PICTURING: GHOSTS

I. to raise a ghost: to cause it to appear (Oxford English Dictionary).

To get this perspective,
you must have wealth or wings.

II. The soul or spirit, as the principle of life; also ghost of life. Obs. exc. in phrase to give up (*earlier to give, give away, yield up) the (*one’s) ghost: to breathe one’s last, expire, die.

Three hundred-and-ten-million years ago,

birds and humans shared
a common ancestor.

Take for evidence: we,
in rhinestoned skins,
recognizing ourselves
in feathered ones
recognizing themselves
reflected in mirrors, and,
of course, in beings
teaching and taught
to sing, pitching ahead

as remembering.

Two million years ago,

Peregrine falcons, like
animated pollen
wind dispersed
from the family tree,
braved, keen-eyed,
unnamed Earth, plunging
into shaggy tundra, tropics
bronzed by dusk,
erupting sea islands
adrift from skyey plain
to forest-spiced cliff,
and, at that time,
in Africa, lived
a chewingmachine,
shady cousin of humanity,
whose strapping jaws outgrew
an appetite for everything,
leaving no survivors.

Our hominin ancestors,
on the other hand,
moved on with two feet,
crunching termites with
small canine teeth and
fleshy tongues sucking
flower buds nourished
infant brains, who grew
to wonder at shiny things,
at their own wonder, and
to dream of giraffes,
of running so fast,
headd
towering,
to
glimpse
the
New
World.

Two-hundred thousand
years ago,

our species emerged. Lenape,
who first arrived on this hilly place,
called it their word,

“Mannahatta,” where
generations of Peregrines
had hatched from
sturdy-shell eggs laid
in shady rock crags
above the river
that flows both ways,

“Shatemuk” —

“Waiiiiiik!”
the falcons scream—
free-falling
through air,
bulleting faster than the coming Express
to talon-catch—slower birds
on wing—
now late Passenger
pigeons, Mourning doves,
Black-crowned night
herons,
Redstarts,
Blue jays,
White-throated sparrows,
who learned first to sing,
still, in boreal’s summer, conduct
midnight sun soul to city
in dark mid-winter,
notes sparkling like
spruce tree lights
jazzing
with silver trumpets
in Central Park.

III. ghost-land

After other races vanished the Lenape
with their words, they renamed the place
“Central Park,” where
marshy blueberry thickets
grew in sea-salt air—but not much longer—
over creek-gurgling schist, feeding
White-sucker-spawn-and-Hogchoker-fed Raccoons and Meadow voles,
potato-faminied Irish pig farmers
and German gardeners, in a free Black village
with three churches, and their school’s
Holy children wore cloth shoes
with leather soles. Red maple
leaves turned
red in fall and fell
underfoot,
then, greened again in spring overhead
trees’ clapping boughs the very stars
re-constellated in tune with the
mappists’ imagination—grid lines
glittering gold on clear nights,
as subway lines
  uptown
burrowed
  carrying creamy-stockinged fares
to plays at
the Century Theater
between 62nd and 63rd Streets
on Central Park West.

The theater’s greatest success was
Eleonora Duse, who, in 1923, aging,
one year before her death,
happily exited gloomy Europe,
sailing to New York, where
she acted Mrs. Helen Alving’s part
in Henrik Ibsen’s

Ghosts.

[Muffled laughter of a young woman and man in another room.]

MRS. ALVING:  [Looks to the wall.] We are all of us ghosts. [Wrings her
hands.]

[ELEONORA DUSE peers out the window, noticing the manner of people
walking in the park. She thinks gratefully about the youthful innocence of a
nation virgin to the horrors of invasion.]

ELEONORA DUSE:  There is something so buoyant. [Looks in the mirror
hung on the wall, affixes her charcoal-wool hat with a crystal-head pin.]

IV. Philos. the ghost in the machine: Gilbert Ryle’s name for the mind viewed
as separate from the body

Egg yolk is the color
of Peregrine toes, feet
of sleek-bulk
like a man wearing
well-fitting, four-fingered
leather work gloves
with long black nails,
  -curving-
smooth       sharp
as a saber tooth
hooks winged prey.
A darting bill-bite severs
cervical vertebrae; he
delivers the plumy-puppet
meal to his mate.

   Clutch to clutch three
dangle-dance in mid-air
to mooring ledge where,
three into one,
she plucks and tears
flesh and eats,
   between wails
as he takes her back,  
   flapping wings,  
   weightless,  
   but for one nuzzling thing,
talons drawn in.

Dark-artery breasts
turn brooding menace. Strangely,
as it appeared, the remedy
for bug-vectored disease
and crop pests was
feathered phantom
meat salted with
war-borne technology.

