

A poetry of flight for the here and now

Cynthia Troup interviews poet A. Frances Johnson

CT Poet and critic David McCooey has described *The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street* as ‘stunning’ and ‘visionary’, adding, ‘no-one, in the long history of the Australian “bird poem”, has written about birds like this.’ When did you realise that you had the core of a collection that focused on the imagery of the bird?

AFJ Well, sporadically over a period of five or six years I wrote different kinds of poems about the natural world, and the unnatural world. Many first saw the light in various publications before being gathered into *The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street*. There are poems interested in the origins of certain kinds of birds. There are bird poems that address Darwinian approaches to the survival of the fittest. There are also poems about machines that emulate the form of birds, for example the drone colonies in ‘Microaviary’, which opens the book. So I had been writing about past, present, and future representations of birds—be they actual birds or constructed birds. I decided to put them together, and organised the book into three sections: ‘Part 1: Wind-up Past’, ‘Part 2: Wind-up Present’, and ‘Part 3: Wind-up Future’. The collection’s Murakami-esque title helped me to differentiate the more futuristic, speculative accounts of birds from more traditional reflections on the bird as creature.

CT One of the collection’s two epigraphs is by Haruki Murakami from his novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*: ‘Why not write a poem about the wind-up bird? The idea struck me but the first line wouldn’t come’.

AFJ Lucky for me Murakami’s first line didn’t arrive! His question threw down the gauntlet to me. Writing about the natural world has been a task of Romantic poems. In many ways it’s no longer possible to write a poem about the natural world with impunity. So the creatures in my book are all creatures of the ‘post-pastoral’ age; these are birds that do not simply come from romanticised ideas of pure nature. Perhaps that’s why ‘the first line wouldn’t come’ to Murakami, because he’s a novelist of the contemporary condition, which is a condition of fragmentation, claustrophobia, deeply vexed relations between nature and culture. These days even the binary separation of nature from culture is under threat. I love the epigraph by Murakami, because it helped me to frame my book in ways that speak to the difficulty of writing the natural world in the present.

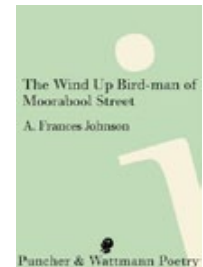
CT The preceding epigraph in the book comes from the poem ‘Extinct Birds’ by Judith Wright: ‘the poet vanished, in the vanished forest, / among his brightly tinted extinct birds’. I noticed, straight away, that Wright gives ‘the poet’ the masculine possessive pronoun. Yet these lines offer a wonderful compressed image for Wright’s own approach to nature. In a manner so prescient for its time, her poetry was concerned with degradation, extinction, and the challenges of saving nature from the eroding myths of its romanticisation by white Australians.

AFJ Judith Wright’s contribution can’t be underestimated—you put it beautifully, Cynthia. Eco-critically and postcolonially she was certainly ahead of her time, using her poetry to seize the day and comment on the destruction of nature. Also she worked extensively with the indigenous poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal [formerly known as Kath Walker] in fashioning an intercultural relationship with indigenous writers. I think Wright is a heroine of Australian letters. Nonetheless in those two lines she humbly situates herself as a poet who’s becoming extinct with her own bright birds. Her poems are her bright birds, but the epigraph also includes a lovely ethnographic reference: it reminds me of the nineteenth century ethnographers’ practice of tinting the corpses of birds in museum collections, so that the bodies would retain some sort of visual reality, even when the species had become extinct. There’s melancholy in the inevitable fact that the poet will fade away with the bright birds; also a cautionary note, to be careful not to let the birds become extinct. Of course this has become a hypercritical message for us now. The final poem in ‘Wind-up Future’ wonders about ‘The Last Bird’.

