

The Birds are Back

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As I tap the top off my boiled breakfast eggs I hear a knock at the door. The dog's affirming bark confirms he too has heard the knock, but we've both been fooled. Our early morning visitor is a magpie-lark tapping the gabled window glass behind me with his beak.

The bird's newsprint plumage reflects his lineage, no longer *In Memoriam* from long years of drought, but proudly boasting of his *Engagement*. His fiancé is not far away. The lark taps and taps again at the glass. He's as persistent and insistent as a reporter hunting for a headline. I wonder. Is he simply denuding the glass of the ants that scurry across its surface? Is he attempting to subdue his fiancé's ardent suitor? Or is he sharpening his beak, the pen of his profession as any good writer should? Tap, tap, tap. He sounds like an antiquated journalist, typing his headline on an old Imperial typewriter. Tap, tap, tap, ratchet return, tap, tap, tap. His headline proclaims:

THE BIRDS ARE BACK.

He is after a story and so am I. I muse at how an interview with the pied reporter might develop. I christen him Magnus Momentous, Entertainment Columnist for the Seasonal Sun Herald. I imagine he asks if, since the drought has broken, I've noticed the local wildlife performances in my garden. Noticed them, I reply. I've been enthralled by them.

It's amazing what a change in the weather can do. Now rainbow lorikeets and greenies disco dance the morning sun into the sky. Their myriad colours flash across the foliage like swirling lights bounced off a mirror ball. Their screeches and squawks ping the skies, the grass and the walls of my house. Their dirty dancing seduces the honey-sweet nectar from native blossoms.

A blue-eyed honeyeater, flamboyant dresser with his brilliant-blue eye shadow, informs me he's the metrosexual star of daytime reality TV. He and his drab partner, Dusty, are renovating their home. While Dusty gets on with the repairs, Blue petulantly provokes his kookaburra neighbours, giving them a right good tongue-lashing. He's all talk and bravado, of course. With raucous cackles, the good-natured kookaburras, Jack and Assa, dismiss Blue and concentrate on their worm farm.

When the sunset spotlight gilds our pergola with golden pizzazz and dizzying dazzle, Willie Wagtail's Shadow Puppetry Ensemble takes centre stage. Though I cannot see the perky performers, their shadows flit and flutter like burlesque fan dancers. They shiver and shimmy in lyrebird mimicry before revealing their grand finale: the Pride of Erin Peacock Parade.

At night an owl visits the dead branches of our avocado tree. Ironically, that tree survived the drought only to die in the first year of rain. Sometimes I startle the owl when I open the bedroom window. I watch him beat the cumbersome span of his broad earth-coloured wings against the still night air, as he sails his shadowy self towards the rising moon. A touch of melancholy flutters across my soul. Could he be the psychological columnist of the ornithological world? Dear Dr Hoot, I wonder if you can help me ...

Until about a year ago, more than a decade of drought taxed the living economy of my landscape into deep recession. Fruiting and flowering trees died. The insect population dwindled. The surviving bird population migrated to greener pastures. They carried my hopes and dreams away on their wings. The last to leave our place was a magpie family who had survived on leftover bread crusts and water from our evaporating fish pond. Before they left, the parents of the brood sang a final serenade of gratitude and farewell. Two-thirds of my brood left home that year as well. And in winter, the spirit of my precious mother rode the thermals to her heavenly home. She had spent the evening singing hymns of praise, then slipped quietly away in the early hours of her new day.

My days were left devoid of song and drained of joy.

Drought is a killing thing. The wise follow the rain where and while they can. If they can't, like thirsty lands, they shrink into survival mode.

Drought dries the land; loss and grief desiccate the soul.

A heart in drought dribbles life-blood through your veins like underpowered turbines suck muck and dregs from rancid puddles in empty dams. The strain broke my heart. I hardly dared remember the drumming beat of little feet, voices insistent with daily demands that kept the arteries of my humanity flowing full, or the rivers of life-giving opportunities that had kept my boat afloat. Nor could I bear the memory of days when divine clouds, pregnant with the promise of spiritual rain, built up in banks on my future's horizon. Like the birds, those days were gone.

Like sanity and madness, seasons come and go. Droughts and floods fight for dominance. Life goes on.

A flash flood broke our drought. The media called it an Inland Tsunami. It was a shocking, devastating event, as expected as premature labour. Shock and pain and birth-waters breaking release new life and ultimate joy. There was sorrow and loss in the midst of our deluge, and rain that birthed new hope and seasonal growth. As Magnus Momentous announced this morning, the birds are back. And, if we're willing to receive them, new creatures brimming with life and potential might take up residence nearby. Currently, a brush-tailed possum and her adolescent progeny sleep their days away atop an old toy cupboard in our garage. A blue-tongued lizard lazes behind the paint tins piled in the corner. The dog is content to leave the wild creatures be. Life is precious, whatever form it takes.

What was that, Magnus? What are my plans?

There's no denying the emptied dam of my heart has room to store fresh rain. It seems silly to keep it empty. I can report that, at last, I am ready to fill it with new friends, new faith, and a new future pregnant with stories. Have you met my new friends, Magnus? They're fellow writers who share the passion of my new season. You'd like them, I'm sure. My faith is also re-emerging in embryonic simplicity. I guess those roots survived the tough seasons after all. Is that enough for your story?

As Magnus taps away I put my breakfast dishes in the dishwasher and head for my writing desk. I sit at my computer keyboard and flick a switch. The future bursts into life at my fingertips.

Well, Magnus Momentous, you have your story and I have mine.

Shall we?

Tap, tap, tap.