

Dream Birds

The Notes of an Unknown Dream Ornithologist

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In the Werner Herzog's film "Fitzcarraldo," Klaus Kinski asks a priest at a missionary outpost on the Pachitea River in Peru if textbooks can convert the Indians and make them "Patriots." The young are easily converted, he is told, but not so easily the older Indians. They are convinced that "Our everyday life is only an illusion behind which lies the reality of dreams." Fitzcarraldo admits that he too is "very interested in these ideas." He likes opera.

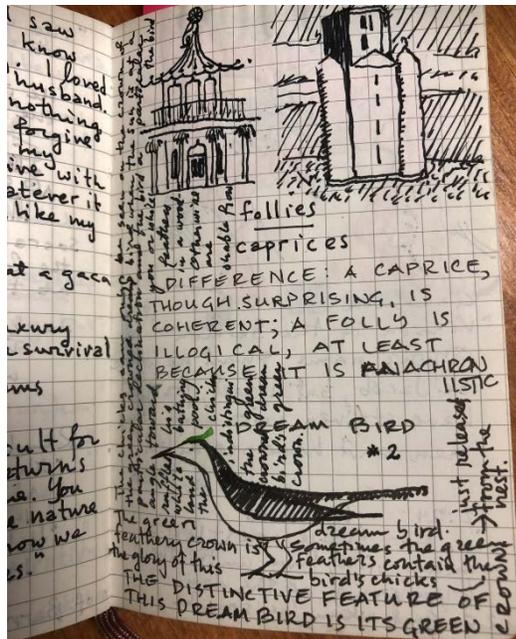
The notebooks from which I will read follow the same premise. They were composed by someone who might call himself a "dream ornithologist." As the university's library is digitized, the archives have deaccessioned rarely used and apparently meaningless volumes. During the downsizing of the Archives, the notebooks of the unknown dream ornithologist were at first offered to the psychology department, because their subject was dreams. As there was no pathology, the notebooks were released from psychology, and found its way to literature, which makes sense because it's entirely imaginary. I would like to read just a few excerpts from notebooks of the dream ornithologist.

1. The Dream Oriole



We cannot know whether the dream bird with a yellow body and a black head is an oriole or any variety of oriole or any bird known to us in the waking world. The dream bird itself may be internally or externally different from "ordinary" birds. It may be very much the same, but its name entirely different.

2. The Green Crowned Dream Bird



I saw a bird with a distinct green crown. The crown is the glory of this dream bird, because it serves as a nest for its chicks. The green crown of the green crowned dream bird can only be seen, and the bird identified, when the sun is at a particular angle in the dream world's dawn or dusk. The dream bird must also ruffle its feathers while bathing in a woodland pool. Otherwise

its green crown remains hidden in its plain brown plumage, which merges with the shadows of the dream forest. For an instant then, as the dream bird bathes in the forest pond, you might also see its chicks, green like the green of its crown.

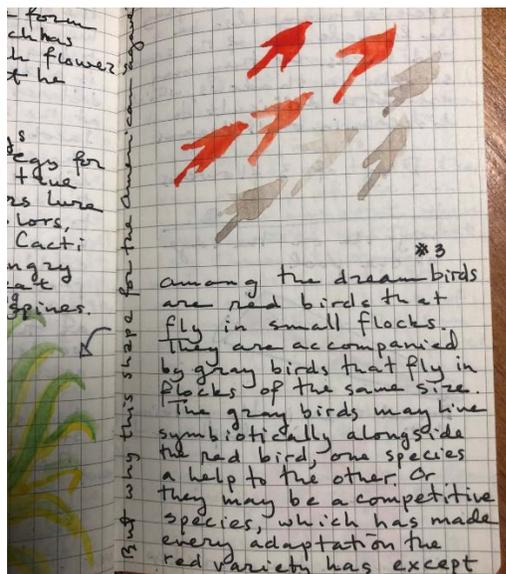
3. Audubon's Birds of America

In a bookstore of my dreams, I discovered what appeared to be the first edition of Audubon's *Birds of America*. And yet it seemed odd that I should find the original elephant folio in a mouse-sized box. The price was way too high for a book that didn't follow the rules of proportion. The book dealer assured me that nothing could be more genuine.

When I opened the box, there was no book at all—just game boards, tokens and counters to show the game's progress and who was winning or losing. I was disappointed and smirked at the book monger. Lies, liars, demons and illusions.