The ‘Bird’s Eye View’

CT In ‘The Last Bird’, also the poem ‘The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street’, and many of the poems comprising ‘Wind-up Present’, the centre part of the book, you closely identify with aspects of the bird as an embodied being. I thought of that very conventionalised phrase, ‘taking the bird’s eye view’, which is often used to rationalise some kind of omission, and to argue the value of humans seeking to objectify from a distance. Whereas in ‘The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street’, and also, for instance, in the poem about the cockatoo titled ‘Sulphur-crested’, you write about the bird’s eye—but with a sustained empathy towards the small blinking eye of the bird, in all its vulnerability.

AFJ There are two kinds of poems there: the first is the hybrid kind of ‘wind-up birdman’, half bird-like, almost machine-like, which owes something to the tradition of Frankenstein. Working with that imagery helps me to avoid romanticising a natural view of a creature. It seems a more contemporary thing to do, even though Mary Shelley was showing us the way back in the 1830s and 40s. The other poems you mention, Cynthia, where I try to get into the skin of the creature—they may well be failed poems. That’s alright, I’m letting myself off the hook there: traditionally poets have tried to get into the skin of an animal even as, paradoxically, they take an anthropomorphic view ... think of Weldon Kees and Ted Hughes. Hughes’ ‘The Thought Fox’ is a famous metafictional poem as well; it describes being in the skin of the fox in order to comment on the difficulty of placing a thought onto the page. As an exercise, I give my creative writing students the task of getting into the skin of an animal, but in so doing I also like to declare that there can only be a failed attempt—how can we avoid anthropomorphising? Perhaps sometimes, hopefully, there can be a kind of beauty in the unavoidable failures of our human language.



CT 'Sulphur-crested' might be interpreted as a critical comment on bird taxonomy and nomenclature. Towards the end of the poem there are the lines:

These birds' ancestral hurt is to know themselves
devoid of poetry in our eyes
Eyes that are just as small and mean and blank as theirs
in relation to body scale.

These birds see humans looking 'up close', but the poem also takes a step back and sees humans in terms of our appropriative traditions of classifying nature.

AFJ Yes, 'Sulphur-crested' finishes with that human distance; the human viewpoint is reclaimed as something inevitable, and something which can have tragic consequences. The naming of a bird cannot necessarily sum up its bird-ness, its creature-ness. Always as writers we have that limitation to work with.

Birds and Existential Anxiety

CT Through the part of the collection devoted to 'Wind-up Present', perhaps through the collection overall, there's a noticeable relationship between the imagery of birds and the theme of death, more particularly the death of loved ones. The first poem in 'Wind-up Present', called 'The Will of Birds', evokes the poignant image of the grown woman wandering upstairs to her lawyer's office: 'I climb the grey stone stairs / dragging my life behind me in a box / the size of something / in which I once interred a corella / as a pious child'. The box is at once coffin and shoe box; there's so much tenderness there for the dead bird, and for the child, which acknowledges also the adult's difficulty in trying to address the future reality of her own death.

AFJ Well, thank you; maybe that poem is more old-fashioned than it seems, Cynthia. Classically art and literature have long associated the bird with transcendence, with things metaphysical, particularly through the Judeo-Christian trajectory of imagery. As a lapsed Catholic, I'm probably influenced by that tradition on some subterranean level; images of human mortality do pebble this collection, but the birds in that sense are no longer the 'Holy Spirit', they are just exquisite threatened creatures.

There has been a lot of criticism of Australian poets writing too many bird poems, and I'm sure that's fair enough. In his foreword to *The Best Australian Poems 2010* [Melbourne: Black Inc.], Robert Adamson has also said very romantically that birds are the closest things we have to angels. Perhaps all of us in the Western tradition continue to be at least a bit influenced by the bird as a metaphor for transcendence, therefore as a spiritual image, and so we can link it to our own anxieties about human existence and mortality.

CT In connection with PEN as a worldwide association, and particularly the work of the PEN International Writers in Prison Committee (WIPC), the imagery of the bird's flight, or song, is frequently invoked as one of freedom. I remember the lines 'The world is a river / and the atmosphere is a bird's song /' written by exiled Arab Yemeni poet Mansur Rajih, for example, who was imprisoned for fifteen years before being released in 1998. Those lines are from the poem 'And Yet They Sing', a paean to the mysteries and subtleties of 'the world' of nature, and, simultaneously, to those of 'the world' of words, the flowing of language, freedom of speech—

AFJ —freedom of speech is inseparable from any matter of human survival, existential anxiety.

