



Speculations

The third volume in a series of three publications documenting the investigative excursions of Professor William Starling and his research team. This volume contains reflections and speculations on items and ideas contained in *Congerries* (Vol. II).

Speculations

being the third volume of investigations, observations and musings collected on the

Thetford • London • Oxford

expedition led by
Professor William Starling of DodoLab
accompanied by

Leila Armstrong, Lisa Hirner, Andrew Hunter, Giles Lane, Josie Mills & Hazem Tagiuri

Thetford, Norfolk

What a lovely little town this was, with its ancient structures and earthworks,

order.

The purpose of my trip to the United Kingdom, as stated in volume one of this set of booklets, was to inquire as to the fate of European Starlings in their traditional surroundings and to further draw forth from the citizenry an explanation for our shocking decline. The locations my research colleagues and I visited held historical significance to starlings, all being notable places of substantial gatherings in the past. What I heard from the people kind enough to speak with me were some truly surprising and unusual theories and I will share with you one tale of explanation from each of the locales we visited: Thetford, London and Oxford. I will follow this with some recently published scientific research of the most startling and complex order.

return my thoughts to the old country.

This autumn to the city and, as in England, to undertake a public perambulation of inquiry. I have also been out and about in Hamilton and Windsor, Ontario, Canada, and will share the related outcomes and observations in other formats. For now, I will return my thoughts to the old country.

Further Thoughts on My Recent Travels in the United Kingdom

Dear Friends,

It has taken me some time to reflect on all that was revealed to me during my recent travels in the United Kingdom and I now find myself in the midst of a discreet visit to the city of New York, to further my investigations of my species' history in America and to hopefully unearth some new specifics concerning the life of one Eugene Schieffelin, the peculiar gentlemen who introduced my species to North America. I write to you from the Deborah, Jonathan F. P., Samuel Priest, and Adam R. Rose Main Reading Room in the Stephen A. Schwartzman Building of the New York Public Library (at 5th Avenue and 42nd Streets) where I have been perusing old volumes, city directories, maps, plans and photographs, to attempt to situate Mr. Schieffelin, to identify his places of residence and business in Manhattan at the time of my species' introduction to this city in the early 1890s. I have also been investigating and noting the extensive presence of my kind throughout this great metropolis, even spotting one extremely fortunate *Sturnus Vulgaris* barely escaping the clutches of a Red Tailed Hawk over the sylvan paths of Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, the location of the remains of Eugene Schieffelin and his spouse Catherine



Professor Starling's Thetford-
London-Oxford Expedition

Book 3: Speculations

Professor Starling and Associates

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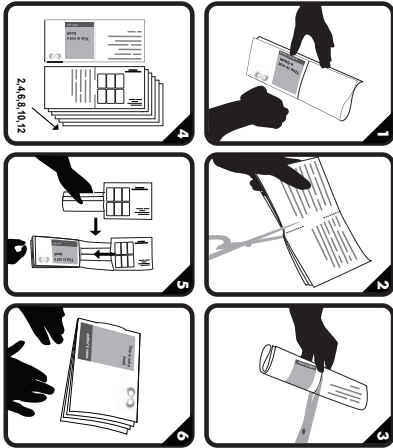
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Such a challenging place to start a conversation or to draw attention to oneself! Unlike Thetford, the great city of London appears both aloof and preoccupied with its own sense of greater purpose; dense flocks of citizens and tourists flow with such momentum through the streets, their gazes fixed defiantly forward, rarely making eye contact. On occasion, one would attempt to discreetly

London

be responsible for such a large decrease in my population there would have to be a staggeringly high number of cats on the prowl and, more importantly, my species is not greatly susceptible to such predations. How often we look to blame another, to find a simple answer to the complex problems we are the authors of. My species is often given soul credit for the damage done to the populations of Eastern Blue Birds in North America and while we have come to accept some responsibility for this regrettable occurrence, it is far more likely a complex mix of factors (habitat loss caused by your species being chief among them) that has doomed my attractive relation. Need I remind you as well that, to the best of my knowledge, we starlings did not initiate the process of emigration (although it is possible that my research into Mr. Schieffelin's motives may prove otherwise).

