

Standing Up

Susan Diab

I am writing standing up. I've done my back in and if I sit down, I can feel the bottom of my spine compressing into where it joins my pelvic girdle and I seize up. Consequently, it's much more comfortable to stand. What do we write standing up? Notes to say we've called when visiting an absent friend, sometimes leaning on someone else's back for support. When teaching, writing summaries of discussions on whiteboards, flip charts, blackboards. How much thinking have I done standing up? I mean, really thinking rather than just wondering? Just wondering. Wondering is perhaps the profoundest thinking of all...after all.

Thinking without effort, just wondering
Often when wandering around
What a connection there is in that change from o to a

So, I'm standing, and occasionally wandering around my flat, eating a plum now and then, stalling. Bending my knees to let my tailbone hang off my spine, avoiding compression.

I call German grammar the skeleton of the language. If you understand how the skeleton fits together you can flesh out any conversation, you have the bare bones. Did you see how that bird built its nest in the ribs just now? Flitting from tree to skeleton carrying wisps of hair in its beak? And straw and other materials? It nipped in before the flesh was on, quick as anything and now it's caught forever in the body, but secure, nested.

The bird appears from time to time. It's a velveteen toy in the foreground of the photo of my mum at three. Put there to enchant her and keep her still. It's a raven, standing once and only once on my balcony the morning after a dream about Tara, a trans-mythic goddess who took the form of a small girl and a raven. A whole motion picture of a dream telling the story of her life.

It's a starling caught in the chimney in the bedroom I shared with my sister, which pecked a hole round as an O in the paper covering the chimney breast and which flew out startled and around the room, frightening in its dis-location.

Bird is within the flesh housed among the bones.

I was in the other room listening to their performance. I could hear the voices but wasn't actively listening, was reading Monica's book valentine. Ida-Freud, Monica-Jorn, correspondences. And as I sat there someone I'd met only once before popped in with a photocopy of a text, Gillian Rose writing about Levinas writing about the other. Hamish, his name. The German word 'hämisches' meaning 'malicious, spiteful' so much the opposite of his generous and honest act.

Language is strange
When you think about it
Especially when you think about it standing up
When you think about language standing up, that is, the language stands.
Language stands like umbrella stands, where the words dry off after a storm, or a story: m/y interchangeable.

They're sitting at a table, Monica is reading the German text and Jorn is 'correcting' her. Jorn gets up and w(o/a)nders to the window. Now I've made magic, now there'll be trouble. I've summoned up 'woanders' (pronounced 'vo-anders'), which is 'somewhere else', 'elsewhere' in German.

The bird flits from rib to rib, not butterfly wings these but strong motions from a tiny source. It's liking it in the stomach with the plums, but it's wanting out.

Jorn is at the window and they continue to read. The pace of the reading highlights a process, which isn't about getting it right so much as about getting into the words, sort of inhabiting them. Monica reads with/to/despite/because of/alongside Jorn. Each word of hers a bit like a twig and the repetitions as she tries the word out in her mouth becomes like bird tugging on a recalcitrant twig to get it to fit into the whole.

It puts me in mind of another bird that lives in an Arabic song that I have a recording of. My Grandmother singing shortly before she died. It's called (the song, and the bird) 'Kukuhtee'. It builds a nest and fetches beans. Her voice wavers to the rhythm of the wing beat in my chest.

Another situation, a small office up a dark staircase behind Victoria Rail station. Crown Business School. I am being interviewed for a post teaching German to business people but I've run into trouble. We bat our opinions across the table like a ball. I argue for knowledge of grammar and make my skeleton analogy. He wants it done by phrase alone. Just flesh, nothing to hang it on. I'm losing the contest. I'll never cut it in the business world with my old fashioned ideas. But I'm arguing for beauty's sake, not for rigour's, or that is, not for rigour's alone. Man and woman across the table. "Man and woman are irreconcilable, and it's the doomed attempt to do the impossible, repeated in each new affair, that lends heterosexual love its grandeur."¹

[Interruption. Dealing with a foot note, looking up the correct way to reference a cited book – bend knees let tail drop – too tense, the fear of getting it wrong caught in the sacrum]

Monica told me that Jorn had said in the morning previous to their performance that he would be strict/streng
across the table - through the words
their relationship to each other
mine to them
theirs to the language
theirs to the individual words
mine to the language
mine to my German world
mine to my English friends who couldn't understand the German
mine to my English friends who could
Monica's to Benjamin
Jorn's to Benjamin
Jorn's to German
Monica's to German
each to their tongue
each to the epiglottis
each to bird, in the ribs, in the stomach, in the pelvis

bird to the filaments of sound straws, hairs, various finenesses of nuance
weaving out through the pupils
She is a bird, delightful.
And with such weight
Lead bird, as in Pb.
Plumb line.

The shapes of the words are painted black in outline on the windows to stop
bird flying out and hitting the glass. Bird flies up to the glass and then back
to desk. Plums and beans all gone.

Benjamin on hearing the election results on the evening of 5 March 1933
makes a sketch on his notes for a radio play about Lichtenberg:

"Here beneath the depressing election results one sees no mighty, moribund imperial eagle, but rather a fragile bird flung onto the canvas with drooping wings in free fall---unable ever again to fly free. Beneath it Benjamin has written "the election bird" [der Wahlvogel]. - Man sieht hier unterhalb der deprimierenden Wahlergebnisse keinen mächtigen, sterbenden Reichsadler, sondern eher einen auf eine Leinwand geworfenen fragilen Vogel mit hängenden Flügeln im freien Fall - unfähig je wieder frei zu fliegen. "Der Wahlvogel" hat Benjamin darunter geschrieben.²

Bird without a skeleton, drooping wings in free fall, or one without a home?

¹. Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities* (Flamingo 10991)

². Birds are the Elections' Observers, No Moribund Imperial Eagle: On the Gießen 'Convolute' of Walter Benjamin's Literary Estate, Günter Oesterle & Harald Tausch
<http://www.uni-giessen.de/~g81013/>