is analogy.

To confuse them would be to fall into the sin of evolution.

Neither my brother nor I ever believed that every word of the Bible is the

literal truth, but we have both met people who have. They have told us that their God created the world in seven days and that His word is Law and is contained verbatim in Scripture, meaning the Bible.

Bible verses:

When a slave owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property.

(Exodus 21:20-21).

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(I Corinthians 6:9-10).

Exegesis:

"Homosexual offenders" does seem a little odd. But its origin is Greek.

Arsenokoitai from the Greek words "male" and "beds."

And don't forget the more famous passages from the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 23:17 (There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel);

Leviticus 20:13 (If a man lies with a man as those who lie with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads).

Slaves, of course, does not really mean slaves. More like servants. Or students.

As one scholar notes, trials at which the "central issue became the determination of a person's racial identity were a regular occurrence in the Southern county courts in the nineteenth century." Ariela Gross, *Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South*, Yale Law Journal Vol. 108, No.1 (1998). In her exhaustive study of United States court cases, Professor Gross explores how juries considered evidence of physical markers, including inspection of skin color, hair color and texture, and feet, as well as documented ancestry and present social interactions and habits.

Select the false statement:

- Audubon, the naturalist, murdered the birds so that he could paint them.
- Muriel Rukeyser, the poet, authored “Waiting for Icarus.”
- In South Africa, during apartheid, there were 102 designations of race.
- In South Africa, post-apartheid, sexual orientation is protected in the Constitution.

Apartheid is from the Afrikaans word for “apartness.”

Afrikaans is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa, third in popularity after Zulu and Xhosa. It is derived from the Dutch, and was the language of the Dutch settlers and indentured servants in South Africa. More than half of the people who speak Afrikaans as their primary language are people of color.

There were only four designations of race made by South Africa’s Population Registration Act of 1950 in South Africa: White, Colored, Bantu, and Other. By 1966, there were still one hundred fifty thousand borderline cases of racial identification remaining to be adjudicated.

quote:

“I cannot accept that there will be borderline cases for all time. If that is so, then the position in reality is so complicated that this legislation is unworkable.”

Minister of the Interior of South Africa, 15 September 1966.

My brother and I used to imagine the children we would have, combining our DNA which was already a recombination, as much as anyone else’s, but more so. There were laws, even then, that prohibited such a reality.

Yet we were ignorant, innocent, living in a prelapsarian glory.

Until we started to name our children.

Choosing birds: Martin, Robin, Phoebe, Raven, Sparrow, Jay.

Never Albatross. Never Puffin, Warbler, Grackle, Dowitcher, Nuthatch, Peafowl, Titmouse, Cuckoo.

We argued about Merlin, a small falcon, which can be mistaken for the Purple Martin, which is not really purple in the lilac, lavender, iris, hyacinth, pansy, violet manner of purple, but more like raptor-dark. (A careful observation of flight patterns should eliminate misidentifications.)

Here is an important fact about a myth:

After Icarus plunged to his death, Daedalus was mentoring his nephew, Perdix.

Perdix was such a smart and inventive lad that Daedalus became jealous.

Daedalus did what jealous men do to their young rivals; he pushed him off a tower of great height.

This should make you suspicious.

Athena, who favors ingenuity, and who goes by the name Minerva, the owl, saw the boy falling and interceded, changing him into a bird: the partridge.

You'll recall that the partridge does not nest in trees or soar in flight, but prefers the low hedge.

Whenever we recognize a sequence as meaningful symbols we assume it is the handiwork of some intelligent cause. We make that assumption even if we cannot decipher the symbols as when an archeologist discovers some ancient inscription on stone. If science is based upon experience, then science tells us the message encoded in DNA must have originated from an intelligent cause.

The call of the Hhadeda Ibis, *Bostrychia hagedash*, of South Africa, is ha-de-da or har-de-dar or la-de-da, which is like an inebriated man taunting his lover or a father laughing at his child falling or a lover spinning around in her new pajamas.

litigation:

In *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, 400 F. Supp. 2d 707 (M.D. Pa. 2005), the court sustained a constitutional challenge to a school district policy. The policy required teachers to read a statement that Darwin's theory of evolution was a theory, and that intelligent design was a different theory. The policy also required teachers to make available the book *Of Pandas and People*. The court ruled intelligent design is not scientific but religious in nature.

readers take note:

All italicized passages above are quotes from the textbook *Of Pandas and People*, ISBN 0-914513-40-0, second edition, on page 7.

I swam above the turtles in the azure sea and they flew through the water, their legs like wings, stroking with such grace it stunned me.

Bird is to
wing
as fish is to
_____.

We think there is a correct answer, even if we do not know it; even if we argue with the one that is provided.

My brother, unsaved by Athena, became a character in a form of writing that does not have characters, only allusions and citations and facts and the occasional wing.

I have a list of unanswered questions.
I can only hope you do too.

I do have a favorite bird: the Laughing Gull.

Generally gulls are not identifiable by their colorings and markings, presenting a puzzle to even the most methodical students.

I have not been a methodical student.

Generally gulls are scavengers, adapting from life at the edge of the sea eating fresh fish and mollusks, to life over parking lots and landfills, eating garbage.

I always recognize that laughter: my brother's laughter, my laughter, our laughter.

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