Birds, Surveillance Culture, and the Ghazal

CT This brings me to ask you about the cluster of poems titled 'Microaviary', and also some of your latest poems that do much more than resist those time-honoured associations between the bird and freedom; these poems begin from the computerised appropriation of aspects of birdlife for the purposes of spying, violence, and war ...

AFJ Yes, the sequence 'Microaviary' is made up of four poems: 'Hummingbird Drone'; 'Hatchery'; 'Raven Drone', and 'Humming Bird versus Raven'. All muse in some way on existing drone mechanisms, addressing surveillance culture, and the sinister imitation of the form of the bird by military industrial complexes. The metaphors of the bird and bird life have always been inherent to aeronautical engineering—even to kite flying, age-old dreams of the aeroplane. However, these poems arise from indignation: I'm greatly concerned about the cavalier use of drone technology, which has already, in the twenty-second century, taken so many lives in an ad hoc fashion.

As most people now know, a drone is an 'unmanned aerial vehicle' capable of very fine surveillance. Drones are also capable of dropping bombs, maiming, killing. They're operated remotely, which abstracts the question of responsibility for any violence inflicted; they make possible unchecked warfare, so politically they've become highly charged technologies. I am increasingly driven by the politics of representation around drone imagery—the poems of 'Microaviary' were the last poems to be written for *The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street*, and have been the springboard for my next collection.

A more recent poem, for instance, was inspired by an Australian news item that I came across in April this year: the Coalition asserted that, once in government, it would spend \$1.5 million on seven new drones for the purposes of monitoring asylum-seeker boats. The title of the poem is 'Interdiction', after the military interdiction of boats filled with asylum seekers.



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CT The form of 'Interdiction' is borrowed from the ghazal, which connects the poem to a global literary heritage.

AFJ Absolutely. The ghazal is a beautiful, ancient Arabic form of poetry, usually comprising of five couplets or more, and usually referencing love and loss. Many have compared the ghazal to the sonnet form, though this isn't really an apt comparison, because customarily the couplets in a ghazal stand alone; they're not obliged to 'make sense' from couplet to couplet. The form allows for discontinuity in the imagery, while most of the couplets allude to an overarching theme. The ghazal has proliferated throughout the Arab world, Pakistan, and India. Nowadays it's often a form for song-writing. Arab poets working in the United States introduced the ghazal to American poets—the late Adrienne Rich speculated with the form to produce her versions of the 'bastard ghazal', so-called because often her adherence to the metrical couplet form is not strict. Other American poets, English-speaking poets, have tried to compose within a purer form: W. S. Merwin is a good example.

In 'Interdiction' I have utterly failed to keep to the form. Actually the poem seems to dissolve back into old-fashioned free verse. But I'm interested in the ghazal metaphorically and politically, because it's a form that has been positively introduced to Western literature, while in other respects the West has been busily engaged in bombing Arab-speaking countries, or assisting in the demolition of Arab states in covert or overt ways. Consequently the 'bastard ghazal' has different kinds of resonances in the here and now.

For 'Interdiction' I wanted to write a slightly more surreal 'bastard ghazal' about a boat full of people, and I chose this approach because I didn't ever feel that I had the right to get into the people's skin. As a result, the poem has a sense of distance. It's highly poetic, hopefully, without being too indulgent. Essentially, it takes the drone's point of view: in the same way that I might try to anthropomorphise a bird, always mindful of the failure of that project, in this poem I try to get into the metal bits of the drone, to see what it sees, and show that as absurd. Here's an example:

'Overall, the sighing cloud
is less trained, less orderly than the bird would like.
A ship or a city cannot be in the sky.
A horizon, it knows, in the way
of earnest technology,
bisects shapes into different origins.
A boat cannot easily be in the sky.'

