Patrick West: Spurned Winged Lover

Patrick West has been published in *The Penguin Book of the Road* (Ed. Delia Falconer, 2008), *The Best Australian Stories* (Black Inc.) in 2006 and 2008, *Southerly, Going Down Swinging, Antipodes*, and many other places. Besides being a fiction writer, he is also an academic, essayist, scriptwriter and poet. Patrick is currently a Senior Lecturer in Professional and Creative Writing at Deakin University, Melbourne campus.

Spurned Winged Lover

Someone, somewhere, switched a radio on, switched on a kettle for tea, adjusted the volume, and . . .

“. . . in financial news, the Governor of the Reserve Bank, Martin Gould, announced today that he would be taking early retirement and stepping down from his position at the end of the year. Analysts have been expecting this announcement for some time and market reaction was muted. Interest rates are expected to remain on hold for the eleventh consecutive month after Tuesday’s Bank meeting despite recent strong housing market indicators combined with wages growth and inflationary pressures. Meanwhile, in other news . . .”

. . . somewhere, someone, a woman, switched a radio off. Alice Gander had her books to attend to. ‘Observed this morning’, she wrote in copperplate, ‘a white-fronted tern (non-breeding) cowering half dead on the back lawn. I was able to approach almost to touch it. According to Slater, the species is an accidental visitor, or vagrant, in these parts. Some of the locals have been giving it a hard time. The storm must have blown it in from the ocean.’

Alice sugared her tea. What twitcher could be better blessed? Airy doppelgängers in the mirrored surfaces of Sydney’s skyscrapers aside, the squalls blowing hard off the Pacific met with no obstacles before they gusted
into her closely watched garden. How many lost souls, rare fowls borne high over NSW, had dropped on Alice’s doorstep down the years?

Martin’s face still itched from the pan-caking before the media conference. The make-up girl always laid it on too thick, he thought to himself, made him look like—he wasn’t sure what it made him look like (owlish perhaps?). He got up from his office desk. A small mirror hung on the back of the door. But before he could get to it, a sharp knock sounded.

When the Asian crisis hit, and every galah with column inches to fill was screeching for one thing one day, and the very opposite the next, not many on the board had sided with Martin. But Lloyd Collins had. Former blue-chip speculator with the blue eyes, and ambitious as hell underneath, his next birthday was one of those with a zero at the end. His enemy? Time.

“Fronting those press bastards gives anyone a mother of a thirst. A man’s not a camel. Are you up for a beer or several?” The two men drank at The Waterloo after success and after failure. And the bigger the success, or the bigger the failure, the more that they drank.

As he grabbed his jacket from the hook behind the door, Martin suddenly glimpsed himself. Read my lips, he thought: “Not a camel and not an owl.”

Instantly Lloyd swivelled as if a skater on (thin) ice. “Got something to say?”

Martin thought he hadn’t said it, but he had said it. . . .

“No mate, nothing to say.”

The announcement of the tern’s presence could wait until the club meeting on Sunday evening. Alice had a feeling it could do without the ocean for a little while.

It was warm for the last days of autumn. Martin and Lloyd undid the top buttons on their shirts, and tugged slightly at their ties, as they walked to The Waterloo. Jackets were slung over shoulders. Journalists and other financial types were at the bar, mobiles like amulets, and they decided to sit outside—although lunchtime’s news was already stale.

“Beer?”

“Thanks Lloydie. Get one for yourself too.” He could still smile.
Stepping into The Waterloo from the glare was like falling down a coal pit—not that Lloyd had ever been into one of those. He tripped a little on the way to the bar. “Are you next in line?” Lloyd took a second to see who was asking. It was no-one. Just some cub reporter.

“Can’t you see that I am?” A moment passed before he got it. “No comment. Get lost.”

Alice’s town was high on a mountain on the slope facing the sea. The sea, which was out of sight. Population of town: 2 854. Height above sea level in feet: 2 854. The tourists were wrong to think that someone, somewhere, was having them on. The sign was right. And it made the inhabitants feel chuffed, as if somehow they each had special possession of twelve inches of the mountain responsible for a view that reached almost, if not quite, to the ocean.

Lloyd held the frothing glasses high out in front of his chest, like offerings of frankincense, incense or myrrh, as he backed through the door, and once more into the sunlight. One elbow brushed over the sign ‘No Work Boots, Dirty Clothes or Singlets Allowed.’ When it came to getting plastered, Lloyd was the perfect nationalist. Two VBs clattered together.

“Get that down you.”

“Just watch me. I’ll murder it.”

Yellow Caterpillar machines were chomping at the earth on the work site across the road. The clinking of glasses was lost in the roar of machinery. And in the yells above the roar.

Martin gently blew the froth of his beer across the street. Lloyd could never resist a metaphor—in every monthly meeting there was a bit of poetry. “That’s all we’re doing to the economy. Blowing bubbles at it. We need to scare the markets badly before New Year.”

“I’ll make some noises on Wednesday and that’ll be enough” Martin said. (And then: “Can I be straight with you? With Patricia gone my heart’s just not in it anymore.”)

