

BIRDS OF PREY (CREATIVE AND CRITICAL PIECE)

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Abstract

'Birds of Prey' is a longform poem that experiments with time-space compression and hybridisation; its chronology and sense of space remain as chaotic as its form, which borders in many parts with prose. Though the time and place of the poem fluctuates, all the events of the poem are linked through the recurring imagery of birds. Intertextually drawing from song lyrics, the poem explores the act of finding personal meaning (quite possibly where there is none) in art. These lyrics are used to head sections of the poem.

The accompanying essay discusses the rigorous editing that the poem underwent: from a dense block of prose, to a longform poem that takes full advantage of white space to lend phrases and lines more impact. It also explains the influences of existing works, both prose and poetry, and how they informed 'Birds of Prey.'

BIRDS OF PREY (CREATIVE PIECE)

BIRDS OF PREY

Mum's ill, and there's a kestrel on the roof. She's
not sure what it is, and the falcon
is tearing
the feathers from a pigeon it's killed. She's

put up the Christmas tree early:
a red flag
that I know took at least three
hours to raise. The kestrel is looking at me, looking
straight down the lenses of my binoculars because
it knows where my eyes are.
It knows where to slash to get
to the tastiest organs.
If only I were a pigeon.

i.

"I hear the drizzle of the rain [...] tapping down your roof and walls."

Kathy's Song is playing, and it is also raining, and I don't care for coincidences or signs. Two songs later, the needle chokes to a halt.

I can't stomach side two. I'm due
home in two days.
I don't care for coincidences or signs.

ii.

"Where have you been, my blue-eyed son?"

I close my laptop lid, leave my room, and I'm in a pub where there's a dickhead tax on all the drinks. I'm watching a play. The kestrel has eaten the pigeon's gizzards. The play is okay, I'm clapping politely, but it moves me to tears when a character reveals a dead mother. I try to phone my mother. The kestrel is gone. She does not pick up the phone because it's ten at night and she's much more responsible than her son.

I don't care for coincidences or signs.

iii.

"I wanna tell her that I love her a lot, but I've gotta get a belly full of wine."

I'm drinking lager on a fence and it feels novel. I show up to film society; the film has finished. People think I'm fun. The kestrel has gone, and a crow is picking at the pigeon carcass. I'm in the night club below my building, the one I've filed noise complaints about. I'm

overthinking.
mum is fine.

I see people I know. They think I'm fun. I kiss
a girl. She thinks I'm fun. I have sex
with a girl, there's a sticker
on her arse cheek. It says,

"peel me."
I peel it,

and I am not
having fun.

The crow has had its fill and it is gone.

iv.

“Waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting.”

It’s three maybe four, in the
afternoon. The sun is setting. There’s
a glorious orange square projected
onto the wall in my room, and I’m in
bed. I intercept the sunset with my
hand and watch my fingers’ shadow
dance on the wall. I’m having fun.
The sun sets, and the square is gone.

A screech
on the roof. The clumsy form of a herring gull is picking
at the dead pigeon. I’ve lost weight,
gained weight,
lost it. I’m tired, awake. I’m

having grilled cheese and black coffee
for breakfast, but
I’ve quit caffeine and dairy. I’m cooking for one, I’m cooking
for two, I’m cooking for one, I’m cooking
a week’s worth of food
for the different person I’ll be each day.

nulla.

I do not believe in coincidences or signs.

The pigeon’s corpse is gone. I’m selfish
like my mother. I’m selfless
like my mother. I’ve stretched
myself thin and I feel as though I’m everywhere. I want
to sleep, perchance to not
have to talk to anyone, perchance
to not hurt anyone.
I’m ill. I’ve been taxed. There’s a stain
where the pigeon was. My money and my health
are behind a wall of bureaucracy I’m struggling to climb,
and I wish I was a kid again.

There's a tempest in my guts, in my chest,
my gizzards! A kestrel would be
a winged mercy killing. My room is spinning in tandem
with nebulae and galaxies
outside the window I can't see. I make myself throw up,
because I don't want to feel like this, not
while I'm alone.
I'm singing songs I can't remember: songs
I'm told my voice suits. Then I'm running
down a corridor,
into a door,
splitting open the bridge of my nose
like the abdomen of a pigeon.
Any one of these doors could hide a bird of prey.
I get preyed upon when I sing The Doors
because I sing them well, but I don't want to be hunted
by these who like what's on the surface; I want
to be known again. I want to be locked in a room
on an odyssey of sweat and secrets
with someone who wants to know me.

v.

