



Woodcut print of Väinämöinen and the eagle.  
Akseli Gallen-Kallela, CC0, via Wikimedia CommonsThe Great Kalevala,

# Birds in Finnish Literature

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Kesy lintu,  
kosteaa, haisee höyhenille, haisee eläimelle, mykät silmät, luonnon silmät,  
suuri variksen nokka.  
Varis huutaa.

A tame bird,  
damp, smells of feathers, smells of animal, dumb eyes, nature's eyes,  
a large crow's beak.  
The crow cries.

Maila Pylkkönen: *Jeesuksen kylä* (The Village of Jesus), 1958, p. 65.  
Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

With a tame bird you can be nose-to-beak – so close you can smell its feathers. The Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) in Maila Pylkkönen's poem even lets you touch it. Despite its tameness, the bird smells of an animal, and its eyes are “dumb” “nature's eyes”. Pylkkönen's poem emphasises the physicality of the bird: the animal can be touched, smelled, seen and heard. Pylkkönen depicts the bird close to human, in an everyday situation, as a screaming crow, whose animality is obvious and in itself worthy of reflection and writing. However, birds have not always been like this in Finnish literature.

In poetry in particular, but also in fiction more widely, birds have, as a rule, had various symbolic meanings until around the 1950's. Birds have typically symbolised death, freedom, artistic expression, nationality and other abstract ideas and ideals related to human reality. Such human-centred bird symbolism is based on various traditions, concepts and currents in art, literature and culture. The use of birds as symbols of poetic expression has its roots in Romantic ideas of hidden truths that the artist, by looking at nature and thinking symbolically about natural phenomena, is able to reach and express this to other people. The birds that return to the North to nest in Spring time have also been used as symbols in National Romanticism.

The importance of birds as omens and symbols of death was in turn based on folklore and traditional beliefs.

The symbolism of death associated with birds was reinterpreted from the late 1960's onwards, when various environmental problems and the intensified use of natural resources becoming common themes in poetry. The rise of environmentally conscious poetry was linked to the emergence of environmentalism as a topic of public debate during the 1960's, both in Finland and internationally. From a literary-historical perspective, it is important to note that the emergence of environmental issues in poetry was possible because of notions of what and

how to express in poetry began to expand. As Finnish literary historians have remarked, everyday topics became suitable as subjects of poetry, poetic expression was increasingly speech-like, and poets started to address social issues and even took political positions in their literary works (e.g. Niemi 1999, 176; Laitinen 1981, 574).

The 1960's was also a significant period for bird poetry, as poetry began to pay more and more attention to the observation of nature and the precise, direct expression of observations. Risto Rasa, Jyri Schreck and Caj Westerberg, for example, published minimalist poetry focusing on individual observations of nature, which critics quickly recognised as a genre of poetry in its own right and called it nature poetry (Laine 1973; Virtanen 1975; Launonen 1977). Influenced by ancient Chinese poetry, minimalist nature poetry often focused on birds. Here is a sample of Risto Rasa's style:

Puut ovat täynnä  
lintujen valtakuntia.  
Puut ovat täynnä  
metsiä joissa asutaan.

Trees are full  
of kingdoms of birds.  
Trees are full  
of forests that are lived in.

Risto Rasa: *Metsän seinä on vain vihreä ovi* (The Forest Wall is just a Green Door), 1971, p. 33. Transl. Karoliina Lummaa.

Playing with scales, such as calling trees whole inhabited forests, is typical of Rasa's poetry. If the poem is interpreted as a defence of the birds' habitat, it also contains an ecological message about the importance of forests. Contemporary critics began to recognise the environmental-political dimensions of nature poetry towards the end of the 1970's, around the time when environmental problems began to be addressed more and more explicitly in poetry. Environmentally conscious nature poetry meant that birds were increasingly signified as animals instead of mere symbols for human-centred ideas, but as the 1980's progressed, birds took on many other meanings in poetry, too.

