Out of Place: A Meditation on *Murmurations*

The starling is my darling, although
I don't much approve of its
Habits. Proletarian bird,
Nesting in holes and corners, making a mess

(from "The Starling" John Heath-Stubbs)

In his rumination on the Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), John Heath-Stubs seems caught between the two paradoxical emotions of annoyance and admiration. His darling bird is beautiful in its resourcefulness, nesting in any available place. The bird is a worker; it finds or forges a home because needs must. The starling is a plucky bird, a bird bent on survival. A bird that will thrive. These are good qualities, the poet implies, qualities worthy of admiration. And yet, despite his appreciation for the starling's ingenuity and resourcefulness, the poet is also frustrated by it. The starling's ability to thrive, its survival, and its incessant labouring are causes not only for appreciation, but for disapproval and annoyance, as well. This species does *too* well, it seems. Why does the starling's radical survival so bother the poet? Is it that the starling's adaptability threatens him? Or perhaps it's that the survival of this small bird, by the thousands, reminds the poet that he is not as necessary, unique, or integral to his own environment as he may wish. The common starling is more adaptable and resourceful than the human. How frustrating. How humbling. How arresting, this realization, once again, that humans are not the centre of their own environments. How necessary.

At a time when concepts such as sustainability and bio-diversity are at the forefront of environmental and political discourses, how do we understand species that, relationally, do *too* well? What place is there for the starling or the quaking aspen—both thriving invasive species—in conservation and preservation work? And how do we experience and understand objects with

histories that outlast us? These are some of the larger questions and concerns that inform Rita McKeough's and Graeme Patterson's collaborative work.

Murmurations is a collaborative act and exploration of radical survival undertaken by Graeme Patterson and Rita McKeough. The Starling, the Quaking Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), and the player piano are the artists' interlocutors. They are the beings and objects that open spaces for encounter, interrogation, and interaction. The terms of inquiry and interation, though, are not the viewer's. Instead, like poet John Heath-Stubb's simultaneous paradoxical feelings of annoyance and admiration, the viewer is invited into a relationship of shifting proximities, where anthropocentrism is decentered. Viewers have to step outside their own agency and see themselves in conjunction and communication with the artists' environment. This is important. Decentering human agency and placing it in a collaborative network with other species is a wonderfully radical act. *Murmurations* playfully and joyfully disrupts the viewer's sense of proximity to space and place and suggestively urges that we ask better questions.

Being in the midst of *Murmurations* is a profound sensory experience. Though it is situated in a central room on the main floor of the Owens Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, the visitor cannot immediately access the work. Walking into *Murmurations* requires you to draw back a thick black curtain, walk past a sign cautioning you to mind the roots and be careful of the trees, (do we want to use the exact quote that was on the signboard?)and gingerly step over intricate root systems that stem from the walls and expand across the entire floor.

Once you have crossed the threshold it is clear you are in a different ecosystem. The light has a particular quality—neither golden nor fluorescent—it is more moonlight than man-made, though of

course it is manufactured. Here, the walls are covered with hundreds of leaves that shiver and quake at intervals that appear, at first, to be random. It takes walking right up to them to see, for certain, that they are fabricated objects. Between the leaf-covered walls, you will see tree trunks, roots, and branches reach up to the ceiling. On the far wall, an animation (a projection of?)birds flock together in a roiling cluster of energy. They hover, as in nature, just above the horizon of flora. At the center of this uncanny forest is a player piano that appears to be both anatomical heart and cyborg lung of it all. In the cold blue half-light you can see that the white box of the institutional gallery space has been reclaimed by hybrid species. The trees are made of fragile scrolls of music that were once played on a 1920s player piano. The leaves, by contrast, are strong: plastic, metal, and mounted on motors ~~Arduino boards~~ attached to small disks of wood foraged from clean-up projects in Calgary parks. As you make your way slowly around the room the leaves rustle and shake as if irritated or troubled by your presence. Voices begin to speak at irregular intervals. *Little by little* say the ~~trees~~birds, echoing words from the player piano scrolls that form tree trunks. The leaves/trees say *up down, back forth, flip flop* and make a breathing sound.~~*The woods, woods,* say the birds, *weep, weep. Seep, seep*~~. The utterances seem both to speak for and from the trees, leaves, and starlings. They are both cautionary and comforting, these utterances. The voices come as offerings to human visitors as they enter a space of irreverent and irrepressible infestation. *We will speak to you in your languages*, they seem to suggest, *but we will not give you more than that.* Suddenly, the piano plays a phrase that causes the leaves on the keys and the exposed hammers to shudder and dance. Just as suddenly, the flock of birds projected on the far wall swoop up and down in a frenetic ball of synchronized energy.

Or so it seems.

