

Unbounded Air

The first time I saw a wedge-tailed eagle
I was young. My Dad, who shot any raptor
that threatened his chickens,
had pulled in for petrol and ice-cream.

The shop was a ramshackle
sell-everything country store.
Hey, he said, as he pumped fuel,
have a look at these wedgies.

There were two – in a home-made cage
of reinforced steel
you might use for concreting.
Fierce, dark brown eyes blazing.

Shoulders big and strong like knobs of rock
to power the great wings
that lay folded and cramped
in a pose of misuse and misery.

The feathers on their muscled legs,
once soft as down,
now stuck with muck
grubby and tattered.

Amazed at their black talons
huge like no thorn I had ever seen.
Long, strong, hooked around the wood.
It was then I saw

the two thin leather straps
tethering them to their prison perch
Why are they tied up, Dad?
Training, maybe. I asked, *for what?*

Today, on this crystalline Autumn day
my daughter and her daughters
and I lie on the grassy hillside, chatting –
a neighbour calls

12 o'clock: Wedgies!

Two wedge-tailed eagles
drift and soar
swooning the sky
their wide wings finger-feathered
spread like side fans.

Lifted by invisible thermals,
they draw circles in the blue,
spiraling, gliding on the warm air
weathering without effort
the fluctuations and turbulence.

We watch, and keep watching
mesmerized until our necks ache,
our eyes water; we marvel
at their majesty, their freedom,
their ownership of all they survey.

As the blue light softens
they slip north over the forest.
No tethers, no guns –
two monarchs of Nature's realm
in charge of their unbounded air.



A Fine Balance

Early morning and the bay
shimmers in a blue taffeta gown.
Spring and Toondah Harbour
are ready to welcome them.

Diamonds of sunlight
are running along the ruffled edges
of the incoming tide
flickering like runway beacons

showing the way home
for thousands of shorebirds
flying on whirring wings
from the northern chill.

I'm on the look-out for the Eastern Curlews
those big, wondrous birds
with their emblematic curved bills
long, competent tools for the deeper stores

of mud, leaving the upper food shelves
for smaller birds like the sandpipers,
dotterels; nature's way to ensure
there's enough for all.

Eastern curlews sweep in exhausted and ragged,
after their 10,000 kilometres flight
yet they settle with the elegance of ballet dancers
high stepping through the mangrove shoots.

The first-timers arrive a month or so later
unescorted, the millennia of genetic coding
guiding their long gruelling expedition
to their yet unseen southern home.

There is a symbiosis between the land,
the sea, the mud, the air and every living thing within;
curlew to crab, worm to dugong,
turtle to dolphin, koalas along the edge.

The existence of each, essential to the other,
the Eastern Curlew's future is fragile
until we too learn to live
within Nature's fine balance.



Photo: Aviceda

Long Distance World Champions

Imagine flying non-stop
for nine days and nights
no lights, only soft wings
and brown barred tails
following the code embedded
in your DNA
guiding you 11,000 kilometres
from Alaska to Moreton Bay.

Bar-tailed Godwits,
long-distance world champions,
fly the pathway twice a year
every year for millennia.
They arrive late August,
heading for the food-packed
mudflats along the shores
of Toondah Harbour

that one patch of coastline
essential to avoid extinction.
For this flock, there is nowhere else.
It's in their bones, in their wings,
the pull of a magnetic force
only they can feel.

If birds could cry
we would hear their weeping.
Critical stop-overs in the Yellow Sea
are dwindling; there are plans
to lay waste their Moreton Bay homeland;
drain the wetlands, build high-rise towers,
3600 hundred units, marinas, hotels –