Regarding prose, no significant expressive change in the depiction of birds has yet been observed – although no systematic research has been carried out. In the light of current understanding of literary history, the presence of birds as animals is clearest and most prominent in “outdoor” literature, where birds are typically either game to be hunted or details that attract attention in the landscape (Varis 2003). Otherwise, narrative literature is dominated by individual works that focus on birds in one way or another. Cautiously, however, it could be said that fiction that focuses on birds' own birdness, bird life and the relationship between birds and humans is becoming more common as we get closer to the present day. As early as the 1950's, Maila Pykkönen, for example, was writing about the

curious nature of birds, both in prose and poetry. Eeva Kilpi's poetry collection *Animalia* (1987) addresses animal rights and offers diverse philosophical reflections on animals, including birds. In the 1970's, a great many poets wrote about birds, from many different perspectives. In prose, birds were frequent in for example Veikko Huovinen's short stories. Since the 1980s, birds and the relationship between birds and humans have been the subject of writing by women writers, whose work includes science fiction and supernatural elements. Examples include Leena Krohn's entire prose oeuvre, Johanna Sinisalo's novel *Linnunaivot* (Birdbrain, 2008) and Tiina Raevaara's collection of short stories *En tunne sinua vierelläni* (I don't know you next to me, 2010).

The history of birds in Finnish literature could be told in many different ways. The presence of birds in literature is rich, diverse, constant and at the same time hiding, random and surprising. When one begins to read fiction with eyes on birds, they are constantly encountered as various details of the landscape, as individuals suffering from or indicating environmental change, as populations and species, as singers, as wild animals to be encountered and cared for, as food to be caught in the forest or purchased in shops, sometimes even as research subjects to be ringed. In this article I address Finnish bird literature from the perspective of the animality of birds. I will highlight some key themes related to birds in fiction, especially poetry: birds in a changing environment, birds as objects of knowledge, and the possibility of interspecies understanding. This essay builds on my earlier research on Finnish-language bird poetry and on environmentalist themes in Finnish literature.

### **Birds in a changing environment**

The 1970's were a time of environmental awakening in Finland. In addition to conservation interests directed towards individual places and species, understanding of global environmental problems began to grow. There were also concerns about the intensified use of land and natural resources. During the decade, environmental awareness and concern began to spread into poetry. Finnish poetry on environmental issues in the 1970's focused in particular on intensive forestry, environmental toxins and urbanisation. In poetry, birds typically suffered from all these changes. The following poem, entitled "Kiiruhtavat" (Hotfooting), from Sauli Sarkanen's third collection *Neidonvaiippa* (Helleborine, 1978), mentions Common Cranes (*Grus grus*) in a series of depredations:

Miehet käyvät, kuorivat maasta mullan,  
mullasta maan, maasta puun, puusta neulaset,  
suosta kurjet, kurjista henget,  
                  hengestä ilman, ilmasta hapen,  
                  näin on jo myöhäinen,  
illat hiipivät      varjoille.

Men come visiting, peeling the soil from the earth,  
the earth from the soil, the tree from the earth, needles from the tree,  
cranes from the marsh, breaths from the cranes,  
air from the breath, oxygen from the air,  
so it's already late,  
evenings creep to shadows.

Sauli Sarkanen: *Neidonvaippa* (Helleborine), 1978, p. 39.  
Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

The increasing and expanding use of natural resources is presented in the poem as an apocalyptic lyric in which various interrelated substances and creatures are each in turn “peeled off” or exploited. The concern about the disappearance of cranes, which was widely shared in the 1970’s, fortunately proved to be unfounded (see Hildén & Linkola 1962, 632; Väisänen et al. 1998, 164– 165). On the other hand, it has been argued that the drainage of peatlands in the 1960’s and 1970’s is still the most significant environmental change in Finland (see Wahlström et al. 1992). In Sarkanen's poem, the “breaths” of the cranes are peeled off, which probably refers to the outright killing of the birds. However, there may also be a more mythical level to the poem, as the word “henki” also refers to “spirit”. Breath, spirit, air and oxygen are all related to breathing, the immaterial and life, but spirit is perhaps something beyond the mundane and the individual – the spiritual. The “peeling” of oxygen from the air marks a historical turning point, after which it is “already late” and “evenings creep to the shadows”. The ending of evenings in shadows is an obvious reference to some kind of final destruction.

Feelings of final destruction were also common in poems about environmental toxins and pollutants, although they were relatively few in number compared to the forest poetry. However, it is the poison poems that are significant from the point of view of the bird theme. Human guilt, fear of the irreversible destruction of physical habitats and confusion in the face of suffering non- humans are often interwoven in an interesting way in poems that depict poisoned birds. The following poem is from Anne Hänninen's debut collection *Yön tina sulaa aamuun* (The Tin of Night Melts into Morning, 1978):

Punavatsainen lintu istuu kirjavassa haavassa,  
varisevat sen keltaiset sitruunalehdet tuulen viedä.  
Ja lintu aukoo nokkaansa ääntä saamatta,  
on koko ajan sen kurkku pingoitettu lauluun,  
vaan hiljaisuus vain lehdossa huokuilee ja  
sitruunanlehdistä viimeinen vierähtää irti kuin kyynel.  
Punavatsainen mykkä lintu avaa jäykät siipensä, ei se lennä,  
se putoaa kuin kivi, ruskeiden sienien sekaan.

