

Hear Us by Amy Sherlock 2013

*Hear us, you who are no more than leaves always falling, you mortals benighted by nature,
You enfeebled and powerless creatures of earth always haunting a world of mere shadows,
Entities without wings, insubstantial as dreams, you ephemeral things, you human beings:
Turn your minds to our words, our ethereal words, for the words of the birds last forever!*
- Aristophanes, *The Birds*, lines 685–8

When we say that someone is in cloud cuckoo land, we mean that they're dreaming, that they have their head in *the clouds*, that they are hoping for or expecting something unattainable or unrealistic. It is a reproach of sorts, applicable equally to the naively idealistic and an altogether more unhinged form of delusion. The phrase comes to English via the translation of an Ancient Greek comedy, *The Birds*, in which two Athenians, tired of the cities of men transform into birds, and build a city in the sky for their species between Olympus and the world of men. Both 'land' and 'cloud': the very name is oxymoronic, faintly absurd. This is a comedy, after all, and he who believes that escaping to a new life could be so straightforward must be playing the jester or the fool. Untethered, floating between worlds like the clouds of its namesake, Cloud Cuckoo Land is a projection of the utopian promise of migration in all its elusive, impossible unreachability.

Birds have a troubled or ambiguous domesticity – particularly the cuckoo, a sly nest thief who brings disarray into the family setting – that mocks the idea of a cloud homeland. As much as the bird in flight is emblematic of a certain unhindered freedom, the caged bird, such as those traded for so long in Bethnal Green, is a particular kind of tragedy. Nobody wants their wings clipped. Migrating birds are never quite 'at home,' given the great periods of time that they must spend on the wing, despite a strong homing tendency that leads them to travel back to the same places year after year, following patterns that pre-exist and extend beyond the lifetime of individual animals. A migrant domesticity is a sense of always being out of place, which is both a freedom and its own limitation.

Bird migration, though still being understood, is a social or communal phenomenon, that, were we discussing humans, we might go so far as to call cultural. Though we don't generally speak in those terms, perhaps because in spite of all that singing, speaking is one of the things that still separates birds from men. And this in spite of all their singing! A quivering complexity of expression to which our own music has long owed a debt of inspiration. Many birds, including the cuckoo itself, are onomatopoeically named (or were, though often the altogether more skittish evolution of human pronunciation has made them a gradually more distant form of mimicry), almost as if we learnt to name the sound first as a distant, disembodied voice, still unable to see the birds through the trees. His distinctive call provides the refrain for one of the oldest known English folk songs, 'Sumer Is Icumen In', thought to date from the 13th century: 'Loudly sing cuc-kuo.' Birdsong has always been richly significant or symbolic in human culture: in much of Europe, the cuckoo is still considered the harbinger of Spring, to this day it remains a tradition in the UK to pen a letter to the editor of the Times newspaper to report the first heard cuckoo call of the year (normally in mid to late April), while in Russia there is a popular belief that the number of cuckoo calls one hears represents the number of years left to live. As a

form of communication, birdsong has long been appropriated by humans as a way of expressing something about ourselves.

I am told that birds have long been of interest in debates over animal culture, because their songs develop regional differences, dialects. Which might lead one to ask: would they understand one another? If, say, a chaffinch migrating to Britain from Northern Europe for the winter passed through the East End of London, would its calls be registered by native species? Would it be recognised as the same species at all? Voice is inextricably bound up with questions of identity and subjectivity. It is a dual affirmation of place – the assertive ‘I am here,’ that always contains the trace, more or less faint, of an ‘I am from here’. ‘This is me.’ Speaking myself into being. Forming these thoughts, which are my own; *articulating myself*. Access to one’s own voice is important – this is why questions of agency or of recognition are so often phrased in the language of ‘giving voice to’ or ‘being heard’. The Athenians in *The Birds* are helped on their way by the Hoopoe, who in another classical myth was King Tereus, transformed by the Gods as punishment for raping his wife’s sister and cutting out her tongue. Tereus’ crime is both the violation and the silencing demanded by it: they are two sides of the same coin, and one completes the other. (In the myth, the sister is turned into a Nightingale, divine reparation restoring her with the most beautiful song of all.)

How strange that something so fleeting and insubstantial, as slight as a quiver of air, should anchor us so deeply in ourselves. The voice, after all, holds on to nothing and cannot be held; passes through us, out and away, in constant motion.

And, of course, one is always speaking to someone. Words may come from within, but they are projected outwards and onwards. They ask for an audience. I speak myself into being only because someone else is there to acknowledge me: ‘I am here; hear me.’ One cannot sing in a vacuum, after all. The voice reminds us of our vulnerability: in that moment in which we call out and address someone without certainty of response, we expose ourselves absolutely, our own needs and insufficiencies. Too-wit; too-woo. We are social animals, and what we might call society or community is this loud, chattering melody of call and response, call and response, where the words that are being said sometimes do not matter so much as the fact that someone is listening.

Calling from Blethenal Green: by re-occupying this name long passed out of use, lost in the chitter-chatter of the years, Johanna Höllsten and Catherine Clover’s project proposes a Cloud Cuckoo Land of sorts, inhabiting St. John on Bethnal Green with the passing immateriality of voices to explore both the utopian potential of dialogue and its fragility and limitations.