But in another phase of the dream, we played the game together, me and the peddler. Although we did not see the birds painted by Audubon while we played the game, we followed the same rules that Audubon once followed. We saw bird flight, bird plumage, and bird song. The game progressed like a fairy tale, consoling and very very real. I was not displeased then at the book dealer's price. I wish I had bought it, whatever the price. If one is poor in life, one might be poor in one's dreams. In any case, I long to hear the book dealer name his price again.

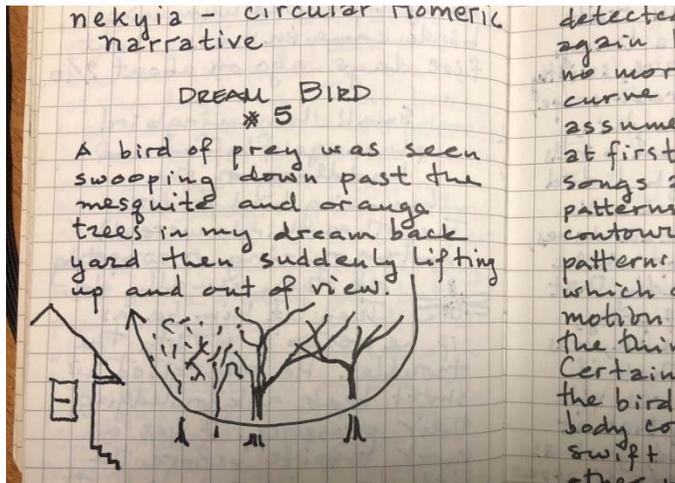
4. Red Birds and Grey Birds



Among the dream birds are red birds that fly in small flocks. They are accompanied by grey birds that fly in flocks of just the same size. The grey birds may live symbiotically alongside the red birds, one species a help to the other. Or they may be an opposite, competing species, the same only in mimicry, their lack of color alone differentiating them. The one species matches the

other, adaptation for adaptation in the dream world. The grey species may also be the female sex of the same red bird, or the opposite. Or they may simply be shadows, which are more difficult to discern in one's dreams.

5. Hawk Flight



I saw a bird of prey swooping down past the mesquite and orange trees in my dream backyard, then suddenly lift up and out of view. The speed of the dive made the bird impossible to identify. He seemed to be transparent or little more than a curve. Blending in to the background, he became undetectable to the dream birds he preyed upon.

We assume that living things are bodies with physical extension, and their songs and movements are secondary traits. However, it might very well be that motion—flight pattern, dance, flock contours, and their fluid murmurations—come first, and their bodies are mere traits of their essential form, which is movement through space. In the waking world, the bird of prey's physical body conforms to his need for swift motion and not the other way around.

It might be proposed that dream birds have no need for a bodily character, and therefore they may appear as no more than an abstract curve. Without equivocation, I reject this. In dreams the separate traits of a thing become more salient and clear to the observer. All traits of a thing, if it be a thing, are physical. A curve, swiftly moving through a dreamscape, has as much thingness as anything else. Even dream birds need to eat.

Although I did not see any prey flee, not Incan, Ground or White Tipped Dove, I know he hunted them. Quicker than the swooping hawk appeared, all the doves disappeared, into his talons or out into the brushlands. Then they became no more than an idea, the hawk's idea or ours.

6. The Phainopepla

A friend of mine, in the spirit of speculative philosophy, proposed that all birds were dream birds—even those in the waking world. “What? Are you a butterfly who dreams he is a man?” was my acerbic response. On that day, I had no tolerance for his abstractions. “There is a difference between dreams and reality and apparently there is a difference between you and me. You are not a scientist.” He made no effort to defend himself, but turned and walked away. I had lost a friend.

It was until I encountered the black Phainopepla—a bird that always appears to people as an omen and guards the mistletoe as fiercely as winged serpents guard the frankincense tree in Arabia Felix—that I realized he might be right. Omens are the signs of dreams, which we see in waking life. All birds are omens. The Phainopepla lives in the desolate Indian lands of the American Southwest. It is rarely seen by white men, and those who have seen it are mocked for trafficking in Indian fables. Although the Phainopepla is included in most bird guides, identifying the bird is not easy. It would fit better into a thesaurus as the antonym of the cardinal: the cardinal has black eyes and red plumage; the Phainopepla, red eyes and black plumage. Most birds are ordinarily indexed according to general class: water fowl, raptor, flycatchers, etc. The Phainopepla fits none of the categories, however, and is classified between bulbuls and silky flycatchers. Who knows—all birds might resist classification, and exist in the in-between spaces of our lexicon. The Phainopepla shows that dreams and illusions intervene in the waking world, and we are blessed with unreality.