‘Observed a pair of spur-winged plovers feeding by the dam,’ wrote Alice.

Martin thought he had said it, but he hadn’t said it. . . .

“But they’re onto you mate. The proof’s right before your eyes.” He pointed. Two men in white shirts had pulled up across the road. One of them was getting a pair of hard hats from the back seat. Martin jolted into alertness just in time to see the men grinning at each other as they entered the work site. Cigarettes were being offered to the drivers of the Caterpillars.
“Do you really expect me to nudge the rate next week just because I saw a couple of developers handing out smokes on a Friday afternoon? That’s full moon stuff, Lloydie.”

“There are worse reasons,” said Lloyd (who was trying to think of one).

“And much better. Any high school economics student could tell you. I’ll say that we’re monitoring the situation constantly.” (Can’t he hold his horses a bit longer? I’m not gone yet. This bloody politics is exactly why I want to leave.)

That and Patricia’s death, of course—six months, two weeks, one day ago now. . . .

“My shout, Lloydie.”

“You’re a legend.”

The white-fronted tern had finally found the bird-bath and Alice was settled in at her living room window with a pair of binoculars. Its chest was trembling. “I’m sorry you had to end up here like this,” whispered Alice. And although it was only a whisper, and she was fifty feet away behind glass, the bird seemed, for an instant, to cock its head in her direction. Alice shushed herself. A good bird-watcher should appear never to be there at all.

From autumn ending, to summer beginning, Alice watched her white-fronted tern survive in her backyard. One night she woke, as if from a nightmare, with the thought that it had gone back to the ocean. “Why am I so concerned about you?” she said to herself. There had been several further entries in her list of new birds for the area since the tern. Just yesterday, a rare species of wren that you normally didn’t see until you were on the plains far below.

All the members of the local bird observers club had been around to see the famous tern that had rejected the ocean for the terracotta billows of Alice’s bird-bath. Once she’d been a new arrival herself. Each member had added her then, at that first shyly joined twitchers’ excursion, to privately kept lists of exotic creatures encountered. Now she was the club secretary and very good at it too. Sometimes she dreamed of even more lofty promotion. . . .

In the end, Lloyd was it. And that evening he did his best to drink The Waterloo dry.

And summer came to a sudden end, with an out-of-season storm, and just as suddenly, although he could have afforded to live anywhere in the world (Bermuda, Burma or Belgrade) Martin was there in the town, at his first meeting of the local bird observers club.

For he needed new pastimes now. And as a boy he’d kept pigeons once, riding his bike great distances through the suburbs, with the birds snugly in a wooden box with breathing holes, strapped to the rack. They always beat
him home, but would sometimes circle for hours, before entering the loft made of packing cases sawed in two, as he watched from the ground. “So who got home first really?” his mother had asked once, pouring a red cordial.

“That’s a wonderful story. But domestic pigeons are a real pest up here,” said the club secretary, as she took down Martin’s details and made up his membership card. It was the first new member in two years. “Gould, you’ve got the right name for our group at least.”

After introductions, there were the reports on fresh sightings and strange behaviour. Martin ventured that he’d seen some magpies while he was driving around town yesterday, looking at houses. They had smiled not unkindly at that.

Finally the president cleared his throat. It was the meeting to elect new officials for the year ahead. “Unlucky you,” whispered Alice to Martin, who was sitting alongside her.

Everyone was happy to continue as they were, except for one, who had a funny feeling about money.

“I’ll do it,” said Martin.

(Lloyd would have loved this.)

“Are there any other nominations?” No-one spoke up. “I therefore declare Martin Gould elected treasurer,” said the president.

“I can show you the ropes if you like,” said the ex-treasurer.

“I’ll manage,” said Martin.

As the meeting drifted into chit-chat about chats over coffee, the president came over.

“Do you mind me asking what you did before retirement?”

“Mr President,” replied Martin (he who had spoken to real presidents in his day) “once upon a time I did very boring things with numbers.” He typed in the air as if at an imaginary keyboard. “Now, tell me more about these binoculars I should be buying.”

“Now he’s one of us,” said Alice, and walked towards the window to gaze at the sea that couldn’t be seen, even on the clearest of days, at 2 854 feet.
The next day, the sign at the entrance to the town still gave the same population figure, but who can doubt that the residents would have walked at least a foot taller, if they had known that the ex-Governor of the Reserve Bank was now living amongst them?

‘It’s funny how little we mean to people up here,’ Martin emailed Lloyd, who didn’t reply.

It was almost a year before Alice worked up the courage to invite Martin to her place to complete some paperwork for the club. “I suggest that we get an ABN but don’t register for GST,” said Martin, as she showed him around her garden. By the bird-bath was a little cross. Having forgotten it was there, Alice gave the cross a casual tap, as if it were only a gardening stake or the like, when she saw that Martin was about to ask something or other.

Of course she knew by now that he used to live in Sydney. “Do you miss the ocean?”