A red-bellied bird sits on a colourful aspen,  
its yellow lemon leaves tremble and are taken by the wind.  
And the bird opens its beak without making a sound,  
all the time its throat is taut to sing,  
but silence only sighs in the grove, and  
the last of the lemon-leaves rolls away like a tear.  
The red-bellied mute bird opens its stiff wings, it does not fly,  
it falls like a stone, among the brown mushrooms.

Anne Hänninen: *Yön tina sulaa aamuun* (The Tin of Night Melts into Morning), 1978, p. 78.  
Transl. Karoliina Lummaa.

In Hänninen's poem, attention is drawn to a bird that has become unable to sing and fly. Readers familiar with the debate on environmental toxins will easily be reminded of Rachel Carson's world-famous book from 1962 on environmental toxins, *Silent Spring*. It begins with the fictional story "A Fable for Tomorrow", in which the effects of pesticides are concretised by the description of the birds' silence: "there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh" (Carson 1962/1966, p. 22). In Hänninen's poem, a red-bellied bird "opens its beak without making a sound". The poem's references to the stiffness of the bird's wings and its falling to the ground can, on the other hand, be linked to the description of birds by Matti Helminen (1961, 80), who wrote about the effects of DDT in Finland: "The birds gradually lost their ability to fly, their legs became paralysed, and death followed after severe convulsions." In addition to Hänninen, Hannu Salakka, for example, wrote about poisoned birds, describing in detail, as Hänninen did, the bird's death struggle.

Salakka also wrote about birds in the context of urbanisation. The following fragment of a poem is from the collection *Ennen kaipasin tähän* (I used to long for here, 1983):

[--]  
Puiden juurille pääsee hissillä  
mutta metsä on puisto,  
ei kiveä tai oksaa johon kompastua  
eikä ainoatakaan erikoista paikkaa johon pysähtyä  
katselemaan ja kuuntelemaan.  
Eikä metsän keskelle syntynyt piittaa  
kaupunkilinnuista,  
tiilenkoloja, tuuletusaukkoja ja ihmisen hajua  
kaipaavista.

Vain metsälinnut ovat oikeita lintuja,  
lentävät ihmisen luota viimeiseen metsään saakka  
ja jättävät sitten senkin.

[--]

[--]  
You can get to the roots of the trees with a lift  
but the forest is a park,  
no stone or branch to trip over

nor a single special place to stop  
to look and listen.  
And those born in the middle of the forest don't care  
of city birds,  
ones that miss  
brick holes, air vents and the smell of humans.

Only forest birds are real birds,  
flying from humans to the last forest  
and then leave that too.  
[--]

Hannu Salakka: *Ennen kaipasin tähän* (I used to long for here), 1983, p. 24.  
Transl. Karoliina Lummaa.

The 1970's were a time of rapid urbanisation in Finland. In poetry, the emptying of the countryside and the feelings associated with it were often addressed with depictions of nature, where natural landscapes represented an original and pure form of life that people gave up, either of their own free will or because they had no choice. Salakka's poem conveys a dissatisfaction with the apparent ease of urban life, and at the same time with its monotony and lack of nature. "Only forest birds are real birds" is a startling statement, but not unique in Finnish bird lore. There are also fake, unnatural or unloved city birds for example in poems written by Anne Hänninen and Jyri Schreck. The poets' attention was drawn to birds at a time when the connection between deforestation, water pollution and industrial and urban development and the reduction of bird habitats was becoming widely recognised. The result was both a sympathetic concern for birds and an arrogant disapproval of their "unbirdlikeness". Poems about wild birds can also be interpreted as expressions of conflicting human emotions and thoughts, drawing on the traditional role of birds. Birds were used to express the pain and guilt of leaving the land. The false birds were compared to people who had left their homes and their former way of life. On the other hand, the problematisation of human's relationship with nature was also addressed in poetry by moving birds from the forests and countryside to the city. The unnatural birds that make their home in the city serve as a metaphor for people who are ready to leave their birthplace, their way of life and their homeland.