"It's not like I'm falling in love, I just want you to do me no good."

Mum's wrapping presents weeks earlier than usual, wrapping them in red.

It's New Year's Eve, I don't know which one, and I'm in a back yard in Liverpool
with a girl I used to love. We're watching other people's fireworks, and I think that I'll love her forever.
Months later,
we're done

"Why are you doing this to me?"
I'm doing this to *us*.

It's a warm night, and I'm bollock-naked in a charming flat. I catch my reflection
in the closed windows. I'm drinking water, because I don't want to feel like this, not while I'm
in company.

"I'm fine doing whatever you want to do."
People are too good to me.

I'm in a darker flat, overlooking the back of a bookshop. I'm ending things because I'm not sure if I can
love again
so soon.

“I could have loved you.”
I know you think you could.

vi.

“But if you try sometimes you might find you get what you need.”

It’s summer again, and I don’t know what I want. It’s September,
and I don’t know what I want.

The rain has washed away all traces of the kill, and I do
not know what I want.

I want my mum to be fine; for the x-ray to show nothing
but healthy gizzards.

I want her to be unhindered by kestrels, and crows, and gulls.
I want someone to look at me like I’m amazing

but accept that I’m not.
I want these fireworks to keep going; the needle

to stop skipping; for my eyes to adjust to the dark, so I can see
this person’s face; for it to stay light out, so windows

don’t become mirrors;
to stop loving at arm’s length.

I want the kestrel to go hungry.

Coincidences and Signs

- i. *Kathy’s Song*. 1966. Paul Simon.
- ii. *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall*. 1976. Bob Dylan.
- iii. *Her Majesty*. 1969. John Lennon, Paul McCartney.
- iv. *Waiting for The Sun*. 1968. Jim Morrison.
- v. *No.1 Party Anthem*. 2013. Alex Turner.
- vi. *You Can’t Always Get What You Want*. 1969. Keith Richards, Mick Jagger.

BIRDS OF PREY (CRITICAL ESSAY)

'BIRDS OF PREY' began as a prose piece written in a frenzy after receiving some news I found distressing. After helpful feedback within the creative writing group, I decided I was going to, through vicious editing, chisel this block of prose into a longform poem: a poem that would share borders with prose, experiment with time and space, and use existing lines from songs that seemed relevant to subjects raised in the poem.

With regards to my use of lyrical quotations as headings for discernible sections of my poem; each quotation was to relate in some way to the topic of each section. My first draft only included a mention of *Kathy's Song* (1966) by Simon and Garfunkel: "Kathy's song is playing, and it is also raining, and I don't care for coincidences or signs." By my final draft, I had eight sections, six of which were headed by a line or excerpt from a song. Thus, the section in which *Kathy's Song* is mentioned is headed by:

i.

"I hear the drizzle of the rain [...] tapping down your roof and walls"

This decision to include more intertextuality in the form of relevant, existing lyrics (rather than just mentioning the one text) came at the recommendation of a lecturer. Intertextuality can be defined as an 'environment of texts in which an author works and from which he or she draws' (Ward 2013, 162). Though the use of intertextuality suggests a link between an artist's work and that which they reference, my use of song lyrics is intended to highlight people's willingness to draw connections and find meaning where

there is none, myself included. Though my work cites many others that are seemingly connected to the events of the poem's narrative, my intention was for these connections to be nothing more than the narrator's inclusion of these lyrics, which seemingly they find meaningful, for the sake of highlighting their own hypocrisy; I wanted my narrator to be unreliable, not necessarily a liar, but uncertain within their own beliefs regarding "coincidences and signs." The narrator states that they "do not care for coincidences or signs," yet they cling to them throughout the poem, drawing parallels between their own life, and the songs they love. This hypocrisy and uncertainty reflects the chaotic state they are in.