“It’s much better up here. I’m not sure why people are so keen to retire to the coast. Once you get used to the sound of the waves what else is there to do?”

“Our little town is dying. They say the bank is going to close down next year and we’ll have to drive over an hour to do our banking. Don’t they make enough money already?”

“It’s no good, I know,” said Martin.

A honeyeater had alighted above the grave of the white-fronted tern.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing. Martin still didn’t know all the names.

“That’s an eastern spinebill,” she said, and swallowed hard. Soon there were three of them, using the cross as a perch to make dashes across the bird-bath: Father, Son and . . . Alice caught herself before going on with a thought she couldn’t be certain wasn’t blasphemous.

“You’re not happy, Alice, are you?”

“I’m not happy, I’m Alice,” she said, and smiled at the sheer silliness of that.

They shared a pot of tea in her living room with views towards the ocean. Swallows and swifts were silhouettes in the sky whose precise species could not be determined under such conditions. Their darting flights were like thin black cracks along which segments of heaven might suddenly fracture and fall to earth.

Alice wasn’t sure if she was drinking with Martin after success or after failure.
“Would you like another cup? Or perhaps some more of those biscuits?”

“Don’t get up Alice. I’m perfectly content as I am.”

In The Waterloo, so close to the ocean you can almost smell the salt over the scent of beer when the wind blows from the east, Lloyd was drinking with a crew-cutted journalist.

“Do you remember the first time we met?”

“I think I told you to get lost.”

“To be precise, you said ‘No comment. Get lost.’ That was the day Gould said he was going.”

“Thank the lord for that!”

“He stuffed up pretty badly, don’t you think?”

“Off the record?”

“Lloydie...”

“Anyway it was obvious to anyone who knew him. He took his wife’s death pretty badly and made some poor decisions. We’re all still suffering from that. He’s up the bush now.”

The courtship habits of hundreds of birds were no mystery to Alice. On the next club outing, she pointed out to Martin the remains of a nest that had once seen the birth of an oriental cuckoo. The others weren’t interested and had kept going along the winding path.

Should she risk it now? No-one could be closer than two or three turns of the track away.

“I know you’re still in love with Patricia.”

The next moment the sky was full of martins. Martins everywhere. Swarms of martins, cutting the sky into the tiniest of pieces. Surely, surely, it was going to fall now. Her one hope had been pushed over the side of its nest by an impostor. She had seen a cuckoo actually do this—the cruel kindnesses of nature. Alice felt as if her heart were swarming.

He could be firm, Martin, when he needed to be. Quite calmly, he made an echo of his previous question: “What bird is that?” And this time Alice looked where he was looking.
“It’s called a spurned winged lover.”

How foolish, how embarrassing, to have said that. . . .

“Alice, I. . . .”

“I should never have said anything.”

The spur-winged plover took to the air. Now the ex-treasurer of the bird observers club (the woman who felt funny about money) was rushing back with news of an exciting discovery just up ahead.

“It’s a first for us,” she gushed. “Do come and see it.”

“Alright,” said Alice. But there was something she wanted to point out to Martin first.

Broken shells of cuckoo and another species of bird were pressed into the dirt by the edge of the path. But that wasn’t what she wanted to show him.

“The spur-winged plover is really quite unremarkable around here,” she said, and, for now, Martin Gould and Alice Gander each agreed to leave it at that.

Then began a cycle of wild swings and outlandish corrections, predictions of disaster topped by predictions of catastrophe, compensations where none were required and the loss of resolve where resolve was all that anyone had. The numbers told the story but a million wild acres of newsprint made certain no economic hornet’s nest was left unprodded. To fall harder than your neighbour had fallen became almost a badge of honour. People really did end up sweeping Wall Street who once had worked there. People really did just disappear.

“International conditions . . .” Lloyd Collins started, but even he knew that was hopeless, and on TV and radio you could hear the hesitation in his voice as the words spilled from his mouth in increasingly confused combinations. At least, as one journalist put it, the end, when it came, was clean. The Governor of the Reserve Bank fell on his own sword.

As for interest rates? Well, what was Bradman’s test cricket average? “Smart arse,” said Collins, under his breath, at the journalist with the crew cut and the premature baldness. Then, just a fraction louder, “What’s that on your head? The recession you had to have?”

A couple, somewhere, switched a radio on, switched on a kettle for tea, adjusted the volume, and . . .

“. . . in financial news, the Governor of the Reserve Bank, Lloyd Collins, announced today that he would be retiring from his position effective immediately. Analysts have been expecting this announcement for some
time. According to the ABC’s chief financial commentator, Ian Peacock, ‘once the tortoise got away the hare was never going to catch up. The Reserve Bank was blowing bubbles into the hurricane.’ Meanwhile, in other news . . .”

. . . somewhere, two people, a happily engaged couple, switched a radio off.

“What will happen to him do you think?” asked Alice.

“I don’t know,” Martin answered, smiling. “Maybe he’ll move in across the road. After all, ex-Governors of the Reserve Bank are quite unremarkable around here.”