

The Language of Birds

By Norbert Scheuer

My ancestor, Ambrosius Arimond, believed that all the birds of our globe had a common language. He dedicated his life to attempting to decode their songs, a world of sounds imbued with magic, notes, and meaning.

Ambrosius believed every species of bird had an individual song made up of the letters of some cryptic alphabet. He is said to have notated the birdsong in his own specially created script. He regarded the flight silhouette of the birds, characteristic for each species, as the grammar of this language, and the sky a parchment of lapis lazuli blue that arched over the entire globe right up to the stratosphere where swifts made love on the wing. His voyages of discovery took Ambrosius far and wide; according to his accounts in the year 1776 he crossed the Alps, made his way to Venice from where he sailed over the Eastern Mediterranean; he followed the Silk Road as far as Acre, Ptolemais of old, continued onwards to Palestine along the caravan routes through the deserts, followed the sweep of the Euphrates, ever further east-wards, over remote mountain ranges, through Persia and into present day Afghanistan. Father often talked to us about Ambrosius, and how most of his drawings had been lost in the Napoleonic wars, only a few yellowed pieces of parchment paper survived in a wooden chest in a barn, handwritten pages recounting his travels through Persia. Ambrosius had eventually returned to our village full of stories about the exotic birds he had seen and of people with Zephyr-like souls, launched from the peaks of the Hindu Kush in ornithopters and homemade gliders, drifting high over the land through a sea of air. I don't know how many of the stories were true, or whether my father believed them. He certainly took pleasure in passing them down to us. Beyond the Hindu Kush lay the kingdom of birds, he said, there were more bird species there than in the whole of Europe,

perhaps even the whole of the western world – it was all because of the
astounding blue of the sky.

Monday, 14 April 2003, Afghanistan, Airport

Medical Lance-Corporal Paul Arimond,

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Above the dusty airfield, magpies are flapping. The Asiatic sort have a narrow, shimmering green wing-bar and long tail feathers of bronze, and are a shade larger than our equivalent at home (*Pica pica germanica*). There are apparently five different subspecies here. The last time I saw magpies was in the grounds of the barracks at Lüneburg; they were cawing from their lookout in the crown of an aspen tree, and we were in the classroom preparing for our Afghanistan operation.

The magpies on the airfield are fighting over a chick they must have plundered from a nest. They fly up, their wings a blur in the glaring light. As they tear at the creature, their black and white wings flash with astounding beauty, then they walk their uneven, swaggering walk like town councillors, clicking their beaks.

I pull on my splinter proof vest, shoulder my pack, and along with a few fellow soldiers march past high barricades of barbed wire. The sun is scorching, my helmet slips on my sweaty forehead. The surroundings are shimmering in a fantastic array of browns. Powdery dust the colour of finely ground eggshells, the brown of canyons, and the reddish-brown of rocks, scrub-bushes, tamarisk-like trees with needle leaves of a pastel-hued lustre, tiny grains of sand that settle on my lips and eyebrows; dazzled I screw my eyes shut for a moment and open them again. The magpies have disappeared, there are no fences or barriers for them.

As the bus drives us from the airport to our camp and I look out curiously at the bustle of the town, I wonder where the magpies build their nests. They are a comforting reminder of home.

Tuesday, 15 April 2003

At the camp in the evening, in my temporary tent quarters, I write a letter to Jan. We've been friends since childhood but we have never written letters to each other – we were always able to meet and talk to one another, why would we write? Jan has not spoken since our accident, not in anything that could be described as speech at least, he babbles away in garbled nonsense, strange, alarming sounds that no one understands; not even his mother Odette can make head or tail of it. She feels helpless when she hears him like that, but all the doctors can say is he has suffered irreversible brain damage. His cranial bones were broken in the accident and they pressed down into the brain, damaging his left eye. He can't remember a thing. I'm not sure if Jan will understand the words I'm writing to him from Afghanistan, I don't want to believe that from now on everything is buried deep in his brain, all the ideas and experiences we shared. I want to keep Jan alive in my memory as he was before our accident. We had been planning to be students together after our graduation from high school; I wanted to travel, to learn the language of birds, and Jan was going to accompany me on my expeditions. We daydreamed, and laughed about it, because we knew how crazy it was, nothing more than imaginings.

I try to explain to Jan why I've joined the army and become a medical orderly, why I've volunteered for deployment in Afghanistan. I describe our surroundings, tell him a bit about the other lads in the military-camp, about the lake nearby and all the birds I have seen to date.

For months after the accident I existed in a vacuum, waiting for something to happen. My whole life had become devoid of meaning, I lay brooding on my bed or walked around aimlessly, nothing interested me any more. I didn't want to talk to anyone about what had happened, not even Theresa. I felt sure I would lose her, too, but there was nothing I could do

about it. I didn't want to take up my studies as planned, nor did I look for a job or an apprenticeship. I often quarrelled with my mother, tried to persuade her that there was no point in my starting anything new since I would soon be drafted by the Bundeswehr anyway.

Wednesday, 16 April 2003

Our military camp is an enclosed compound with tented living quarters, sleeping and administrative containers, a bar, a pizzeria, a shopping centre, and a post room, and there is even a small chapel. Soldiers from four nations are stationed in the camp. When I arrive, the camp already seems full to bursting point with new contingents coming every month.

