

Fall 1976

## My Triptych of Lyrebird and Great Auks

Norman Dubie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Dubie, Norman (1976) "My Triptych of Lyrebird and Great Auks," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 7 , Article 16.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss7/16>

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

MY TRIPTYCH OF LYREBIRDS AND GREAT AUKS:

for Paul Zimmer

1.

There is a white stretch of desert in the heart of Newfoundland  
Near to where Strand photographed his conifer forest. I think  
The extinct great auk might still live there with only  
The wisest mothers.

I find the desert a sanctuary.

The last great auks ever seen were a couple doing  
Their silly puttering beside rocks and seaweed. They were clubbed  
To death, their large speckled eggs smashed, on the island  
Of Eldey in the first week of June. 1843.

They were murdered by fishermen who bragged later of killing  
Two witches with their yellow and red buoys.  
The sun coming up off Iceland that early morning must have  
Needed to eclipse itself with grief — there was nothing like  
This scene ever before; *and no witnesses*;

There would never be, again, another massacre of great auk,  
And never again would its fat be swallowed by sad clerks in London  
As a remedy for anxiety and heartburn.

Perhaps, the ocean came up in its awful privacy and took the  
Dead couple away; their wings broken like the oars  
Of Viking deathships  
That cut out into the icy waters, burning, while men from the village  
In their white furs stand up on the fjeld blowing horns until  
Their lungs fire

Like their gutted ships. And

Living close to the earth, we yearn, these days  
To visit even the great deserts of Saturn.

2.

The lyrebird is followed by a feathered ceremony  
Like Arthur on horseback trailed by blueboys with whistles and  
cymbals  
And two ugly Saracens, their sharp blades crossed on their chests,  
And, then, the remaining knights who were prettier with  
Girls behind them emptying wild flowers from baskets  
Over the animals' droppings and scent: in this

Manner the history of Arthur's passage out of his castle  
Over the countryside remained pleasant on a blue, airy day!

E.A. Robinson, sullen philosopher and billiard's wizard, understood  
How March becomes April, *becoming May!* How you draw down  
And away on the corners, letting the cue-ball pop against the bank,  
Settling in the center of the table that is clearing!

And then there is nothing  
But immigrants singing near the fire in the orchards that  
Are cleared of apples and deadwood. The snapped branches are  
Wounds that leak a little perfume on these first winter nights  
Of a memorable childhood. The incidents of a childhood

Like the lyrebirds' brooms sweeping the forest floor in the park  
Outside Melbourne, Victoria. There, inside Sherbrooke Forest,  
The snakes raid the nests, the fox eats the foraging hens, and  
The polygamous male makes its bubbling notes even as it is mostly  
Lost down the throat of a Tasmanian wolf. Centuries of wood-cutters  
Killed off the wolf. The lyrebird becomes numerous, and a mimic.  
It can repeat the sound of chains rattling,  
A heated saw opening a tree, or  
Even the human voice when used simply. It can repeat for example:

I AM SICK AND TIRED FROM LIVING! That was recorded up in  
the trees  
In 1843, in Victoria. Once at a timber-mill, where six blasts  
Of a whistle meant a fatality, six distinct  
Reports were heard through the woods at late evening, and men came

Running from everywhere. It was the lyrebird up in the mahogany  
Copying three blasts of the chimney whistle signaling that supper  
Was ready! Trumpets, alarms and birdsongs!

The two-foot plumes of the lyrebird  
Can be silver with brown, or mauve with spangles of yellow.  
The Tasmanian wolf is gone; sometimes, in moonlight, up in  
The aspen-breaks you can hear his ghost, though, making that

Impossible cry that is extinct, that empties into  
The wooded valley waking all the animals;  
Do they realize it's the lyrebird up to his old tricks, or do  
They think: *Wolf*,

*Old friend, they said you were dead, welcome back into our lives;  
We need you for you are like our lives —*

*Empty and ferocious!*

3.

There are colonies of dovebies, or little auks, on the cliffs  
Of Greenland. They are a populous community, their only rival  
Being the guillemots.

The thought of five million little auk nests holding  
Up in gale winds off Cape York is heartwarming.

My triptych of birds, of loss, has turned toward  
Happiness like these sparrow-auks turning north as the ice pack  
Recedes past their instinctual boundaries. The North Atlantic  
For centuries, you see, has been warming up! For us it could mean  
The end of Poughkeepsie!

The Arctic fox up on the scree slopes will gobble up,  
Every so often, a little auk or dovebie.  
But these birds are increasingly suspicious of our northern gardens  
And ponds, our cats and dogs, and the Arctic fox.  
Charles Eton says the little auk colonies are

An opera house on opening night: all their  
White shirt-fronts into the wind, their black tails,  
And something like whispering.  
To the left of their nests a polar bear rears up into  
An Arctic breeze, his hair shifting, he looks out across the little auks  
And screams! These formal little birds  
Know he is pure and white like a stream, or the skins in the Eskimo  
Lodges opening,

In an Arctic summer, for days of feasting. The dovebie knows  
That the big fellows rearing up on their hind legs are not  
Frightening for they pass most of their lives asleep, and

Dreaming of the scree slopes where the little auk appear like debris.