Ward also writes that 'simulation has imploded into private life to such an extent that it has become impossible to distinguish between "natural" and "manufactured" identities and desires' (Ward 2003, 167). Despite him writing this with intertextuality in mind, I believe that the general idea is represented in my work; in section iii., the narrator states "people think I'm fun [...] they think I'm fun [...] she thinks I'm fun [...] I am not having fun" (this is spread across five stanzas). In the first stanza of section iv. (regarding a square-shaped projection of sunlight on their wall) the narrator finally admits "I'm having fun." This repetition of different iterations of "having fun" shows that the way the narrator is perceived by others is contradictory to their true self (most comfortable and happy on their own enjoying a sunset from their bedroom, rather than being surrounded by people) and how any "fun" others see in them is illusion. This indistinguishability between manufactured and natural identity (Ward 2003, 167) is also represented in the final stanza of section iv.:

I'm cooking for one, I'm cooking

for two, I'm cooking for one, I'm cooking
a week's worth of food
for the different person I'll be each day.

Within my poem, I experimented heavily with 'time-space compression' (Smith 271). Through the first-person narration, the chaotic narrative moves 'quickly from one moment or scenario to another (Smith 2005, 271). Sections iii. and v. demonstrate this use of time-space compression best. In section iii., the narrator's point of view moves fluidly between "a fence," a "society," and a "night club." In section v., it moves between "a back yard in Liverpool," "a charming flat," and "a darker flat, overlooking the back of a bookshop." These jumps between setting and chronology reflect the narrator's chaotic state of mind. The specificity of place is employed to anchor the events of the narrative, if only briefly before the next change of setting.

My inspiration for time-space compression came from an extract of the novel *Genre* (1997) by John Kinsella. In the extract, the protagonist's mind wanders from his own flat, to his wife, the student in flat five, women preparing for a night out in a different flat, the steroid hungry guy in flat six and his girlfriend, and the woman whose child has been removed by the Department and her boyfriend, the addict (Kinsella). All of this is achieved within one dense paragraph. Though my first draft was similarly dense, it was suggested by a lecturer that I experiment more with white space in order for my lyrical language to have more impact and significance. Another difference between my work and Kinsella's is that he employs time-space compression to show a mind that wanders, and I employed it to show a mind that is scattered and panicked.

Creating the all-important white space in my poem came as a result of relentless redrafting. I think the best example of redrafting within my poem is section v., which demonstrates the hybridisation of my piece from pure prose, towards poetry. It also shows a recommended change from the dialogue-heavy section of the first draft. The original, dialogue-heavy section went as follows:

“I might end up hating you.”
I already do.
“Thank you for seeing me.”
Half concern, half guilty obligation. I hate seeing people in pain.
“I don’t want to be anywhere else.”
Then I doubt your taste in place and company.
“I’m fine doing whatever you want to do.”
People are too good to me.
“You’re interesting. I think I can love you.”
No, I just pretend to be. I thought I could love you too.
“Why are you doing this to me?”
I’m doing this to us.

I was told by a lecturer that this section didn’t feel as charged as the rest of the piece. To this end, I decided to take the three pieces of dialogue that I deemed the most impactful, and incorporate them into the following extract from the first draft:

Mum’s wrapping presents weeks earlier than usual, wrapping them in red. It’s New Year’s Eve, I don’t know which one, and I’m in a back yard in Liverpool with a girl I used to love. We’re watching other people’s fireworks, and I think that I’ll love her forever. Months later, we’re done. We were done months before, years maybe. Months later, it’s a warm night, and I’m bollock-naked in a charming flat,

staring at my reflection in the closed windows. I'm drinking water, because I don't want to feel like this, not while I'm in company.

The result of this omission of unnecessary dialogue, splicing of necessary dialogue, and creation of white space is as follows:

Mum's wrapping presents weeks earlier than usual, wrapping them in red.

It's New Year's Eve, I don't know which one, and I'm in a back yard in Liverpool with a girl I used to love. We're watching other people's fireworks, and I think that I'll love her forever. Months later,
we're done

"Why are you doing this to me?"

I'm doing this to us.

It's a warm night, and I'm bollock-naked in a charming flat. I catch my reflection in the closed windows. I'm drinking water, because I don't want to feel like this, not while I'm in company.

"I'm fine doing whatever you want to do."

People are too good to me.

I'm in a darker flat, overlooking the back of a bookshop. I'm ending things because I'm not sure if I can love again
so soon.

"I could have loved you."

I know you think you could.

Each change in location has a corresponding piece of dialogue within that location. I believe this gives the dialogue more significance; firstly, because it is scarcer, and secondly, because it is anchored within time and space, rather than being lost in a dull list of other utterances.