### **Birds as objects of knowledge**

The early Finnish folk tradition of birds includes words of birth, i.e. knowledge about the origin of different things, such as bird species, passed down from one generation to the next by oral tradition. In Finnish-Karelian mythology, the Common Raven (*Corvus corax*), which in Finnish tradition is often associated with knowledge but also with evil, has the following words of origin:

Hoi sie korppi koito lintu,  
Korppi kolmen Lemmon lintu,  
Maassa on sinun majasi,  
Koivussa sinun kotisi;  
Kyllä sun sukusi tieän,  
Kanssa kaiken kasvantosi:  
Koottu oot koan noesta, Tulipuista tukkueltu,  
Sysilöistä synnytetty,  
Pantu kaikesta pahasta,  
[--]

Ho! raven, thou ill-omened bird,  
of three Lempos thou art the bird,  
thy hovel is on the ground,  
thy home is on a birch;  
full well I know thine origin  
with all thy bringing-up:  
thou wast gathered from kitchen soot,  
heaped up from burning sticks,  
wast bred from coals,  
composed of all that is bad  
[--]

*The Magic Songs of the Finns*, "The Origin of the Raven 18.b". Compiled by Elias Lönnrot in 1880, translated into English by John Abercromby in 1898.

The origin of the raven is set in the objects and realms of the Hiisi, the Death Elf, and other black or sinister things.

Knowing birds and knowing about birds is one of the enduring themes of Finnish bird lore. Poetry about bird knowledge also brings out the animality of birds in an obvious way. The following poem by Sauli Sarkanen, "Picoides tridactylus", is part of a series of poems entitled "Piciformes", which is included in the collection *Joku on käsitellyt tätä maailmaa* (Somebody Has Been Working on This World, 1976):

En oikein ymmärrä  
miksi muut sukulaiseni  
eivät pidä kuusista yli kaiken.  
Minusta niissä on koko  
maailman sulo.

I can't quite understand  
why my other relatives  
don't like spruces better than anything.  
I think they contain  
the sweetness of all the world.

Sauli Sarkanen: *Joku on käsitellyt tätä maailmaa* (Someone Has Been Working on This World), 1976, p. 43. Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.



The title of the series “Piciformes” provides a reading guide for six short poems, each of which is named after the scientific name of a particular woodpecker that breeds in Finland and explains the appearance, habitat or situation of the species in question. In “Piciformes”, Sarkanen, who has researched the nesting biology of White-backed Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) and written about their conservation, combines his scientific expertise with a strong environmental ethical message, which was a strong element of his poetry during the 1970’s. In the poem “*Picoides tridactylus*”, a Three-toed Woodpecker from the northern coniferous forests speaks rapturously about spruce trees. As the only woodpecker that inhabits the coniferous forests, and especially the spruce trees, the Three-toed Woodpecker perceives the northern spruce as “the sweetness of all the world”. The bird’s focus on sweet spruce trees instead of itself may also be related to the anthropomorphic descriptions of this bird species as “silent” and “modest” in older ornithological literature (Hildén & Linkola 1962, 349; Helminen et al. 1971/1974, 146).

The following poem called “Kolmivarpainen tikka pöyhkeänä” (“A Three-Toed Woodpecker Puffed Up”) by Eero Lyyvuo from the collection *Pieniä laulajia* (Tiny Singers, 1946) creates a funny contrast with Sarkanen’s modest woodpecker:

Pretereteret – pretereteret,  
mulla on hienot höyhenet!  
Pretereteret!

Kitikitikiti – kitikitikiti,  
silkinmusta ja lumenviti!  
kitikitikiti,  
vuorotellen ne silmään vilkkuu,  
kademielistä naurain ilkkuu!  
Mull’ on aatelishöyhenet!  
Pretereteret!

Pretereteret – pretereteret,  
miestä hienompaa löydä et!  
Pretereteret!

Pretereteret – pretereteret,  
I’ve got feathers excellent!  
Pretereteret!

Kitikitikiti – kitikitikiti,  
silky black and snow-white!  
kitikitikiti,  
they take turns to glint in your eye,  
mock the envious with a laugh!  
I’ve got noble feathers!  
Pretereteret!

Pretereteret – pretereteret,  
a finer man you can’t detect!  
Pretereteret!

