

Colin Simms

GOSHAWK POEMS

SAMPLER

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Pages 11–39 of this book were previously published as a separate volume, *Goshawk Lives* (London: Form Books, 1995).

The essay by Eric Mottram which serves as a postscript to this volume originally appeared as a Preface to the above-mentioned Form Books edition of *Goshawk Lives* in 1995, and is reprinted here by permission of King's College, London, for the Mottram literary estate.

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These verses are from goshawk observations since 1955; my first experiences of the bird in the wild overseas— anecdotes of camp life, falconers, birds and probable escaped or released individually, few enough anyway, are considered largely irrelevant in this naturalist's view. Few publications, bar the 1995 *Goshawk Lives* booklet, so well and generously prepared by Harry Gilonis' Form Books, have been used; most of this edition is new. I have used almost entirely only notes made at the time, in now well over 500 notepads, and diaries and letters; memory illumines only a narrow broken trail.

Dates appended are those of original notes and/or earlier versions.

Colin Simms
January, 2017

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the goshawk's regime, here in England where it re-established itself
thinly for the first time in generations, in spring, and summer dispersal...
if there are any birds about in winter they are concerned with survival—
hunting without being so conspicuous they'd be vulnerable.

Gos low-rowing ride, brushing tip-dew scatter
leaving-swinging lightest bright-tip laterals
After her, nothing. Dawn, all birdsong before
stilled after her passing.
Sun-behind-blind, at the turn she climbed into it
higher as it warmed her head, higher still more red
gos dressing till the blue was back around her
her gray grew out of grey,
day graduated for her height.
Where there in her way the stray soft black wing threaded
orbiting unconsciously, or it had been too fast for prey
into the sleeping swift her talons thudded
reflexes eclipsed both ellipsings.

for TH (based on an incident remembered, last summer)

* * *

we were talking of the strain after the racing has gone by
in the same palpable silence the gos diddles me again:
tucked-in her style, closing-wing goshawk-hurtle
rockets the blind-side of trees lined, ignoring the ride
yet at the nest-tree with a flourish is feet-first somehow
foot first onto its ledge, never a wobble but ruffled-brow
from the braking, not a feather anywhere else seems disturbed
stillness in the sharpness of the needles we haven't heard, hide
rocked by the wind, but not her; she's over the finishing line
Hartle or Hailwood in concentration, or unconcerned
her acceleration in onto the nest-edge defeating the eye

*Oliver's Mount, Scarborough
(from '60s diaries)*

* * *

Gos 1.10.81

Fellow, the eyes stream on recognition
after the hollerin scream
its stream-sense planing its hollow in below-plateau
eye yellow and yellowing
reaming out hate pile-driver riving
eyass-excited, Cort following
season accessions reason below barrens earth opens hard
access of gos and secession from reasonableness human hesitation on land
excess is aggression, any essence is all-in-eye yet the bird watches
not either of us, but movement, as if the rattlesnake's vertical pupil
makes no sense of us, and we do not even know what he sees
or what we see or name as seen. Beneath the surface of a great nerve
only partially warms, like permafrost, even in sight we don't understand
manned in each other's space none of us in the gos's course.

* * *

Liddesdale's Goshawk is ghostly in this dawn mist over the Liddel
so that you'd see Viking features, the character of the northern race
the features of Linnaeus' Scandinavian bird, but it is ghostly silence
that contributes to such deception as much as our excitement as it does,
and as much as quiet makes the crepuscular Barn Owl whiter still
than it is, if you see it in daylight. Mist destroys distance, fills
space and instils a strangeness or fear so that shapes loom and rear
and seem bigger, and a moving shape and a silent movement chills.
After raindark days, there will be sunlight and warmth this mist says now
though we can't see it yet, already the felltops are standing in the clear
and the land spoken by the bird, soon spreads a new sweat from the brow.

(August 1984)

* * *

Hunters in the Wood

This morning the woodpigeons are not down on the mast
where the snow has not even drifted in scatters under the beeches
some morning fox may have dissuaded, but then and first I hear the gun
a rabbit is swung, underside pure as the snow cups in the bramble and fern
onto the shoulder the grip, at risk only otherwise crows and magpies
no burst of birds ahead of these coming, nothing to say they come, upwind
not even a scolding wren's thought-wedge of panic spinned. They have spurned
questing but relaxed at eye, at foot, deadwinter brackens scarcely disturbed
no more than the wind, against it and sound quartering on quarry, in unison
spare unhasty threading a heading an echelon, only one exposed at a time
at the rabbit-lawns, each his part of the noose moving but waiting-on in motion
Ken and his son, gripped for response, loose in readiness each with his gun
always away from the other and from me, man and boy, father and son brothers
they pass this little house, wall, riding the squall at anchor on it part of it
but parting, they go by my smoke and I poke my nose out afterwards to see
shadow of a hawk in the sun under the beeches, burnt powder and woodsmoke choke its grit
notwithstanding the report of gun disinterested goshits on in the beech crown above
its pearl, to shift only a shuffle after they have passed and at mettle-some
ruffle of mantling, *that's* why the stoggles hadn't come down to a mast-breakfast—
a few notes of red, beadlets of blood on still leaves, the pestering
robin beginning to shake, those long moments after, its breast.