First swimmers
in original seas—
mute hearts—
slick out
fissures
of warm
chestnut-flecked shells,
suddenly, a slight
barb’s breadth
too-thin for
safety.
V. the ghost walks (Theat. slang): there is money in the treasury, the salaries are forthcoming.

The steel-girded, masonry Century Theater, as it was widely recognized, had “deadening acoustics.”

In 1930, after a mere twenty-two years running, the unprofitable Beaux-Arts venue was razed.

In its place, the Century Apartments raised luxury again, despite the Great Depression. The building towers Art Deco-confidently as a well-lit, homey cliff, welcoming prosperity restored with Peregrines, captive-bred and released, safe from DDT, an abundance of rock doves to eat, yet, with few sheltering crevices for nest scrapes.

Window ledges, narrow and steep, expose fresh laid eggs—

breast-sturdy shells regained—

elliptical geometry and

gravity to rolling, and—

not sturdy enough for this—

falling
so many feet,
scrambling
on crowded sidewalks
pancaked with chewed up gum,
and cast off plastic bags
float east

across the street
to flap from trees,
most spookily at night,
in Central Park, where
black nannies charged
with white babies in strollers
peregrinate.

VI. Sc. ‘A piece of dead coal, that instead of burning appears in the fire as a white lump’ (Jamieson).

In the spring of 2014,
a parking lot magnate
and his wife,
bolted
a gravel-filled box
to the brick outside
their 32nd floor
Century Apartment
residence.

Two obsidian-eyed
nestlings fledged,
according to
historic
landmark law,
illegally.

That fall,
building management unbolted
said breeding ground
for predatory rebels
from that high ledge,
to which the parent birds,
quiver (again) quenched,
unspooked,  
maintain fidelity.

The following week,  
in September,  
on the day of the parade,  
this announcement:  
Appreciating the burning irony,  
John D. Rockefeller, Senior’s  
also philanthropic heirs—living  
the oil magnate’s hope for,  
in his own words,  
“efficiency in giving  
so that wealth may be  
of greater use  
to the present and  
future generations”—  
inspired by a movement of  
that future’s fiercely  
present “Y”s  
—will divest from  
their corporate legacy,  
aiming to keep carbon,  
good as gold, unburned,  
in the ground.  
It is “schizophrenic,”  
their spokesperson said,  
to maintain “investments  
undermining our grants.”

For all time,  
as far as we can see,  
the laws of physics say,  
inescapably,  
greenhouse gases  
in the air—  
think  
carbon atoms with  
two “O”s—  
sucked hard  
by sun-flecked plants  
long dead (some  
chewed to flesh)  
pressed to Earth
in quickoil breath
fossil haunts
uplift
spiriting again
into the air—do
warm
conglomerate, soured sea,
crystal ice,
and naked soil,
the ecosphere
ripple-change

Paradoxically,
the human species—since
we running matters

growing
high on
upright
necks
such
BIG
ridged fat-rich

full of a certain ingenuity,
now live in a different time
on a different planet that
need new names—for
a self-made mirror of ourselves
mirroring ourselves shading
fierce green fires—
of glimpses
cold-blind,
dimming, and
not dead.

VII. Television. A displaced repeated image on a television screen caused by a duplicate signal travelling by a longer path.

To blame the world,
is to condemn ourselves.
VIII. ghost-dancers

September 21, 2014:  
People’s Climate  
March  
south on  
Central Park West @ 62nd and 63rd.

A Peregrine falcon  
is perched  
on the high ledge  
too far overhead  
for those on the street  
to notice. No human being  
knows what that bird  
is seeing.

Of the 400,000 people  
on the ground,  
over 50,000 are the Millennials,  
the original human generation  
born tongue-first singing,  
“climate justice, now,”  
into a shrinking or is it an expanding world,  
whose clenched teeth  
dreams glimpse the stellar  
with scientific wonder,  
yet  
forget  
giraffes, and,  
whose members know,  
in surprising, complex detail, that  
to celebrate Earth—  
each and every other tangled other—is  
to exalt our human selves  
COUNTING DOWN...  
as remembering silence...  
pitching ahead  
and a swell of voices.
The young paint themselves pink, green, black, gold—if you are old, they may paint you, too—and dance buoyantly, music-footed gripping shards of glass and oily pavement. Resist not to resist. We will sweat for as long as light lasts—suns or moons. See your self reflecting in others’ eyes recognizing you likewise as the mirroring other. Flip that silvery drone in pale clouds overhead, but know the birds, the extinct ones, too, even their songs—Get carried away, artery-red, bare-breasted, sometimes clapping hands or clasping hands or hand-like limbs, being wide-awake, re-named on the barren inside’s edge, maybe, snatching that ghost of a chance.

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