If you stand in this reclaimed and clamoring forest long enough, if you take your time and, after standing, move slowly and carefully amongst the roots and trunks, if you listen with your whole body to the birds, the quaking aspen leaves, and the piano, a pattern of sonic reciprocity emerges. You move through the room and, a few moments later, there is breath. A few moments more and there are voices, whispers, words. If your movement through this human-made forest triggers a reaction from the Starlings and the Quaking Aspen, that reaction is neither immediate nor direct. Instead, the mechanisms of your human movement are not sovereign in this space.

Murmnurations is a new iteration of the pastoral; it is a joyful celebration of infestation and invasion that places species other than human at the heart. And what is there to record and remember it all? Not person, but player piano. An object that, once made, has no need for human hands to make its music.

The pastoral is a genre with a long history. The Roman poet Virgil is perhaps the best-known practitioner of the pastoral using language (not sure what this means). In his hands pastoral poetry—made up of *Idylls*, or small scenes describing rural life—became dependent on the human interlocutor. The voices in pastoral poems explained to their readers the natural and simple beauty of rustic life. Naïveté and idealism are central to the pastoral; as a genre it depends on the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief and wholly buy into the notion that the natural world is simple, pure, and idyllic. *Murmunrations* inverts the tenets of the pastoral by inviting viewers a glimpse of the incomprehensible and complex magic of the natural world. But there is more to it than this. *Murmurations* asks us questions about our place in the world. It asks us questions about collaboration, between humans and their environments, between multiple species moving through spaces, together.

Murmurations asks that we think about our movements through shared space with species other than ourselves.

It was the natural landscape that gave McKeough and Patterson's *Murmurations* roots. Outside the forest, before you walk through the dark heavy curtain, there is a large painting. *View in the Delaware Valley* by John R. Johnston is a kind of key to the forest. It is a large painting that plays with light and dark in surprising ways. In the painted distance, the landscape opens up to green rolling hills and a horizon that tells the viewer the sun has just set. It is the foreground, however, that threatens to exceed its frame. In the foreground are trees, roots, dirt, and rocks so dark they bleed into one another. *View in the Delaware* is reminiscent of the pastoral, in that landscape is the central focus, yet Johnson's painting refuses to cast nature as bucolic or passive. Standing in front of the painting, it feels possible that a tree root may reach out, wrap a surreptitious rhizome around your ankle, and pull you into the foliage.

Johnston's painting was, for McKeough and Patterson, a point of departure. A place from which to think, together, through shared questions and shared obsessions. A primer, perhaps, for thinking through the impossibilities of framing nature, of hemming it in, of making it just another trope for human emotion. These questions, which run through both Patterson's and McKeough's solo work, were, for the artists, questions most productively explored in collaboration with each other. In each artist's work plants, animals, and music are recurrent methods of questioning. In *Murmurations*, those questions are posed with two voices.

Here, then, then are the collaborator's collaborators: the viewer, the starlings, the leaves and trees, and the throbbing piano heart. *Murmuration* is made of both murmurs and movements that ask

questions while simultaneously offering answers…if only the viewers be willing to listen and look. A murmuration is, at its most basic, about movement. Starling flocks create murmurations, sometimes called swarm behaviors, when they fly together in almost-incomprehensible synchronized movement. A murmuration looks like a pulsating, swooping cloud that shifts and twists, draws together and stretches out to thinness. This collective motion is called scale-free correlation. Flocks of birds are almost never led by a single individual, not even Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*), flying in their organized vee-formations. Bird movement is, in fact, managed collectively. Starlings, though, do it differently. Their scale-free correlation allows them to move quite literally as a unit. "The group responds as one," writes ornithologist Andrea Cavagna. Like starlings, the quaking aspen is a species predicated on collective movement. Quaking aspens grow in stands and share a rhizomatic root structure. Unlike most trees in North America, their bark is living tissue. They reproduce both asexually and sexually. Quaking Aspen are disturbed habitat species, which means they will often grow on land that is disturbed by fire or avalanche. They thrive, these shaking, trembling trees, and they do so as a collective entity.

Standing inside *Murmurations* is disorienting, and yet the disorientation is not wholly discomfiting. Here, the environment is at play, it resists subordination. But the intervention of human presence has significant effects on that play. Collaboration, it seems, is possible here, too. Normative narratives of infestation and invasion have been turned on their heads. Not quite an anti-pastoral, *Murmurations* doesn't just invite us to ask big questions about co-habitation and radical survival, it demands that we do. In Patterson's and McKeough's built forest the viewer becomes the paradoxical possibility. We are re-centred in our relationship to concepts of infestation and invasion. As the piano plays the music of memory and movement we are reminded that we had better find answers before questions, like species, disappear.

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References

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