

Story for performance #977  
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Source: Gina Hotta, 'Asian American soldiers of conscience', *Asia Times online*, 22/02/08.

Tags: [animals](#), [world events](#), [water](#)

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Gloriously coloured parrots nod their heads and gossip as they sashay, in their ridiculous waddling way, sideways up some gnarly old branch, or dangle nonchalantly upside down, swinging in the breeze. Black and white magpies stalk the garden—even the silly fluffed up adolescents—all so pompous on knobbly twig-thin legs. Willy-wagtails fix me with beady black eyes and waggle their tails fearlessly from the grass. The satin bowerbirds are much shyer. I have to watch them through the window as they hop it from roof to tree and back again. The other day I saw a greeny-bronze female swallow some enormous, gloopy, slimy-yellow thing she retrieved from the old wisteria. Kookaburras observe patiently from the gumtrees. Just before the rain starts, their mad laughter ricochets around the escarpment. You can hear them for miles.

But nothing prepares you for the white cockatoos exploding into noise and motion round about dawn. Such demented cackling and shrieking. I imagine them frightening themselves into wakefulness. They certainly woke me. That first morning in the cabin I was instantly out of bed, immediately laughing. I never wake up like that. They are glorious and outrageous and demanding and voracious. We don't feed them. You wouldn't want them eating the house: chewed-up window frames, lintels and balconies are the norm in this neighbourhood. Black cockatoos are rather more exotic and other-worldly. Their strange wailing call pierces my heart, and their less frequent appearances seem to portend wild elemental changes. Come to think of it, there have been a lot more of them about lately.

Between lake and ocean, enormous pelicans ride the thermals, looking for all the world like a squadron of Sunderland Flying Boats on patrol. Seemingly imperturbable they soar in formation, whilst smaller birds dart about below them. When I turn my head, it's the deep green of temperate rainforest. Jack comes in with coffee and a newspaper. I stroke the down on his back and shoulders. It's getting thicker and more silvery as winter approaches, and his eyes have deepened into a kind of silvery bronze colour.

I watch the birds and ignore the newspaper with its daily litany of atrocity, scandal, prejudice, and spectator sport. I contemplate 'humanity' and 'civic values', 'democratic aspirations' and 'the good life' and I wonder how in a world of plenty it's come to this? Jack reports that our City Councillors have been caught with their snouts in the trough again, and I turn my head, trying to shrug it off. I harden my ears against stories of drunken Serbs torching the US Embassy in Belgrade nor do I want to think about the Middle East or Africa, particularly not Darfur. I've got other things on my mind today.

Throughout the day, I manage to keep the normal

things happening: going to work, gossiping with colleagues, going through the mail, word-processing and data entry. It's not that interesting but compared to all the 'interesting' things taking place in the world, the routine's manageable, even pleasurable. Jack says it's age and I think maybe he's right. On the other hand, while I've never been in a war, I know people who have, and they seem to operate on the basis that you keep your head down and hope that no one—not God, not the world, not the enemy—pays any attention to you. If you can get by unnoticed, you can survive.

All day I feel like a spy. My shoulder blades itch. I want to look around and see who's watching but I don't want to seem paranoid. It's just that the lumps on my back are really starting to protrude. Jack checked them out last night and said they were hard but kind of flexible.

When I get home, it's still quite early and the cabin is empty. Jack's clothing is in a pile on the floor and his flippers have gone. He'll be out there now I guess, swimming strongly, deep into the ocean. He won't be back, and while I probably should be panicking, anxiety seems unnecessary somehow.

Later, I walk down the hill to collect the mail. The neighbourhood kids are playing in the road. They call out 'Hi' but don't seem to notice anything. I'm a bit surprised by that, although as Jack says, it's better if no one notices. My shoulders feel like a couple of cats fighting in a sack. The lumps feel enormous and even my back muscles seem enlarged, which is not unpleasant but when I turn my head to take a look, I can't really see anything.

I keep on walking for a while but my feet seem to be losing their grip on the earth. My toes spread as I hang on tight, trying to keep my balance. I imagine the planet untethered from the gravitational pull of the sun, plunging into the Milky Way, but I still can't let go. I go back, gather up the keys and drive to the highest point on the mountain that I can reach by car. Here on a grassy slope, hang-gliders hunch into harnesses, or zip themselves into strange chrysalis-like contraptions. Lumbering clumsily to the edge they launch out into the abyss. I hold my breath with them until the updraft kicks in, picking up enormous hot pink, blue or electric green sails, sending them soaring over the ocean. I find myself singing to them: 'Here I am sitting in a tin can far above the world; planet earth is blue and there's nothing I can do'. I feel a strange rippling sensation. My wings unfurl, for the first time in years. As the sky loses its brightness and darkness falls, I step off into the ether and fly.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sarah Miller.*