Fall 1976

My Triptych of Lyrebird and Great Auks

Norman Dubie
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.
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!
There are colonies of dovekies, 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 dovekie.
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 dovekie 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.