

Celebrating Our Feathered Friends in Verse
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by Kate Stout

Some people think poetry is for the birds — among them 137 of America's finest living masters of verse. Their tributes to our feathered friends have been anthologized in the just-published *The Poets Guide to the Birds*. Five of these noteworthy poets — Erica Funkhouser, Jeffrey Harrison, Gray Jacobik, Robert Cording and Daniel Tobin — will give a reading from the collection on Sunday, May 24, at the Concord Free Public Library.

The anthology, compiled by Judith Kitchen and Ted Kooser, grew out of a serendipitous discovery of over 1000 poems about birds in their combined libraries. "It was clear from the sheer volume," Kitchen writes in the introduction, "that birds have fueled the poetic imagination, turning American poets into birdwatchers...."

So it is not just the telescope-toting and binocular-draped enthusiasts peering off into the trees and across the marshes who note, record and are charmed by a flash of orange and black in the treetops or the swoop of a Cooper's hawk sighting a vole or the wattle of a wild turkey strutting across the backyard.

Indeed, Erica Funkhouser, a long-time Concordian — she grew up on Monument Street and spent many childhood days combing the then-undeveloped wooded acres surrounding her October Farm home — will read her anthologized classic, "Owl Pellet."

"I do not consider myself a nature poet," she says, "but I use that imagery to think about and respond to a variety of human concerns. Call it a hunger, a need to describe where I stand or what my hands hold and also a need to be in a state of un-knowing and un-doing, where all the discoveries, wondrous or desperate, come without names."

In "Owl Pellet" Funkhouser writes of coming across the regurgitated remains of what an owl could not digest, examining its contents and from it making this unexpected discovery:

It is never too late for rhapsody.

A kiss says nothing compared to this.

Funkhouser, who now lives in an old farmhouse in Essex, MA, teaches Introductory and Advanced Poetry Writing at MIT and is the author of five volumes of poetry. Likely among the other selections she will read, in addition to ones by other poets in the anthology, are "Watching the One-Eyed Hawk" from her latest volume of poetry *Earthly* published in 2008 and "The Story We Tell" from *Sure Shot* (1992), about a pheasant freshly killed on the roadside, and the instinct to bury it trumped by another more primal one.

Jeffrey Harrison, who is the author of four volumes of verse, the most recent being *The Names of Things* (2006), teaches at the University of Southern Maine and will be another of the readers on May 24. "I have never been a very organized student of nature," he

says, confessing, “I am not a birdwatcher, for instance. But I write about the things of that natural world that have entered my life in some way.” This is evident in his two anthologized poems. “Swifts at Evening” conveys the beauty and spectacle of a flock of swifts both on the page and in the words:

*...the birds swirling like specks
...of living sediment drawn from
...the world into the whirlpool
...into the word-pool flapping...*

And his tender “Visitation” observes his mother reacting to what he calls ‘the family bird,’ a white-throated sparrow on its annual migration — reminding her, reminding him of the son/brother lost to suicide.

*...but she stands and listens, knowing they will stay
for only a few days before moving on.*

In addition to reading these two poems, Harrison will draw from the anthology and from his own work, too.

Of the five readers, Gray Jacobik is perhaps the most prolific and unapologetic writer of nature poetry. “Nature is at the very core of my poetic vision,” she says. “When I was a child I was a mystic without having any idea what that meant.” Now a mature poet with several volumes of verse under her belt — the most recent being *Brave Disguises* (2002) — she calls herself “a contemporary Romantic poet, a realist who nonetheless feels inseparable from the ‘ground’ which is earth, sky, birds and other animals, weather, seasons, rivers, marshes, and so on.”

Jacobik will read “Flamingos”, her poem anthologized in *The Poets Guide to the Birds*:

*...There, at lake’s edge,

they sieve their ambrosial lunch,
cranking up elbowed knees, lifting
awkward S-curved necks, tipping drowsy
oval bellies.*

She will also share others of her treasures of the natural world, winged and otherwise, from “Wild Turkeys” to her timeless “Ode to the Breeze”:

*...you flip the pages
of my abandoned book,
cause me to gaze across the lake and consider
the invisible...*

She, Harrison and Funkhouser will be joined as readers by poet Daniel Tobin, who writes startlingly in “Piegons”: *What face under heaven has a duller eye?* — and poet Robert Cording. Cording, who will read his “Swallow Syllabics” demonstrates what all the poets in *The Poets Guide to the Birds* do — that words like birds take wing in each other’s presence.

The readings from *The Poets Guide to the Birds* is free and open to the public. It will be held at 3pm on Sunday, May 24 at the Concord Free Public Library. A reception and

book-signing will follow. Be sure to thumb through this book to the two appendices at the end. “Habitat and Range” cleverly puts the poets in their regional US places and “Index of Birds” dazzles with its list from anhinga to wren — 70 different species in all, and all putting birds into words.