Eero Lyyvuo: *Pieniä laulajia* (Tiny Singers), 1946, p. 63–64.  
Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

Lyyvuo used typographical or compositional devices and phonetic patterning in his poems, which imitate the songs of various bird species. In the poem I quote above, the phonetic influences from the Three-toed Woodpecker are strongly present. The hard consonants p, r and t in “Pretereret” reflect the sound of drumming wood and other hard materials, and the typographic representation of the expression (in the original typography) as descending from top to bottom in the reading direction is likened to a quieting of the drumming sound towards the end of each line. The transcription of the bird's voice as “Kitikitiki” corresponds quite closely in phonetic form to the vocalisation of the Three-toed Woodpeckers (cf. Helminen et al. 1971/1974, 146). The “ki” and “ti” sounds, which are partly in two different lines, reflect the narrow phonetic repertoire of the bird, with only two short bursts of different pitch, the higher of which is also slightly louder.

Sarkanen's and Lyyvuo's poems about Three-toed Woodpeckers are in many ways based on knowledge of the species. At the same time, however, they strongly anthropomorphise the bird. Lyyvuo's aristocratic and masculine pomposity may seem far-fetched. From an evolutionary and ethological point of view, however, Lyyvuo's poem is entirely correct: the purpose of the bird's drumming is precisely to prove its own worth to its female counterparts. The impeccability of the plumage and the speed and loudness of the drumming indicate, at the very least, a vitality and ability worthy of consideration, which can be passed on to next generations.

Very little ornithological poetry has been written in Finland. The first to use scientific names in Finnish poetry was Eeva-Liisa Manner, whose poem “Tuttujen lintujen historiasta” (“On the history of familiar birds”) from her collection *Niin vaihtuivat vuoden ajat* (Thus Changed the Seasons, 1964) mentions the scientific name of the Eurasian Eagle Owl: “birds nest in the shade, owls flutter, / *bubo bubo*, suddenly all the voices wake up”. The same poem also imitates the Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*): “the stock dove tunes his hoarse flute, hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo”, and mentions the Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*): “peep, peep, peep: the eurasian jay opens its tail like a book, / the eurasian jay's book contains the writing of the forest”. The scientific nomenclature is most abundant in Timo Haajanen's posthumously published collection *Rigor mortis* (1991), which also contains several poems about bird ringing. The following poem called “Joskus sille voisi olla olemassa (*Picoides tridactylus*)” (At Times He Could Believe in the Existence of Things (*Picoides tridactylus*)) deals with the already familiar Three-toed Woodpecker:

Museon häiskä epäilee tietoja  
mitä sille on tullut pohjantikoista.  
Eikö se meinaa uskoa  
ennen kuin ulkomailta tai jostain  
tulee kontrollilöytöjä takaisin.  
Joskus sille voisi olla olemassa  
sellainenkin mitä ei ole muualla vahvistettu  
mutta mikä me vain tiedetään.  
Ja millä tikalla se tietää meidän tietävän  
olevan tunnusmerkillisesti kolme varvasta.

Tämä on informaatiota,  
peukalon nivel iskeskelty verille  
ja kynnen alta iho repsottaa yli sentin.

The bloke at the museum doubts the information  
he's received about three-toed woodpeckers.  
Is he not gonna believe  
until control discoveries come back  
from abroad or somewhere.  
At times he could believe in the existence of things  
that haven't been confirmed elsewhere  
but that we just know.  
And which woodpecker he knows we know  
has, as an identifying feature, three toes.  
This is information war,  
the thumb joint has been beaten bloody  
and skin flaps from under the nail, by over a centimetre.

Timo Haajanen: *Rigor mortis*, 1991, p. 51. Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

Observation-based scientific knowledge seems both the most accurate and the most neutral way of knowing about birds. However, the poem I quote above describes a conflict situation in which the “the bloke at the museum” doubts the findings of the poem's speaker and his colleagues. Interestingly, the birds to be ringed also contribute with their beaks and talons to the collection of scientific data and the “information war” that builds from it. This opens up a broader perspective on the material contingencies of ornithological research: the bodily presence of birds, their presence and activity in the vicinity of humans, and the reciprocal relationships between humans and birds. The familiar set-up between active human subjects conducting research and passive animal objects under study is challenged.

### **Opportunities for interspecies understanding**

Mitä tuo kuoren läpi häämöttävä valo on? Täytyykö minun lähteä täältä? Kuka minä olen? Mikä minä olen? Hänellä oli kymmenittäin kysymyksiä, joihin kenties koskaan ei saisi vastausta. Varmaa kuitenkin oli, että oli kuoriutumisen aika.