When structuring my poem, I opted for separating it into clear sections headed by lyrical excerpts. Each section was structured differently. For example, the title section is structured quite traditionally for free verse, whereas sections i., iii., iv. and v are more experimental with spacing and shape. This chapter-like approach to poetry can be found also in Sarah Howe's titular poem, *Loop of Jade* (2015). This poem uses asterisks to signify the end of one section and the start of another (Howe). Howe's poem also borders on prose in some sections but, whereas each of my sections is structured differently, Howe's begin by alternating between two structures, before becoming more experimental as the poem progresses.

Section iv. of my poem is shaped like a square, much like the "glorious orange square" of sunlight the narrator describes. The decision to shape this stanza this way was inspired in part by the free verse poem, *Jack of Hearts* (2017) by Abigail Parry. Her poem, which depicts the playing card, Jack of Hearts as a character, is shaped like an anatomical heart, complete with atriums and ventricles (Parry). Though her shape is much more complex than mine, the simple square I opted for serves its purpose perfectly.

Though I drafted each section to be unique in structure, it was through language that I linked them all together. These 'recurring ideas/images which bind the piece together' (Smith 270) (ideas and images of the ill mother as well as the site of the dead pigeon and

the birds that feed on it), cement each section as belonging to the same piece of writing, rather than eight short poems joined together to make a long form poem.

The inclusion of the bird imagery, and the events surrounding the hawk-slain pigeon are based on my seeing these events over the course of a day from my window. This happened months ago, but I spread the event throughout the poem to expand its time-space compression, as well as warping the chronology of other events.

Ward writes that ‘whatever original idea an author might have, certain conditions must be in place in order for these ideas to happen’ (2003, 162). As well as previously mentioned texts, I would consider the works of Ted Hughes to be one of the “conditions” that were necessary for my own idea to happen. I’ve always enjoyed Hughes’s poetry that is centred on nature and creatures. Take, for example, his description of a chipmunk in ‘The Chipmunk’: ‘A rippling, bobbling wood-elf’ (Hughes 1998, 62). I also enjoy his description of the mythical protagonist, Crow, in ‘Examination at the Womb Door’: ‘scrawny little feet [...] bristly scorched-looking face [...] still-working lungs [...] utility coat of muscles [...] unspeakable guts [...] questionable brains (Hughes 1972, 5). Though Hughes’s inclusion of animal imagery delves into far greater description than mine, it is my appreciation of his nature-related works that made me so enthused to include bird imagery within my own work.

I was also told that my piece is comparable to Max Porter’s *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015). Admittedly, I didn’t read Porter’s novel until I’d finished my first draft of *Birds of Prey*. Thus, his work didn’t have any direct impact upon mine until the redrafting stage,

when I tried to mix more prose-like parts of my work with more poetic conventions, such as in section ii. and section v. (which can be found in full earlier in this essay). Examples of this hybridisation of prose and poetry can be found in Porter's novel, where an otherwise standard passage of prose ends with:

The wings.

The Love.

Bird-like.

Again. I beg everything again.

(2015, 36)

It was hybridisation such as this which inspired me to use spacing more experimentally (such as in my aforementioned section v.).

My first draft was born from directionless panic and self-reflection, but, through rigorous redrafting, I was able to produce a longform, hybridised poem that draws inspiration from a wealth of other texts. I set out to experiment with time, space (both on the page and in the poem's narrative), and structure, and I have demonstrated my success in all of these. One thing I regret not giving more time to was the description of the birds in my poem. Though I was inspired by Hughes, and later, Porter, I did not adopt the lyrical description given to their crows. However, I think I can be forgiven for my minimalist approach to animal description; where Hughes and Porter utilise the crow as an antagonistic character, my inclusion of birds serves to distract the narrator and embody their anxieties. To this end, a focus on my birds' actions, as opposed to their appearances, is understandable, although I

don't believe that a greater dedication to the description of my kestrel, crow and gull would have detracted from the narrative of my poem.

Concerning my writing as a whole, I believe that *Birds of Prey* is probably one of my more ambitious pieces, and I must admit, I'm proud of it. The methods I employed whilst writing it, and the texts I used to support this essay, I believe, will have a lasting impact on my writing in the future.

References

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