On the first day I and the other newcomers see to the necessary formalities, an officer advises us on the safety regulations and describes the bomb attacks: the camp has been the target of rocket fire from the craggy plateau on several occasions but seldom sustained damage as it mostly hits the area outside the camp. As we are shown around other soldiers say hello, sprawled on folding chairs in front of their Portakabins, sheltering from the sun beneath the makeshift shade of camouflage nets, listening to music. Local workers have laid gravel paths between the containers. Most of the camp is under gravel to prevent the proliferation of desert mice, which are a pest. In the afternoon our photos are taken for the security passes; no one is allowed into the camp without an identification card. The passport photo shows me with my closely-shorn hair, almost everyone in the camp has their head shaved and grows a beard. I hardly recognise myself in the photo at first, and get a fright, believe I have already changed beyond recognition. But then I notice the small bump on the bridge of my nose. When I was a child I ran into a glass door and broke my nasal bone.

During our tour I find a feather. I stroke it flat and place it in my notebook – the first feather I have found here. In this country there are so many species of birds that are unfamiliar to me. This bird would be about the size of a titmouse. The feather has faded in the intensive light of the sun.

Saturday, 19th April 2003

It's Easter now at home. Theresa mentioned the snow has been falling again in the Eifel since Good Friday. She gave me a surprise phone call yesterday. When we were talking, she was on a local train to Gerolstein. I haven't spoken with Theresa for so long, I felt happy hearing her voice. She told me she had been in Kall, visiting Jan. Afterwards she had gone into the supermarket café to wait for the train. My mother is back serving in the café and she gave my telephone number to her. Theresa spoke about Jan and her work at the stud farm close to the maar. She had always wanted to work with horses, she loved them. At some point during her journey we were cut off.

Ambrosius notes five different species of magpie he observed during his travels through Afghanistan, they differ in the detail of their plumage, the colour of their tail feathers and beaks, and in size. Magpies belong to the crow family and yet they are also songbirds, hard to believe though it sometimes is with all their cawing and yattering. They have colonised almost every part of our globe. It is said that one magpie brings joy, the second sorrow. Pliny the Elder is known to have had great respect for the intelligence of these birds. He remarked that they enjoyed voicing certain words, not only learning these, but also loving them, privately considering when best they should be used and setting great store by that. It was a proven fact, he noted, that magpies died when the difficulty of a word got the better of them. When I was twelve, I adopted a magpie that had fallen out of its nest. Every morning, before going to school, I fed it, it soon came to trust me, perched on my shoulder, tugged at my ear lobe, and accompanied me on my walks.

In the evening when I have noted down the experiences of the day in my diary, I try to sketch the magpies I saw at the airfield. Lots of

ornithologists photograph the birds they are observing, but for me to take a photograph would be to lose the memory of what I had seen. I sketch the magpies and think of Theresa.

Theresa helped Bruni move the horses to the paddock, before they mucked out the stables, then it was time to drive the old Fendt tractor over to the pastures by the maar and to make a start on repairing the fences. It was astonishing how many things needed fixing on the farm during the winter. Theresa had hoped winter was finally over. But during the night everything had frozen again. After breakfast the owner of the farm had told them they had to repair the fences. Kessler was a compact old man with a bald head, a triangular wrinkled face, and bushy eyebrows. Bruni knew the ropes, she had been on the farm for a couple of years. Before coming to the Eifel she had worked as a horse handler on Baltrum, taking children out on rides along the beach in the summer, but winter on the island had almost driven her mad with boredom, everything was so obvious there, the streets did not even have names. When she read Kessler's advert in a horse magazine, she had packed her belongings and left. Some years from now she would take over the Kessler Farm, she told Theresa. Kessler and his wife had promised she could take over the farm and simply pay them a small pension. "We're getting old and won't manage it much longer," Kessler had said to her, and the old woman with her narrow, lined face had nodded. Bruni was naïve and believed everything the Kesslers told her. She also believed the young vet in charge of the medical care of the horses on the farm had his eye on her.

They spent the afternoon working down by the banks of the maar. An icy wind blew over the water, it was twilight and it began to snow. Theresa was wearing Paul's old parka on top of a thick woollen sweater but she did not have any work gloves. She pulled the wire taut with burning hands, and Bruni stapled it to the posts. Theresa looked out over the maar, a throng of birds rose up and landed once again. Whenever she saw birds, she thought about Paul, even as small boy he had been fascinated by all things that could fly. Bruni chattered non-stop, she could not be silent, not even when she was working. She was saying now that in the summer they would

take the holiday children out on hacks by the maar, they would swim and spend the whole day lying in the sun. Then she moved on to the vet, what a handsome fellow he was, and how she had taken his fancy when he had taken over old Dr Langrich's practice. "You didn't know him," she said. The new vet hadn't been working in the Eifel long, he came from a place not far from the coast by the Baltic Sea. Whenever he was at the farm, Bruni ran along after him like a little schoolgirl and went into rhapsodies about him.

They stretched another length of wire. Theresa had rips in the red palms of her hands from the work; whenever they started to heal, the wounds reopened.

When it started to snow more heavily, they finished up their work, packed away the tools and drove back to the farm over the dirt tracks. Because of a loose contact the headlights stopped working for minutes at a time, and they drove blindly over the bumpy tracks. The tractor had no windshield and the snow slapped their faces. Back at the farm they fed and groomed the horses. People from the city had arranged to visit the following day to look round the stables with a view to keeping their horses there.

Translation by Rebecca K. Morrison