What is that light showing through the shell? Do I have to leave here? Who am I? What am I? He had dozens of questions that might never be answered. What was certain, however, was that it was time to hatch.

Alexis Kouros: *Gondwanan lapset* (Children of Gondwana), 1997, p. 6–7.  
Transl. Karoliina Lummaa.

Alexis Kouros's novel *Gondwanan lapset* (Children of Gondwana, published in 1997) begins inside the egg, on the 35th day of the hatching of the main character, a baby penguin. Already in the egg, the penguin asks for the first time the questions that structure the whole story: "Who am I? What am I?" The penguin's philosophical questions become more

poignant as the story progresses, when it becomes clear that the penguin has been born in an albatross's nest.

Kouros's work, classified as a young adult fantasy, follows the fantastic-realist code familiar from fiction stories such as Tiina Raevaara's short story "Gordonin tarina" (Gordon's Story, 2010) and Leena Krohn's short novel "Ihmisen vaatteissa" (In human clothing, 1976), in which humans and birds represent their species physically and behaviourally, yet share a common language and a vision of the world that is similar enough to enable them to communicate meaningfully with each other. In such works, the question of the possibilities of interspecies understanding becomes central.

*Gondwanan lapset* follows the familiar structure of fairy tales, in which the protagonist moves through a bounded environment and meets various characters, with whose help he tries to solve a problem related to his origins. In the story by Kouros, the identity sought is that of a biological species. Questions of identity, dreams and destiny are thus addressed and interpreted within a scientific and ecological framework. Animals construct their identities on the basis of where they have succeeded and what they have evolved into. The contradiction between dreams and destiny is seen as an impossibility to fight against one's own species characteristics: the penguin never learns to fly, even though it has dreamt of doing so ever since it was hatched in an albatross's nest. But fate also involves the idea of an outside guide or influencer, which in Kouros's story is the ornithologist who mixed the albatross and penguin eggs. The fate of animals can thus be simultaneously linked to evolution and human activity.

In *Gondwanan lapset*, the human relationship with – and power over – birds is explored in the context of scientific practices. The following passage deals with scientific naming:

- No miksi kutsut minua?
- Aves; Sphenisciformis; Spheniscidae; Pygoscelis Adélieae, vastasin eläintieteilijän tarkkuudella. - Onko kaikki tuo minun nimeni? Ja minä olen vain pieni olento. Miten sitten nimeät vuoren tai jäätäläiskalan?
- Se on sinun tieteellinen nimesi, joka sisältää lajin, heimon, lahkun ja niin edelleen. Yksinkertaisemmin sanoen olet pingviini.
- Mitä nimeni tarkoittaa?

En halunnut kertoa, että ranskalaisen tutkimusmatkailijan mielestä pingviinit olivat yhtä hassun näköisiä kuin hänen vaimonsa, ja että hän yhden samppanjapullollisen jälkeen oli nimittänyt ne vaimonsa mukaisesti "Adélieksi", ja että Pygoscelis tarkoittaa rampajalkaista. Terminologiamme ei ollut puolustettavissa.

- So what do you call me?
- Aves; Sphenisciformis; Spheniscidae; Pygoscelis Adélieae, I answered with zoologist's precision. - Is that all my name? And I'm just a little creature. Then how do you name a mountain or a giant fish?
- It's your scientific name, which includes species, genus, family and so on. In simpler words, you are a penguin.
- What does my name mean?

I didn't want to tell you that a French explorer thought penguins were as funny-looking as his wife, and that after one bottle of champagne he had named them

“Adélie” after his wife, and that *Pygoscelis* means crippled foot. There was no excuse for our terminology.

Alexis Kouros: *Gondwanan lapset* (Children of Gondwana), 1997, p. 75.  
Transl. Karoliina Lummaa.

The penguin, or more precisely the Adélie penguin, is puzzled by the length of its name. As the researcher explains, the bird's scientific name places it in a precise position in relation to other species. The origin of the name, on the other hand, is something the researcher prefers to remain silent about.