a simple place to visit as one can easily stroll along the river and into the town centre, engaging at leisure with the locals along a high street closed to automobile traffic. I was particularly struck by the openness of Thetfordians, their willingness to share with a curious stranger not only their thoughts on my kind but to even draw parallels within their population, offering stories of continuing migration (of people and enterprise), as well as habitat decline and struggles to adapt to change. It was of great interest to me that often within their stories of change in Thetford, there was a tendency to identify a culprit, a single protagonist on whose shoulders one could lay blame (those who came with the London Overspill/New Town scheme in the 1960s or the far more distant events surrounding the loss of the cathedral to Norwich and occasionally the mediaeval plague). It seemed fitting, therefore, that one tale of explanation that seemed to resonate with my colleagues and I was a bold suggestion that it was cats, both domestic and feral, that could be ultimately responsible for the decline of my kind in the Thetford area. Now, please believe me, I do not count felines amongst my close acquaintances and confidants and while I would certainly take some satisfaction in painting these creatures as being a leading perpetrator of avian destruction (which I am confident to do in the case of dodos and other, now extinct, defenceless island species), it seems highly unfair to do so in this case. To



Boy: *It was wicked! We went to the Botanical Gardens and I talked to a starling.*

Dad: *You know starlings can't speak, right?*

Boy: *This one could. He was as big as you and wore a nice suit.*

Parental exchange of glances.

Dad (carefully): *You know what we have discussed about the difference between reality and imagination, right?*

Boy: *No really, he had a waistcoat and a beautiful grey top hat. And he knew all about starlings and the environment.*

photograph me and should I take this as a sign to engage, they would most often scurry away or duck into an open passageway. What did they fear I wonder? Perhaps they assumed I had some other purpose, to sell them something or promote some cause is my guess. I found that in order to initiate a dialogue I would do what any visitor to the city might be inclined to, simply ask for directions (not really necessary in my case as I had very much familiarized myself with the metropolis but it was, in the end, an effective ruse). As you may be aware, we starlings are great mimics and so to perform the role of a visitor in need of guidance was not a difficult task – I must say it proved rewarding as the English are so polite when put on the spot and greatly pleased when asked to assume a position of authority and knowledge. I am very grateful to those who were obviously employed in maintaining the city or were attired for commerce and civil service for their generosity in sharing knowledge.

Many, sadly, were unaware of the history of starlings in the centre of the city and most often became distracted by a current avian situation involving the vast numbers of pigeons, a bird even I will admit is not discreet in its presence or modest in its population, but then we are all doing our best to get by and to prosper.

It was not until I reached the confines of St. James Park that the nature of my interactions with the public became more relaxed and casual and where I did not

feel the need to adopt an air of ignorance to establish contact with those out enjoying the warm sun and elegance of the surroundings. As in Thefford, I was approached often while exploring the park with its lovely water features, gardens and feathered residents. Some of you may appreciate being informed that it was within this very park that King Charles II introduced the Canada Goose from America in 1665. It was here that I was fortunate enough to stroll for some time with a young woman on a bicycle, who shared a most fascinating tale of witnessing a murmuration of starlings take the form of a dolphin that then transformed into a devouring shark! Our time together was, I must confess, partly defined by our mutual efforts to gauge the other's sanity. But this was not the specific story I wished to share. A more considered attempt to explain the disappearance of the mighty flocks of starlings that once gathered daily around Trafalgar Square was offered by a Scottish man to my good colleague Miss Lisa Hirmer. According to this kind gentlemen of Gaelic ancestry, the true culprit is the increased automobile traffic in the city centre which he proposed was destroying all of the flying insects he believed were the staple of the starlings' diet! While the demise of insects due to traffic is plausible, it can hardly explain the disappearance of the once vast evening murmurations as we, firstly, do not primarily dine on airborne insects (as our cousins the swifts and swallows do) and, secondly,

I talk to him and he listens. He listens and he understands like no else can understand because he is one of them. He is a starling.

I've seen it. The prophecy. A sky filled with a flock, an immense beautiful flock. But then it shifts and divides. It alters and becomes two greater wholes: a thousand flapping wings that make a dolphin and a shark. Beating and flapping in the unison of two distinct wholes.

They are huge and black and beautiful these two. One gentle and moderate. One fierce and powerful. The second, the shark, turns and devours the first. Turns and devours, breaking up the things that have come together to make something exquisite. It crashes through it, biting and ripping and overwhelming.

Scene 3

Around the supper table in the home of one of the group of school children we met in Oxford's botanical gardens.

Mum: *How was your day today? What did you learn in school?*

Shopkeeper: How odd, a professor named Starling who studies starlings.

know what happened to all the starlings we used to see here.

Starling and had a nice chat with his students about starlings. They wanted to

Old Man: Indeed, it is the time of year for our visitors to pass through as they migrate.