This kind of writing is an attempt to show the program of the bird's eye, its severity, and its incapacity to see in any complex way ... A risky strategy, I suppose, but I didn't feel qualified to write from the sufferer's point of view, and by sufferer I mean asylum seekers, who are not received warmly at our shores, or treated very compassionately.

CT A. Frances, thank you so much for including this more recent poem in our discussion, and for your permission to print 'Interdiction' alongside this interview piece—indeed, many thanks for this interview.

AFJ Thankyou, Cynthia. Poetry has a small audience—but in Australia a burgeoning audience. I teach a lot of younger poets, and they're arriving fully formed at twenty-one years old, whereas at that age I couldn't write a thing! There's no doubt that these are exciting times for poetry.

A. Frances Johnson lives on the Bellarine Peninsula. Her poetry has appeared in *Motherlode: Australian Women's Poetry 1986–2008*, and *Best Australian Poems* (2009, 2010, 2011). The chapbook titled *The Pallbearer's Garden* was published in 2008 (Geelong, Whitmore Press), and her 2012 collection *The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street* (Sydney, Puncher and Wattmann) received the 2012 Michel Wesley Wright Prize. In 2013 she was shortlisted for the *Australian Book Review* Peter Porter Poetry Prize, the Newcastle Poetry Prize, and the inaugural Australian Catholic University Prize for Literature. In this interview, she speaks with writer and PEN Melbourne Committee member Cynthia Troup about *The Wind-up Birdman of Moorabool Street*, the heritage of the bird poem, and the risks of investigating the drone's eye view.

The full text of A. Frances Johnson's 'Microaviary' poems can now be found as part of a recent special issue of *Cordite Poetry Review*, adapted by graphic novelist Bruce Mutard: see <http://cordite.org.au/poetry/pumpkin/mutard-johnson/>

Mansur Rajih can be viewed reciting his poem 'And Yet They Sing' at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHDJVsnXB48> [uploaded mid-2013]; a collection of his poetry in English translation can be read at: <http://www.icorn.org/articles.php?var=219>

Rajih is amongst the fifty writers represented in the PEN anthology edited by Lucy Popsescu and Carole Seymour-Jones, *Writers Under Siege: Voices of Freedom from Around the World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), a collection published to mark the eighty-fifth anniversary of the founding of English PEN.

Interdiction

The Raven Drone hovers for forty-two hours
against blue: our blue, your blue, their blue.
At the 33rd hour, a drift of cloud appears.
It resembles a turreted city or an ancient barque.
Both the cloud and the bird drone have limited time,
but each shows great endurance
within their allotted time.
The bird has been taught to loiter,
to train its compound eye
upon anything shiplike,
anything unship-shape,
such as poetry, waving hands,
forms of special pleading.

Overall, the sighing cloud
is less trained, less orderly than the bird would like.
A ship or a city cannot be in the sky.
A horizon, it knows, in the way
of earnest technology,
bisects shapes into different origins.
A boat cannot easily be in the sky.
A cloud of people may not be set
in water or sky indefinitely.
At some point the bird or the cloud,
like the boat or the city, will cease to apply.
There is not much time; a petrol-soaked rag
binds the motor and its constituent
parts to the present.

When the interdiction crews arrive,
they look in all the wrong places
and have brought the wrong tools
to look for a village
that cannot float.
Their one-syllable words sound like 'no':
Tow, tow, tow, tow, tow, tow, tow.
In English, you can be towed
and drowned at the same time.
When conditions are right, bird and boat
can be set going again; horizon immaterial,
cloud sails and cloth words
no longer heavy with water.
For forty-two hours they dream
of landings, touchdowns, streets, cities with
gardens, windows with glass, a bough in the breeze,
—hope's old Cartesian delusion.

A. Frances Johnson
2013

*In April 2013, the Coalition asserted that, once in government, it would spend \$1.5 million on seven new drones to surveil asylum-seeker boats. In late July both the Australian Labor Party and the Coalition spoke of towing boats back to Indonesia. I mention this as the word 'tow' features in this poem. Variations on this poem were recently submitted to the inaugural 457 Prize in Poetry