In Kouros's *Gondwanan lapset*, as in Raevaara's *Gordonin tarina*, the bird's perspective, built on story and narration, helps to examine human activity critically. However, writing about birds in the first person can also offer both the writer and the reader the opportunity to experience the reality of birds. The following poem is from Jouni Tossavainen's collection *Kerro* (Tell, 2007), which contains many sonically and visually experimental poems about urban birds:

kuumenen kun myönnyn vilulle toinen on nälkä joka tulee eteen vaikka takaa en  
näe ei kuulu tai yhtä vähän höyhen siipisulaksi jos en kuumota jos munat  
pääsevät pakoon jos jäähtyvät kuin hen gitys nokassa jos nyt nokka on  
silmien edessä: joka hetkessä edessä: josta edempänä valuu  
viileämpää kurkun alle suhinaa vettä tai  
myrskymärkää suojattom kun en paina mitään tai  
siementen tasaisella jos loon muualle kuin maa  
madoksi ääni pelottava nopeasti kääntää varjo mu  
suhauttaa suhahduksella kirkaisee lopuksi vaikka  
loppua ei ole on pakko älä pelkää nuku uutta laulua  
kuuntele on mun munat muna kivi nämä nälät lapset  
kovat joille yksin olen jano metsä tai taivas joka ei osaa  
liikahtaa pilven puoleen tai ruohon rinta ja oksien aallot unettava  
unettavasti unettaa silittää sitä mitä tahtoo toistaa ei tiputtaa pesästä pois  
myönnyn kun jysiö rasahdus risu särö yksi: kaksi kolme

I get heated when I yield to cold the other is hunger which confronts me though I don't  
see from behind don't hear or just as little as down can be in the air when I'm not when  
I'm pushing everything you can't get in the shade of the silicon under the sun I can be

heard from the back of my neck as  
 wing feather if I do not feel hot  
 down like breath in a beak if  
 front in every moment: from  
 something cooler under the  
 storm-wet unprotected air  
 every in which you cannot  
 underground voice fright as  
 whizz screeches in the end  
 be don't fear sleep listen to a new  
 hungers children for whom alone I am thirst forest or sky which cannot shift towards a  
 cloud or  
 the breast of grass and branches of waves soporific soporifically puts to  
 sleep strokes what it wants to repeat does not drop out of the nest I yield when a thump  
 crackle a twig a crack one: two three

fast as I can blacker blueberries  
 if the eggs escape if they cool  
 the beak is before the eyes: in  
 which further ahead flows  
 throat rustling water or  
 when thing or when I press  
 elsewhere except to be  
 fast turns a shadow a blue a  
 through there is no end it has to  
 song ego eggs egg stone these

Jouni Tossavainen: *Kerro* (Tell), 2007, unpaginated.  
 Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

The speaker of the poem is very birdlike in describing, for example, the feeling of rain on its body. An empty space opens up in the middle of the poem, which is easy to see as an egg, given the content of the poem. The avian speaker's attention is drawn to the eggs, which are also described in the ambiguous verses at the end. It is not certain what will eventually happen in the nest of the tired, caring bird – the word “jysiö” (translated as “thump”) is Tossavainen's own. It seems to be based on the verb “jysähtää”, to strike hard, or to thunder, which means that the word may refer to an external event, perhaps to an attacker. It could just as easily refer to what is happening inside the egg. Are the crackles coming from the egg or eggs, and are they breaking the egg from the outside or the inside? Perhaps “jysiö” describes the moment of hatching? In his poem, Tossavainen seems to construct a description of the thoughts and experiences of the mother bird. Visually, the poem builds a kind of nest of characters, with (and without) a white intact bird egg in the middle.

The possible hatching of the bird from the egg is also illustrated in the following poem by Antti Salminen from the collection *Nollankuori* (The Zero's Shell, 2013):

Nokka näkyy jo  
 se tulee läpi

Tuore nolla rakoilee  
 ei ole mistä lopettaa

The beak's already showing  
 it's coming through

A fresh zero's cracking  
 no place whence to end

Antti Salminen: *Nollankuori* (The Zero's Shell), 2013, p. 12.  
 Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

Finnish writer and environmental philosopher Antti Salminen's debut poetry collection *Nollankuori* (2013) could be described as a philosophical work. In his verses, which are partly composed of new words, Salminen seeks alliance with non-human beings and outlines a way of being that focuses on experience and the freedom of happening rather than on doing and controlling. A recurring motif in the work is zero, signifying a productive emptiness and also the beginning of something that has always been already happening and affecting. In the poem I quote above, there is something birdlike about this enigmatic zero, which also justifies the title of the collection, *Nollankuori*, the Zero's Shell. In the poem, the opening or breaking of the "fresh zero" is caused by a creature with a beak.

