

The Feathered Other

by Jonathan Franzen

The primitive and the postmodern intersect in Rebecca Jewell's new work as happily as they unhappily collide today in countries all around the Mediterranean. The primitive imperative to kill or cage migratory wild birds is now abetted by technologies— MP3 recordings of bird sounds, mass-produced nets, late-model shotguns— that give the birds little chance. The result is wholesale slaughter, a wildly unsustainable avian death toll in the hundreds of millions annually. A single mist-net installation in Cyprus, blaring recordings, can take two thousand small birds in one night. A couple of Italian hunters poaching in the Balkans, again using recordings, can kill a truckload of quail in one season. Bedouin hunters in Egypt boast of shooting sixty or more golden-orioles in one morning.

Feathers are what you see on the ground in the Mediterranean, and feathers are both reference and material in Jewell's collages and assemblages. Feathered animals have always been the great Other in the human world: beautiful, graceful, warm-blooded, socially and cognitively sophisticated, omnipresent, and yet— *they can fly and we cannot*. Envy of birds has historically and prehistorically taken the form of myth, as in Icarus or in the eagle that comes to peck at Prometheus's liver. It has taken the form of deification and ceremonial costume; the robes of chiefs are often adorned with feathers, no doubt for their rarity and beauty but also, I suspect, in homage to the freedom and majesty of the great Other. And the envy has taken the form of murdering birds purely for the satisfaction of it. Is it any accident that, even now, hunters and trappers in the Republic of Malta, a prison-like constellation of rocky islands that birds can visit and leave as they please, take a higher toll per square hectare than anywhere else in the Mediterranean? The lust to kill birds is said to be "in the Maltese blood."

Human envy of birds in its many forms, mythologizing and adornment and violence, is the primitive substrate of Jewell's art. But the way she samples and recombines and repurposes, defamiliarizing everyday feathers in unexpected contexts, some of them playful, some of them wrenching, is quintessentially postmodern. Nowhere is Europe more haunted by the spectre of the postmodern effacement of *difference* than in the natural world; unless laws are changed and enforcement seriously increased, we are in the age, right now, when bird life may well dwindle to a sterile monoculture of crows and pigeons. Jewell's work points toward a happier outcome, a reconnection with the primal wonder of birds, a recognition of how poor our world would be without the feathered Other.