Shopkeeper: The birds must be lively, waking up from winter.

Old Man: Yes, it does. It was a perfect day for a walk in the park.

Shopkeeper: Lovely day. Feels like spring has arrived.

Shop frequented by the old man we met in St. James's Park

Scene 1

Speculations: a few scenes after meeting Professor Starling

- As offered by Dr. Josephine Mills and Leila Armstrong

Old Man: *Oh no, no coincidence at all, the professor is a starling. Wonderful fellow, very learned. Beautiful plumage. Keen students.*

Shopkeeper: *(silent)*

Old Man: *He's Canadian.*

Scene 2

Interior dialogue, woman cycling through St. James's Park

I'm walking. I'm riding. I'm peddling. I'm biking.

Sun is lower. Sun is warm and there is a green fuzziness starting to emerge. I'm on the path now, in the park. Off the roads with their shiny black metal glass reflecting people on sidewalks and in the road.

Buds on trees. Soft delicate hairs of yellowy grass poking up.

There's a man ahead. A man, but he's different. He's not a man. He's a bird.

A large shiny blue-black speckled sharp beaked bird. He's a starling!

gone elsewhere," I was told, may have simply migrated or even relocated due to a

aloofness or based on well-earned knowledge. The once common flocks may have

unlike those offered in Thetford and London, that could be interpreted as either

explanations and speculations concerning the fate of my species, an explanation,

were quite receptive to my visitation and offered a surprising consistency in their

The gardeners at the Botanic Gardens and the vendors at the market

if it had chosen its own vulnerable form).

misinformation and ignorance, even accused of being responsible for its own fate

such a noble bird whose reputation has for so long been besmirched and tarnished by

pause, along with various other museum patrons, and contemplate the sad demise of

Alice stories). I am of course referring to the dodo. It was a melancholy experience to

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (who you may know as Lewis Carroll, author of the

that specimen the museum is so well known for and which profoundly inspired

school children (how fondly I recall such school outings of my youth) and to consider

was given the opportunity to consider their many informative displays, to chat with

I enjoyed the fine welcome I received at the Museum of Natural History where I

representation of a Porcupine from Hudson's Bay). I must say that I particularly

fine antiquarian print and map dealer Sanders of Oxford acquired a lovely

our presence in the city centre was for the purpose of gathering to roost, not feed.

As in many urban areas, where we gather to sleep is distinct from where we seek out

Oxford

You will not be surprised to hear that, as a professor, I found Oxford a

very delightful, comfortable and satisfying place to visit and navigate. How helpful

the students of this great university town were, how willing to pause and give

directions to a humble visitor and to welcome one of equal education and academic

commitment into their midst amongst such lofty institutions of learning. My path

of inquiry was very specific on this day and I had chosen, in consultation with

my research companions, to visit several distinct sites in addition to the general

surrounds of the university and town. These included the Botanic Gardens, the

Oxford Museum of Natural History and the Gloucester Green Public Market,

Where Are We Really?

I must admit that while I returned from the United Kingdom enlightened, I remain naive as to the true cause of the dark fate of my home country cousins, a

recent cold snap. In my mind, this explanation seemed a little thin, though in fairness there had been an unseasonal cold spell in previous weeks and starlings have clearly gone elsewhere and thrived (I am a fine example of such). Wandering back to catch the evening train to London with my colleagues, I was left haunted by that phrase, “gone elsewhere” and was overcome with a profound sadness I have been unable to fully overcome. How could the disappearance of a species that once flocked in such great numbers be explained with such vagueness and not be noted with more alarm?

Your species often engages in such deferral, convenient deflections of the obvious. I am reminded of the Passenger Pigeon whose massive flocks would take hours to pass overhead. When Europeans first arrived in North America, the total population of passenger pigeons equalled one quarter of all indigenous bird species. It has been said that the reason no one noticed that this once abundant creature was being pushed to extinction was the assumption they must simply have “gone elsewhere.” What if the passing of you, your family, your community, your species, went unnoticed?

cause that I speculate is far more complex than a single narrative could convey. Prior to my travels I in fact came across this fascinating (yet to me horrifying) possibility offered by Bridget Stutchbury in her publication *The Private Lives of Birds* (Walker and Company, 2010). She suggests that starlings in the Southwest of England have been dining on earthworms contaminated with Bisphenol A (from pollution leached from water treatment plants, a favoured gathering place of *Sturnus Vulgaris*). The result of such a diet is raised estrogen levels in my male brethren. And here’s the rub, while the contaminated worms make males less healthy and less likely to successfully reproduce, it will also make us males much better and louder singers, hence far more appealing to our potential mates who have evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to prefer strong singers as this was once a sign of paternal health and vigour. So we have, as illustrated by my research colleague Leila Armstrong, the image of the *Starling Castrati*.

