

Mousehole Bird Poems

(Found and others poems by Heidi-Marie Stephenson, inspired by Dorothy Yglesias' *The Cry of a Bird* and *In Answer to the Cry*)

[Mousehole Wild Bird Hospital Facebook Page](#)

Seedling

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Mousehole Bird Hospital: an acrostic

Seedling

We came every year
for our holidays:
to MOUSEHOLE
(a fishing village.)
Near the extreme West tip
of Cornwall.

The more we saw,
the more we loved.
The rounded hills,
the curving line
of the harbour -
sheltering
from the power
of the sea.

Its kind,
hospitable people.
The old, established
village residents:
gulls and jackdaws,
bathing at low tide,
preening by the stream.

The waders
and Rock Pipits
("shore larks they.")
The Storm Petrels
half flying, half running
along the heaving
wakes.

The inaccessible coves.
Kittiwakes crowding
the cliff faces,
the driving sea
below.

The deep sense
of *privilege*
in being so close
to these wild
beings.

The cries
of the circling
birds.

The Cry

"The cry, as of a falling bird,
will come like the echo of truth
to the climber of heights."

(Lines written by Pog, while she was still at school)

Forests of wild mustard
swaying in the breeze
against the backdrop
of the Cornish-blue sea.

The harbour full
of pilchard boats
of herring gulls circling.
They called.
We lost our hearts.

How do things begin?
For us it was
a spontaneous response
to the cry for help
from a wounded bird.
What we had to do.

A conscious desire
to atone perhaps
for the great sorrow
the great cruelty
of the past ages
of mankind.

We had to try
to somehow
put the *KIND*
back in again.

Genesis

It all began
with a drainpipe
and a jackdaw.

A bird
had shattered
his wing.

The drainpipe
was his only
refuge.

He was brought
to us.

My sister, Pog
set aside her paintbrushes
(which would now be used
for feeding cod liver oil) -
and I stopped
growing flowers.

"Drainpipe Jacko"
became our first
patient patient
at the Wild Birds'
Hospital and Sanctuary
at Mousehole.

The Burned Gull

A rubbish dump
BURNING!

A hungry, young,
herring gull...
teeters frightened,
smoke-bewildered,
on the smouldering heap.

A spontaneous act
of courage
is performed
by a young girl
from Lostwithiel.

She rushes in,
her shoes *melting*,
her soles **scorched**.

She doesn't stop
until she reaches
the bird
with blistered feet,
with feathers **burned**.

They take the bus
to Mousehole.

Passion

We called him Passion
because of his RAGE
when he was first
in our hands.

A great bird threshing
through inky water,
flapping violently -
his white breast
tarred.

At the sea edge we waited
for him to land,
badly oiled,
a desperate
Guillemot.

We were brutal.
We had to stop him
cleaning off
the deadly oil,
which if he swallowed,
would be fatal.

He lashed out
FURIOUS
with beak
and wings.
We called him
"Passion."

A month later,
down at Cracker Rocks,
he reclaimed
the surf and sky:
streamlined,
perfect.

Owlets

The nestlings arrive
from mid-May onwards.
Tiny bundles
of milky fluff.
Big eyes gaze out
at the bewildering world.

They fall from church towers,
or are stolen from nests.
Hollow trees get felled,
with nests within them.
Parents are shot,
or poisoned;
eating prey
contaminated
with pesticides.

They are good friends
to Man.
They live on
the small creatures
who ruin
the farmers' crops.

Barn owls
protect the stores,
from mice
and other rodents.

Swift encounter

For a few seconds
the swift lies there
warm and still,
except for the beating
of her heart.

Then, from inside
her frail body,
grows a vibration
of unbelievable
power.

Her wings
start to flutter,
but nothing matches
the speed
of this hidden
dynamo

Unfailingly
she tells us
that all is well.

The reason
she has been brought
is that once
a swift lands
on the ground
she becomes
"grounded."

She cannot rise
into the air again
without assistance.

The spread
of her wings is great
in comparison
with the length
of her body
and her short legs
so good
at clinging
onto walls,
and other steep
nesting sites,
that even
an uninjured swift
can only crawl
helplessly.

Our 'brief encounter' swift
is rested for an hour or so
and is then taken up
to the meadows
behind the hospital.

Here, we toss her
gently into the air.
Her wings open,
ready to catch
the wind,
and with rapid beats
they lift her
higher and higher
as she swoops
and circles
in joyous
freedom.