The bird and the bird's egg have provided a model for birth and life – and, more broadly, for the birth of the whole world – in many cultures. According to Finnish folklore, the sky and the earth also originate from the egg of a bird. However, Salminen's poem ends with the ambiguous phrase "no place whence to end". By reversing the established phrase "where to begin", the poem challenges our ideas of hatching, birth or the emergence of something new as an absolute beginning with a temporal limit. "Fresh Zero", with its cracking shell and protruding beak, may thus be a bird's egg, but it is also a description of birth and life as a process with no clear beginning or end. The chick is already there, but inside the egg, as is told also in *Gondwanan lapset*.

There has been a shift in Finnish environmental poetry since the 1970's: during and after the 2010's, poets have focused on the possibility of new kinds of interspecies relationships and more ecologically sustainable ways of life. The direct naming of environmental problems and reflection on human culpability has diminished. Birds may stay more at the background in such environmental poetry. On the other hand, birds can also emerge as new models of sustainable life, reinforced by their long evolutionary history. Birds, after all, have been as they are now throughout the time our own species has evolved into what it is today. Birds have thus provided conceptual and material tools for understanding and perceiving the world – including forms of artistic expression. Such historical precedence can also be conceived of as resilience, survival beyond humanity. Salminen's next bird poem could be about such survival:

Tavallinen pesä  
nyrkinkokoinen kivi  
pimeässä avautuva käsi

hyvä pesä

linnulle  
ihmisen jälkeen

An ordinary nest  
a fist-sized stone  
a hand opening in the dark

a good nest

for birds  
after man

Antti Salminen: *Nollankuori* (The Zero's Shell), 2013, p. 16.  
Transl. Emily Jeremiah & Fleur Jeremiah.

In this poem, the history of the bird goes beyond human. Interestingly, the bird's nest is compared to the human hand in two ways: the “fist-sized stone” and the “hand opening in the dark” are mentioned. *Homo sapiens* is generally considered to be characterised not only by language and conceptual thinking, but also by a hand capable of grasping and working, which has in fact been argued to be crucial to the evolution of humans and human cultures. In Finnish too, the word “*käsittää*” (to grasp) originally meant a concrete grasping action. On the other hand, the hand can also be understood figuratively, in which case the darkness simply opens up something for the bird to perch on. However one interprets the connection between the hand and the nest, the historical situation of human is also structured in this poem by the bird or birds. There is an elemental link between birds and humans, which means that Salminen is not just writing about the challenges of interspecies understanding but also about interspecies survival.

### **Closing words**

Fiction provides an infinitely varied view of the many relationships between birds and humans, and the ways in which humans think about, treat, study, love and even hate birds. The portrayal of birds as animals is linked to both artistic and natural conceptions. Birds must be seen as worthy of representation in fiction, writers and readers must have a shared understanding that birds can be written about as animals, and there must be knowledge, observation and expertise about birds. Artists have shown in their works and in their reflections on them that all writing and representations of birds are relative, based on a particular way of speaking or writing. Science has its own terminology and starting points, folklore its own belief systems, and the arts its own means and language.

On the other hand, artists and scientists who are passionate and serious about birds have long recognised that all art about birds requires the presence and lives of real birds. The writer and journalist Pekka Suhonen published an essay in the 2/1980 issue of the literary magazine *Parnasso* entitled “*Muuttolintujen runous*” (Poetry of migratory birds), in which he points out that the poetry of birds is always based on knowledge, experience and understanding of birds:

Sen jolle linnut ovat silmän ilo ja uteliaisuuden kohde, parhaassa tapauksessa jonkin runonsäkeen inspiroija, täytyy ymmärtää tätä suurta luonnonkokonaisuutta, josta lintujen muutto ja vaellus kertovat. Kilometrit, rasvagrammat, meteorologiset tosiseikat ja kokeiden kuvaukset ovat sen mittaus- ja selitysaineistoa.

For whom birds are a delight to the eye and an object of curiosity, at best the inspiration for a poem, one must understand this great natural whole of which the migration and migration of birds is a record. Kilometres, fat charts, meteorological facts and descriptions of experiments are the means of measuring and explaining it.

(Suhonen 1980, 100.)

As bird individuals, populations and eventually species begin to thin out as a result of intensive agriculture, the loss of evergreen forests and other natural environments, pollution of land, sea and air, climate change and the as yet unknown combined and multiplied effects of these, culture also gradually begins to become more monotonous. The loss of birds is also a cultural loss.



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