My journeys and research continue and I hope that your kind will invest such energy as Miss Stutchbury exhibits in pursuing the hard truths, to not be satisfied with stories of marauding felines and automobile induced insect devastations to explain the demise of a once abundant species in your midst. More worrisome would be to hear more consoling pronouncements of “gone elsewhere”. I accept



Returning to her home on the outskirts of the city, atop a classic Triumph motorcycle and clad in a Pulpware ‘Centurion’ helmet, Susan drove directly through swells of low-lying acid fog, though she was too preoccupied with why the session had failed to notice. On the threshold and looking for her wayward keys, she became fixated on the helmet nestled in the crook of her arm. Not because of its uncanny newfound sheen, but the imprinted confession that “John has a long moustache”. It was her eureka moment. Clearly, she thought, her intended messages from the study group had simply been delayed. It had taken time for them to be transmitted, leaving a garbled residue on the solid matter of her helmet. The technique would need refining, but this was irrefutable proof of her theory. If not, what else could it be?

Those who struck upon the treasure of the Pulpware only witnessed the final step of a process, one link in a complex chain of events. Limited by a stubborn grip on the tangible, our human perception glimpses the merest fragments of a sequence. The rest, we concoct.

* * *

None of his friends were around to observe the subsequent messages, occurring twice a day. Dawn and sunset were hardly conducive hours for Batan's quasi-bohemian crowd. He couldn't find a covert press release on the net, nor any insider rumours to confirm his theory, either. They stopped appearing by the fourth evening, but still he watched. Two days more of sitting by the window until, his mind wrecked by sleep deprivation and skewed with paranoia, he decided it must all be a cruel hoax. Batan wrenched open the window, lashed the jug outside, and finally retreated to his bed. Curiously, he seemed to forget this turn of events later on. When asked about this 'phase' in jest by a friend, he replied that he was too busy to remember what had happened last week, let alone a month ago. Life was streaming by, apparently.

The mirrors would do well to reflect again'.

Twitter! That was new, even for him.

Let's progress in another direction. Halt the procession of time and retrace back to another era. 1970 heralded the worst year for air pollution in the United Kingdom. Sulphurous gases billowed from coal stations into the atmosphere, spawning clouds ripe with chemical vapours. Acid rain. In some cases, when examined, raindrops had the same pH level as vinegar. But it was harmless looking fog that acted as a catalyst for the earliest incidence of Pulpware communiq  s, when thick acidic mist enveloped Oxford in January of that year.

Susan Weld, a Senior Research Fellow in Physics at Oxford University, had just come from a study group in her unusual and almost unprobed research field of Transient Psychodynamics. She was particularly keen on the notion of using telepathy – if it could be harnessed – to implant knowledge and ideas in students' minds, drastically reducing teaching time and ensuring that the grand weight of the university's legacy and its ideals were handed down successfully. Her theory proposed that the thoughts of the most genius, esteemed members of the institution would be able to emanate from the brain and be directed at will. Naturally, she considered herself to be the perfect candidate to test this, alongside several first-year volunteers, narrating simple, stock sentences in her mind and seeing if the other subjects received them. Unfortunately the results were, as yet, inconclusive.

Speculations by Leila Armstrong

The following set of renderings by this fine artist from Lethbridge, Alberta, in Canada's majestic western lands, represent speculations on where starlings go when they are not seen in their traditional haunts as well as depictions of theories concerning the starlings' demise offered by the good citizens of England.

and shoulder the burden of a certain amount of accountability for negative impacts caused by my species' introduction to North America and equally fear for the possible passing of my ancestral populations from that Green and Pleasant Land.

I will now return to my newly secured lodgings in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where I am pleased to say I am surrounded by an abundance of my fellow starlings. I will continue to venture forth on perambulations of inquiry, to engage your species in a dialogue of mutual benefit and to come to a deeper understanding of our respective fates. I will continue to visit your museums and record the scattered remains of my fellow species who have become extinct, and I encourage you to do the same, to imagine your kind in such a display. I thank you for your interest and encourage your correspondence.