Birds of a feather (heart haikus)

May blossoms, full bloom
Fledglings fall from lofty nests
Cupped by caring hands

Mother killed on wing
Air alive with hungry sounds
Gaping mouths are fed

Great tit found by road
No tail or wing feathers grown
Clings to paintbrush, sucks

Nerve-case seagull brought
Attacked by stray 'tiger' cat
Girl gives both raw egg

Hung up by one leg
Farmer shot jackdaw "scarecrow"
Still alive, *cut down!*

Baby razorbill
Floating out to sea forlorn
Fisherman has heart

Visitor Book: 1928-1959

Cormorant, Corncrake, Crossbill, Crow
Guillemot, Godwit, Goldcrest, Gannet
Herring gull, Hawkfinch, Heron, Hen
Puffin, Plover, Pigeon, Pipit...

Razorbill, Robin, Redstart, Rook
Sandpiper, Shearwater, Shelduck, Shag
Whitethroat, Whinchat, Woodcock, Wren
Turnstone, Twite, Tit and Tern...

Dunlin, Diver, Duck and Dove
Kingfisher, Kestrel, Kittiwake, Knot
Blackbird, Bullfinch, Blackcap, Bittern
Moorhen, Mallard, Magpie, Martin...

Little owl, Little auk, Lapwing, Linnet
Black-backed, Black-tailed
Rose-coloured, Golden
Common, Great, Lesser, Barn...

Great Northern, Red-throated, Arctic, Manx
Blue, Green, White, Grey,
Pied, Tawny, Red, Yellow,
Wood, Meadow, Tree, Hedge

Purple, Ringed, Racing...
Rock, Storm, Hammered.

Nightjar! Fieldfare!
Water-rail! *Swallow*...

House.

The Torrey Canyon disaster

"Black specks were coming in across the waves, some thrashing the water like torpedoes, others drifting in with the rising tide. They were the first *Torrey Canyon* birds I saw, desperately beating their way to safety before the advancing oil ...You could see them flopping and struggling in a host of places around our shores, trying to walk and extricate themselves from the coagulation of oil and sand, their plumage plastered with it, helpless, silent, bewildered, innocent." (Dorothy Yglesias in *In Answer to the Cry*)

"There is a poor guillemot down there, beneath that granite boulder, on the blackened sand; and as the filthy tide comes in and starts to wash its dead, unfeeling body to and fro, it brings the pathos of our own sin and shame more closely home to us." (Dorothy Yglesias in *In Answer to the Cry*)

March 14th, 1967 –
the *spring*
of the summer
of LOVE.

The "supertanker"
SS Torrey Canyon,
owned by the Barracuda
Tanker Corporation,
(chartered by BP)
strikes Pollard's Rock
on Seven Stones Reef -
between Cornwall
and the Isles of Scilly.

She spills
thirty-six million
gallons of crude oil
hot from the Persian Gulf,
into pristine waters:
the UK's worst spill,
in living history.

An avoidable,
navigation "error,"
a "confusion"
between "master"
and "helmsman;"
a desire to save
half an hour.
(The problem
not rectified
in time.)

The ship
on automatic steering
hurtles at full speed
(at seventeen knots)
in broad day light.

The same date of approach
when large numbers
of sea birds
come up from the South
along old,
migration
routes.

Warning rockets
are fired
from the lightship.
But the captain
orders
"Full steam astern!"

There is a loud grinding
along the length
of her 1000ft keel
then the first stream
of *Torrey Canyon's*
120,000 tons of oil
pour out.
Into the sea.

The Satanic Ark
belches
her bile-black venom
and begins to break up.

Detergent is deployed
on an unprecedented scale.

The British cabinet
instructs Cudrose
to set *fire*
to the doom vessel.

Forty-two 1000lb bombs
are dropped from sky.
After two days of war,
with the high tides,
the high seas,
she finally
sinks.

15,000 sea birds die.
Unaccountable,
("huge numbers") more,
are never found.

Millions of marine beings
perish –
because of the *TOXICITY*
made worse
by the “solvent-emulsifiers.”
(10,000 tons
of chemical poison
float *on top of*
the deathly oil.)

120 miles
of Cornish coast
lies contaminated.
(A further 50 miles,
off Brittany.)

The British government
is “strongly criticized”
for its man-handling
of the unfortunate,
international
“incident.”

David Bellamy,
(man of plants)
steps forward, *cries out*,
publishes a report
on this *PLANETARY*
disaster.

And Mousehole
opens its doors.

Black Death

A black death
of oil
was *cast*
upon the sea.

The ship
needed
to be saved!

(The captain
not yet ready
to abandon.)

A merciless,
man-made mess
was *pumped*.

The gale roared.
The surf boiled.
The waves swept
desperately.

A black tide.
A black Friday.

Overwhelming
the helpless.