Low Woodhead, February 1988

* * *

*Ther was the tyraunt with his fethres donne
And greye, I mean the goshawk, that doth pyne
To briddes for his outrageous ravyne.'*

Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowles*, II. 334-6

as commanding their wave action the gos wove the woodedge's laterals
against the wind and out of the sun upon where the fieldfares sheltered
the dawn had been without calm and they hadn't got up off the roostground
into the northeast wind he came and down its grey ribbon out of the sun
its level yellow-rose split the horizon behind him along the fells level
I had been surprised not to find them down on, if they had not been in the trees.
But the gyr had already shifted them from the trees, for the coup coming now
and I could hear and feel something of their fears even of their panic how
the bird into the flock and flicking my wrist passed me with a long twist
that had given him one of the fieldfares, all silent but heavy as if hoarse
and the bird into the woodline on the hill; how the bird folded itself-in of course
itself the tree lost already itself in the other vague birches rich
in the light greys and blacks of the bird and its fructose lichen.

4 July 1990

* * *

ghost moths go feeling-out the outfield holding
both us lost fielders before we go, grey ashflakes in this light
uncertain censering against cicely and hawthorn moulding bright
from nowhere out of the earth the hawk unfolding
furrow from a soft ploughing grassheads spread from his mowing
manoeuvring talon to maw, stalling-speed chopped at the blockhole
resuming rowing the heavier for the early vole.

Northumberland 1986

* * *

Grey light, level grey with reddening bars so wide in the east
opened place on bigger land the bird's one open eye swivelled
the whole stretch to the hills the sun had already lit up easily
so the place was shortened as the light grew to detail
hills still and nearer, a crisper line and then folds of lines
but the eye of the bird sought short distances, dimensions
only carried the brushing lines she launches on the plantation
nearer the earth, sun width of wingspan realised again
that didn't need to touch the close trees brash, and was gone.

* * *

it was dene country, beneath the farmed old plateau
grooves the land has had to the coast since draining the ice
the bird the same southwest by east to the sea, direction
seeing the whole wooded valley, every thorn tree and thicket
picked up the silhouette/outline as a boy, first letter to Meinertzhagen
a migrant or wanderer (James Fisher's opinion, a falconer's)
overhead on the same land's grain, horizon to horizon

since before there was a coast

and roadsides'

Wood Cranesbill nodding and blowing after the Sweet Cicely,
as Northern as each other
the Southrons come and call them Cow Parsley
cockily

County Durham, for B.B. 1977/79

* * *

Mantling Wind

Rougher-in North Sea tightening low is than an Atlantic blow
its raw sou-wester new-(moon) noise off Cheviot rumbles a quaking antic
its (the) northeaster rallies trees below this cottage, the *higher* trees are sheltered by hills to the east!
shivering rough his shroud, barbs on edge,

gos sits
crows don't know to rise and go after him

the burn above the little house is a river; it's only enough to bathe meadowpipits usually
leaves its bed behind not in frustration of its course but in sheer (re) awakening.

In the wind as much as the dead twig is I am
wind bends all, runs all, in the chimney as in my lungs as if in my spine and its stones
a tremolo along a pipe, a vertical cliff pipe; great hills prepare little landslips about their adits
quake, the old lime kiln collects its draught in reverse and disturbs its little hanging of longeared bats.
Shaking a loose slate skittering down the roof like someone committed on skates
a glissading glissando staccato hitting lake ripples, ruffles at the margin
fox quiet
his den under me, under the hill's old adit, the deer ride on the wind. The gos is preening
in seas of shifting grass and grey as glass the wind is cleaning.

Low Woodhead, Jan '88

* * *

*for Cort; whether or not the same experience,
this is under a nest-tree. permafrost
Mackenzie: juv. Goshawk*

(73)

greetings, fellow! yet neither 'hi'
its not 'hello' its admonition
cryin's 'greetin' in the North: the eyes stream recognition
hollerin high scream its steam seeming creaming the hollow between boles subscenic element in this land
eye all eye yellow and yellowing
sense reaming out whole hate pile-driver riving spateriver
state-high as eyass-excited

season accessions reason below the barrens this earth opens-up its hand
access of gos is secession from reasonableness, holistic statement
human hesitation
essence is all in eye access is aggression: any
in sight beneath the surface the mighty lens and the perfect
sclerotic then understand
the great nerve essentially is demand
and the demand is high

at the back-of-the-neck feel it stand
manned in each other's space now and wherever we go
last night in the tree's arms underpinned until the same wind skinned you out that
sharpened my eye, your eye after the eye the talon blue-rooted touches sky and grips hard
only air opening and closing in conversation and

your hand
subtends some same tension digits re-read re-rigid not lame re-stirred fanned
the land frigid to the bird rejects it though the screams were heard, parent-birds murder wean
we come upon the remains you me remember gos-hunting grind
remember we've had good rides and bind with this one resists reside'n hard men's mind.

1.10.81

* * *

'Goshawk, male, in prospecting flight over Sweethope Lough
ellipses high-low, west-cast over Lough, water choppy
and air midge-heavy as the wind collects water and midges up
against the screen of the dense green never thinned or brashed rough
sitkas; many young swallows scatter from under the hawk
but his mate is in attendance at the edge of the trees and takes one
only to drop it again' (verbatim, fieldnote) gosses rarely co-operate in hunting
and this may have been mere play, or more play; Mr. Bunting
nevertheless expresses, excited high voice but just loud enough over the wind
that the birds had come in together, rather low and unseen "my bad eyes skinned"
to see them at all; and look how they go away together, chuffed as hell at their skill

(August 1983)

* * *

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