

## Cramping their style

Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights* (Jonathan Cape, 2020)

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Kingfishers, like peregrines, terns and kites, have two foveas, the little dimples in the retina that give the clearest vision. They use one for seeing clearly at distance, and the other for seeing clearly up close. It has been suggested that this structure also allows them to register very slow movements, movements too slow for a human eye. Their eyes allow them to situate themselves in relation to the projects and trajectories of the tiniest insects, to toggle coolly between the wide view from a high rise office block and the flutter of a pigeon down below, to locate the small in the vast, relate the fast to the slow.

To attend to nature in an age of anthropogenic climate change we would ideally have the perceptual and attentive faculties of a kingfisher and the imaginations to match. That we don't is the starting point of much of the more imaginative contemporary writing about nature. Take Katherine Rundell's pieces on animals in the *London Review of Books*, or Daisy Hildyard's *The Second Body* (Fitzcarraldo, 2017). The "second body" of Hildyard's title is proposed as a term describing the physical effects that we, as bodies, have on a global scale: larger patterns of causality we are caught up in without properly comprehending. Charles Foster's *Being a Beast* (Profile, 2016), from which I learnt about bifoveal birds, is a more literal attempt to recreate in human form the lives of specific animals: otters, deer, swifts. The problem, as Foster's book demonstrates, is not just that we cannot see or imagine things on the scale that swifts, or kingfishers, can. It is also that we cannot imagine what it is to be a swift, or a kingfisher, or an otter. Animals are the most obvious 'other' with whom we share a world. As such they are good practice, or a test case, for imagining the lives of nearer others, for understanding ourselves as selves at all.

Helen Macdonald is celebrated for a kind of nature writing which attends to the unavoidable fact that a view of nature is not only a human's eye view, but the view of a particular human, and for her willingness to take account of the ways in which that particularity frames or even obscures the view. She did this most famously in *H is for Hawk* (Jonathan Cape, 2014), a memoir of training a goshawk after her father's sudden death, which also serves as a biography of sorts of T.H. White. She has since written a number of essays, primarily for the *New York Times Magazine*, focusing on particular animals or encounters—falcons nesting in cities; the frustrations of birdwatching on Wicken Fen; a solar eclipse—and moving outwards to larger questions about

our interactions with what we think of as natural. *Vesper Flights*, published last month, collects and extends these essays.

At her best, Macdonald's ability to weave together observations and reflections at such varied scales around a single focal animal or idea is breathtaking. The essays in *Vesper Flights* touch on questions of social class, migration, nationalism, sexuality, Brexit, war, religious experience, death, and alternative modes of community. But they also describe with detail and patience the plumage and movements of golden orioles and waxwings, the shape and smell of mushrooms, and the vastness of the flocks of cranes which break their long journey to feed and roost in north-eastern Hungary. In the last case, the scale is the point:

The switch in recognition is eerie: I go from seeing rushing patterns in the sky to the realisation that they are made of thousands of beating hearts and eyes... The magic of the flocks is this simple switch between geometry and family.

“As I stand there”, Macdonald continues, “my mind turns to human matters.” In each of the essays, there is an additional level of scale, that of her own presuppositions and immediate responses to what she observes. These often transform as the essay progresses. Over the course of the book, this habit of reflecting and re-reflecting begins to seem self-indulgent. But the deftness with which Macdonald turns personal revelation into a kind of moral plot-twist is remarkable. In a piece on deer, for instance, she begins on a grassy bridge above the M25 and with a discussion of British kitsch after the financial crash of 2008, and ends on YouTube, upset by the inability of commenters under a compilation of DVCs (deer-vehicle collisions) to see deer as meaningfully alive in themselves. Macdonald then realises that this upset is anger at herself for having, all along, imposed on deer a particular function—as mysterious, almost magical agents, surprise encounters with which bring one greater self-knowledge.

Here and throughout the collection, thoughtfulness is not merely a mode of writing but a structuring principle. The introduction imagines the book as a cabinet of curiosities, whose appeal lay not just in the oddness of the objects, but in how “their disparate contents spoke to one another of their similarities and differences in form”. The plot-twists form part of this process, and no matter how close they may come to navel-gazing, the impetus they give the essays meant I looked forward to them as one might the epiphanies of a murder mystery.

Macdonald's constructive charity with regard to her instinctive judgements is extended to others. Without obscuring her own values, she is curious about and fair to those who think differently, whether British nationalists or egg collectors or people who buy bird boxes decorated with slogans and bright colours. She is also clear on how the prejudices of middle-class England are given a moral sheen. The essay on bird fairs is exemplary in this respect. Macdonald explores in a few pages the class divides in bird-keeping, and the

way certain forms of interaction and expressions of ownership are stigmatised as cruel and others presented as ethical, where a class-conditioned sense of taste and an aversion to obvious artifice are as important as any objective measures of cruelty.