Operation Bird Wash

Offers of help
came flooding in.
Mousehole rallied.
School boys collected
rags, towels, sponges,
boxes, straw, sheets.
Washing stations
were set up
all over the village.

The Penzance Playgoers
took consignments of birds
to clean and dry.
A nearby garage
was commandeered.
Recuperation homes
were found in Slimbridge,
Bristol, Taunton.

Letters arrived
with prayers, thanks, donations.
From America, Canada,
South Africa, Australia.
We had never
seen so much money
in all our lives.
Someone sent a box -
of golden daffodils.

Many said our efforts
were wasted;
that the birds should all
have been "destroyed"
on the beaches.

Others understood.
Compassion committed them
to preserving fellow lives,
to trying to make
some sort of amends.

Eight thousand victims
passed through our doors
in that one, manic month.

Aftermath

Thin and weak,
their feet and beaks
badly blistered -
having swum the gauntlet
of the oil,
only to be met
with the detergents
sprayed on
all the beaches.

Without warning
they would go
into convulsions -
screaming out
their agony.
Brain-damaged;
lungs broken.

There could be
only one answer
to that.

We helped them over
as humanely as we could -
using an injection.
Death was quick.

In the mornings,
we always found
a number had died
during the night.
We put their limp bodies
into sacks.

Our most haunting
memories
were when these sacks
were dragged
down the hospital steps:
too heavy
to be carried.

All that suffering;
all that dreadful
bumping.

The Kindness of Strangers

"A great northern diver was sent by the St Ives police in a wooden crate with labels all over it, 'Beware of the Beak.'...We christened him *The Czar*...He got us so well trained...His beak was sharp as a rapier but never once did he turn it on us. He actually rested his beak on our hands as we cleaned him, seeming to understand our purpose." (Dorothy Yglesias in *The Cry of a Bird*)

"The relationship between us is always one of mutual friendship. We never make pets of the birds, their intelligence demands something more than that. It is a rare privilege to be given their confidence and trust; but it demands a sensitive awareness on the part of the human being." (Dorothy Yglesias in *The Cry of a Bird*)

You were endlessly patient.
You observed, you adapted your responses.
You mended broken wings with Elastoplast.
You cleaned the badly oiled with lard and Lux.
You fed them raw egg and halibut oil - on a paintbrush.
You fetched seaweed and cuttlefish from the rocks.
You tied sacks around your feet to stop you slipping.
You worked into the night for the nocturnal owls.
You shared your rooms with guillemots and razorbills.
You let the recovering use your own bath.
You put them in front of the kitchen fire.
You fixed a bough across the beams,
and made nests in waste-paper baskets, which you lined.
You gathered rain water in buckets for the thirsty.
You helped a starving hen with an injured leg;
you bought her freedom from the farmer with 5 precious shillings.
You released Mallards on water protected from the shooters.
You cycled the seven miles to Sennen.

You never gave up.

Even though wings were completely severed at the shoulder (the airmens' regret)
Even though there were food shortages during the war years.
Even though there were "grim prospects ahead."
Even though desperate gulls carried off your early potatoes.
Even though a starving gannet gave you a bracelet of blood.
Even though a recovering crow made smash-and-grab raids on your few possessions.
Even though many birds lost energy and appetite.
Even though the lice left their cooling bodies - and swarmed.
Even though your hearts broke and broke.

All God's children

"This first instance of a wild bird's trust was a most wonderful experience. 'Wonder' was the right word. We had never dreamt of finding such a beautiful way into another existence...each bird intensely individual as all birds are." (Dorothy Yglesias in *The Cry of a Bird*)

"He loved the voice of Gracie Fields." (Dorothy on Ben, the Jackdaw)

You enlarged
human understanding
of bird life
bird character -
beyond physical "habits"
beyond "instinct"
and "behaviour."

You told
of their individuality
of their emotions
of their minds
of their memories.
You saw them think
...and feel.

You bore witness.
You gave the world
a deeper understanding -
beyond the cast-iron
"scientific validity"
of "experts."

Beyond the cold observations
of studied ornithologists,
statistical records,
and PhD papers -
beyond the banished heart
the generally accepted.

You understood
bird sensitivities.
You knew.
You *recognized*.
You told the truth.
You gave voice
You saw value.

And above all,
you loved.

Mousehole Bird Hospital: an acrostic

Merciful Mousehole

Offering

Unfortunate

Seabirds, songbirds

Emergency

Healthcare help

Obliging with

LOVE

Endless

Benevolence

Injury respite

Rudimentaries

Devotion

HOPE

Operating a place of

SOS salvation

Peace

Infinite patience

Time to heal

Assistance and aid to...

Lift off again