

## The Air Gap

*'...it was only after watching and thinking about the flight of birds... that I began to achieve in my dreams some of the same bird-like flights...'*

*Mary Arnold-Foster, 1921*

As a child I had a recurring dream. I would stand on the edge of our paved courtyard and then jump off. In the fluid manner of dreamscapes, the steps that led down to the garden became a cliff edge beneath my feet and a vast misty valley spread into the distance below. I was aware of being at a great height, soaring weightless above the land with infinite space all around me. I jumped without fear, completely certain of my ability to fly.

*Sankofa*, a word and symbol from the Ghanaian Twi language, embodies the idea of looking back to the past to retrieve something that will enrich the present. I wonder if we could reach back into our dreams, into states of natural flight, what dynamic lightness, what responsiveness and synergy with our surroundings might we also embody? The *Adinkra* symbol of *Sankofa*, is a bird with feet facing forward, and head looking behind. In the more detailed images, it is an egg that *Sankofa* is looking back to.

In Western behavioural studies it has been documented that children's drawings, from around the age of five, commonly depict the sky as a strip across the top of the page, the earth another strip below. The French psychologist Jean Piaget categorises this as the 'schematic' or 'preoperational' stage along a progression of reasoning. My children's drawings, tacked onto the kitchen wall, mark this stage. The white space in the middle of the page is a space that behavioural researchers call the 'air gap.' Behavioural scientists are interested in

cognitive development and perception of dimensional space, but I'm interested in the air gap as a liminal space, a playground of its own.

Installed in my kitchen gallery is a conceptual exhibition of child-world art. Drawings of lollipop trees and x-ray people with stick limbs float above platforms of green grass. The sky is calm and blue, rolled across the top of the page like a scribbly ribbon. In the air gap, birds fly. At this point in development, before the 'dawning of realism' that begins around the age of nine, people and birds fly in the same liminal space, unbound by horizons.

The mythology of birds as creators, carriers of important cargo (from Hindu God's to European babies) and messengers from other worlds is widely known and explored through art and literature. Of the English poetic canon alone, Aldous Huxley famously said it would diminish by half, should birds be removed. What's interesting is that it confirms the human capacity for understanding through metaphor. We are hardwired to understand meaning by connecting the similarities between two ideas. The word *phero* (to carry) and *meta* (over, across) is an apparatus to transport our thinking across intellectual borders, across boundaries of knowledge. It's a delightful poetry that a bird can serve as a metaphorical symbol. A winged body that travels between realms of earth and air to carry our thinking through the veil, into new places, from our own cages to freedom.

As far back as I can remember both my parents were avid bird watchers. My father was the kind with binoculars, telephoto lens and well-thumbed bird guide. My mother wrote bird poems and collected feathers for her hair. Now in their separate lives, they still send me photos of magpies, blue wrens, black cockatoos, a ubiquity of neighbourhood sparrows. It's

an avian language that connects our family across state borders. A little message on the wing, a nudge about the feathery folk we share the streets with.

I've read about incarcerated people and their connection to birds in prisons. It's a familiar metaphor for freedom but beautifully evoked by death row inmate Jarvis Jay Masters. In an encounter in the prison yard, Masters intervened to save a seagull about to be harmed by a fellow inmate. When questioned why he should care he answered, 'that bird has my wings.' It became the title of his memoir, but its significance is the recognition of a shared Self. A synergy we would do well to recall as bird numbers plummet around the globe as a result of human development. Masters writes that his liberation from a violent life was not a change in himself but rather a return to who he'd always been; 'to the young child that knew his life mattered, that he could make a difference in the world, and that he was born to fly.' When I read this, I'm reminded of the *Sankofa* bird. Masters feet are facing forward, towards the uncertainty of a state execution, but he's looking back to the egg of his childhood. It's *Sankofa* wisdom that brings the knowledge of his past, his child-world when he was certain he could fly, into the present.

*Certain*, from the old French word meaning fixed or resolved, shares a root with the Latin verb *krei*: to sieve. To be certain, is to sift through meaning before settling. Developmentally, in the Piagetian 'pre-realism' schema, child logic isn't processed this way. As in our dream states we don't question the logic we know in our adult waking lives. It is an interesting lingual twist that *krei* is also the root for the Greek *krisis*: a turning point or judgement. Certainty and crisis are forever at play, like the tension between thunder and lightning, sound foretelling light.

I have not been incarcerated, but I have spent some time on death row. The space between certainty and crisis—in the storm before the electricity flashes—is a familiar space. The air gap can also be vacuous, and it's hard to fly when you've lost your feathers.