On the website lithub.com, Macdonald has given a list of “things she tells herself when writing about nature”—that is, advice for good nature writing—which is worth reading as a statement of the project of *Vesper Flights*. The seventh is, “it’s usually about you”, and the eighth is “but sometimes it’s not”. The sixth deals with the politics of nature writing: she considers herself bad at polemic, but feels it is increasingly necessary. *Vesper Flights* is more obviously ‘political’, in many senses, than *H is for Hawk*. There is an essay on migraines that is also an essay on climate change and apocalyptic thinking. The title essay, on the “vesper flights” of swifts, is a “fable of community”. These twice daily ascents of several thousand feet, thought to be communal orientation and weather forecasting manoeuvres, can teach us something about the need for moral and political philosophy (she does not put it so crudely). To this degree, Macdonald is explicit about what we should learn from the encounters she describes, but the large part of the political work of her writing is in providing models for attention and commitment. “If you can instil wonderment and complication, you can forge in others attachments to the world”, she explains in the list. It is fashionable to value “complication”, or, as she elsewhere puts it, “messiness”, but this can mean, in the end, shirking judgment. The model of the vesper flights—that, as against the “thick and complicated” lower levels at which swifts eat, mate, etc., there are those higher ones where they go to judge—helpfully shows the two as part of an integrated communal life.

A ground bass of the collection is the mistaken alignment of the natural and the national: farmers shooting ‘continental’ skylarks; Bewick’s swans, arrived from Soviet Siberia, given the names ‘Jane Eyre’ and ‘Victoria’; birds in their twice-yearly movements flying in the face of human borders. The swerve, at these points, to migration in a human sense occasionally has the tone of a reflex piety; as always, the more granular the description, the more the reader is given pause. The essay on swan upping first published in 2017 was, at the time, one of the few worthwhile pieces of writing on Brexit, and in this context it is no less rewarding. Its central concerns—animals as repositories for human meaning; the necessity of taking one’s own incomprehension in hand; the care of animals being a form of loving craft—ring differently here, now that they are echoed in surrounding essays. Its argument, in favour of finding common ground through the universal experience of particularity, could well be the argument of the book as a whole.

This goes, of course, for animals, but also for people. Macdonald is especially interested in those who feel somehow at odds with human society: T.H. White in *H is for Hawk*; the astrobiologist Nathalie Cabrol; the former prisoners of war central to post-war British ornithology; the spy, naturalist and cuckoo-keeper Maxwell Knight; and, indeed, herself, an “odd, solitary child” who

learnt about relating to others from birds before she ever applied these lessons to people. She takes the biographer's approach, whether with people, species or landscapes. She always wants to know what happened before, what will happen after, how any given moment or movement fits into the larger pattern of the history of its species or of the world, the subject always crystallising nonetheless back into one distinct life. In a brief but rich essay on walking through woods in winter, she talks of the almost unimaginable patience that attending to nature demands, which has something of the non-teleological presence of prayer or 'mindfulness', and suggests that an attention to nature, while initially seeming an attention to the present moment, is also an attention to history. To look closely at a wood, she says, is to be shown "the last five hours, the last five days, the last five centuries, all at once". The essay begins with animals "swearing" at her as her walk disturbs them: the asymmetric burden of our relations with animals is not just one of habitat depredation, of wilful persecution or unwitting displacement. Even in quite everyday ways we cramp their style.

And we do so too in persistently refusing to see animals as they are, interpreting them rather than knowing them. *Vesper Flights* gives accounts of animals—deer and boars—which Macdonald had previously been content to 'read', but was then forced to desire to understand. There is a fine line between the heroic futility of seeking to understand creatures whose inner lives are not in the least accessible to us, and the cop-out of making them stand in for their own unknowability, folded back into the human work of abstraction. Macdonald, in an essay called 'The Numinous Ordinary', talks of encounters with nature as "occasions of grace". It might be helpful to think of our relation to animals as, in a structural sense, similar to our relation to God: what they are is 'not us'. Their alienness defines them, and defines us. In thinking about what concepts like 'home' and 'family' might mean to an animal, Macdonald is knowingly committing a category error, at least on her terms. But she also knows that there is no way out of the particularities of being human, or of the fact that thought itself is provincial. And yet the austerity of the alternative—suppressing all anthropomorphic urges, all eagerness to share in their lives—leads often not to humility but to indifference. We cannot know what it is like to be an animal, Macdonald says. "But the imagining? The attempt? That is a good and important thing."