The last time I had a flying dream it was fast and out of control. I was heavily sedated in a hospital bed but adrenalin and fear spiked awareness in this state. For 12 weeks my window faced an adjacent concrete wall with only a small sliver of sky visible above. I had read the medical research about increased recovery in patients with vistas of nature. I worried as my health declined. When I was moved to the intensive care unit there was a large window but I wasn't awake to see it. My memory of this time is broken but a recurring nightmare came as I drifted in and out of consciousness. I was flying across an infinite desert, racing low to the ground over sharp rocks and sand, my shadow chasing beneath. I wanted to stop, or to at least rest, but I had no control over my body. I was speeding above the surface of the earth in a relentless motion unable to rise and join the birds calmly wheeling above.

When I emerged from the ICU, I had no certainty of survival. For a blood cancer so rare, my only chance at living hinged on a transplant of donated bone marrow. Like Masters, I spent time going back to my childhood, searching through the weeds and harvesting memories from when I last felt self-confidence, when my mother's words were the framework of my child-world. Each memory I cracked open in the fluorescent light of the oncology ward brought forward a power, a potion to the logic of medical statistics which were not in my favour. Here I collected the eggs of memory and began to play in the space between certainty and crisis. To form a horizon in the air gap.

The artist Tacita Dean developed an obsession with the horizon. Or more precisely, of capturing the elusive ‘green ray’ as it flashes for an instant at sunset. In the research on children’s drawings, the central horizon begins to form around the ages of nine to twelve, mapping the cognitive development from ‘concrete operational’ into ‘formal operational’ when child-world reasoning shifts into the scientific. In this schema, the separate realms of above and below come together. It’s the time that the air gap closes, and the loss of liminal space heralds the cycle of certainty and crisis as we begin to sift for meaning. Anecdotally it appears to be the same age when most of us stop flying in our dreams.

For Tacita Dean, the pursuit of the horizon gives agency to the divide itself, a caesura marked by a celestial phenomenon, a flash of green light. For Dean it signifies hope. Not in the cliché of the unknown but because ‘the artist is only able to attempt to capture what she “could not imagine” by placing her belief in...her own ability to truly look into the horizon.’

My children drew pictures for me in hospital. My mother taped them to the walls among the photos. I unfold these paper treasures from home now, afraid of the pain I might find. My daughter drew an owl with a rainbow overhead, the bird as big as the rainbow arching above it. An entire spectrum of colour bridges the air gap in a festival of hope.

In the Kulin Nations, the Eagle Ancestor Spirit, *Bundjil*, created the land and people. On *Wadawurrung* Country where I live, he is the sacred totem. In the southern night sky, *Bundjil* is the brightest star in the *Aquila* constellation and beside him are *Gunanwarra*, his black swan wife and her spirit. These stars are evidence to me that birds carry poetry across knowledge systems. *Aquila* is Latin for ‘flying eagle’ and the constellation was also recognised as an eagle by the Sumerians around 4000 BCE and the Ancient Greeks, who

believed the eagle carried the thunderbolts of Zeus. In Hindu tradition, it is *Garuda*, the eagle god. The great eagle, like the star, is constant, carrying knowledge as light between sky and earth.

It is with a critical self-awareness that I evoke Wadawurrung story and lean into Ghanaian language for meaning. I make no attempt to make these my own, but knowledge seeks knowledge and avian connections provide synergies between world views. From our dreams to drawings, in the air gap to the horizon, these states in human development enable a scientific but also poetic learning of how we create knowledge. In the process of sifting through reductive symbolism or adopted mysticisms it's possible to expand our shared experiences, to avoid the crises that escalate because of our disassociations.

In hospital, my mother and my sister kept vigil, never once leaving me alone. At a critical point in the ICU, my body accepted the donor marrow and stem cells began to repopulate. Having withdrawn into my core, I found my horizon and the spaces between certainty and crisis collided into an ability to truly imagine living. I recall the sensation of lifting up in flight, far above the parched earth.

It is a long and slow recovery. My parents take turns looking after their grandchildren. If the kids feel upset, they take them bird watching with my dad's big binoculars, collecting feathers for the mantlepiece or to wear in their hair.

I learn to walk again with a child's hand in each of mine. They are excellent bird spotters and show me all I've missed as we walk around the bay. Tern. Egret. Pacific gull. Our pelican friend they call Percy, perched on the old pier where the sky meets the sea. I am well, but I

am lighter than before. My bones are thinned and hollow from the treatment—but they are birdlike—weightless, and I am certain I can fly.