Sincerely,

Professor William Starling

In the final few days of the apparitions, several people noticed that the readings had started to sound eerily similar to those channelled previously. It was almost as if Vera was recycling a dozen statements; changing a word or two, or the supposed meaning. Then, just before any suspicions could manifest, the messages stopped, bleeding away for good. For a while, the folk of Thetford continued to seek out Vera as she sat in residence at the tearoom, demurely hoping for the wonder to return. It had passed.

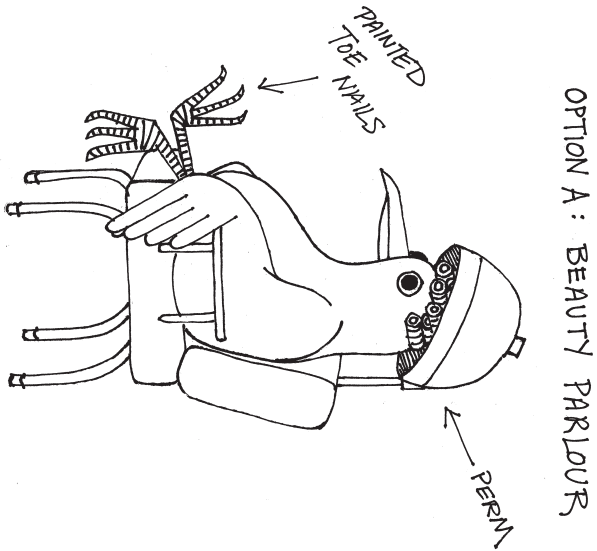
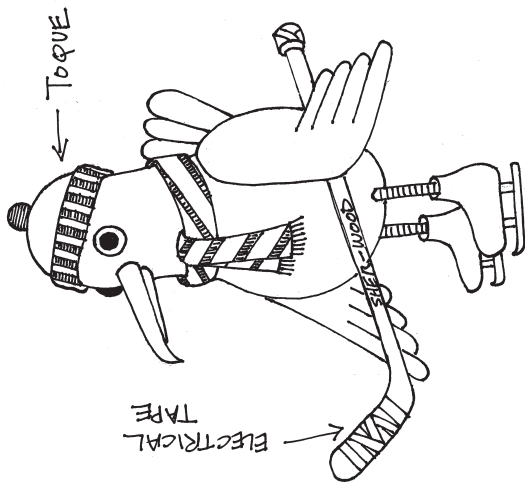
The missives were to reappear countless times throughout the week, bringing pilgrims eager to witness readings by the oracle of the tearoom. Dedicated Christians said these must be edicts from God, materialising in objects like the face of their saviour. Those fascinated by the stars argued that they were clearly extra-terrestrial communications, and that the huge mound of Castle Hill held an ancient stranded spacecraft within its belly.

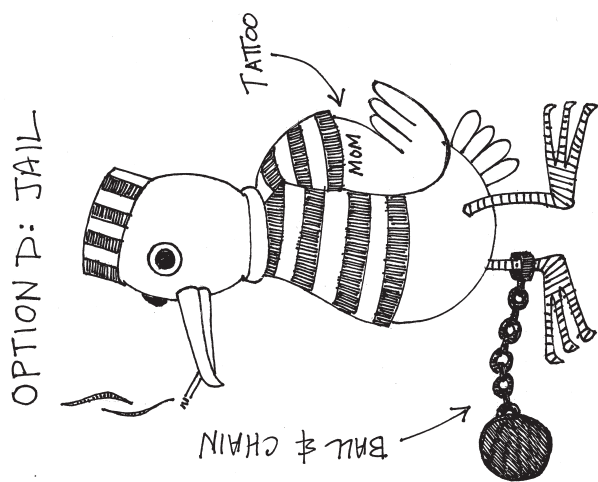
divining fate through the tea-leaves in her cup. La fortune vient en dormant' might have looked like an exquisitely unreadable script, but Vera's half-remembered French and unscrupulous gaze allowed her to loudly proclaim: "Fortune comes in sleep!".

When messages appeared in London in February 2011, nearly 25 years later, Batan Farley was the opposite of an oracle. He had somehow acquired a Pulpware jug at a debauched party in Shoreditch the previous night, and was now looking with slight amusement as it stood framed by the window. He guessed that a friend had donated the jug for irony value, to contrast with an array of strategically placed design-ware in his converted warehouse flat, but he couldn't be certain – he felt frazzled. By dawn, he had been half-awake all night as the after-effects of the party subsided, drifting in and out of awareness as the radio stuttered a news report of a massive solar flare a few days before. As morning rays bathed the jug in light, their oblique angles casting long, languorous shadows, a text unfolded across its upper rim like freshly typewritten ink.

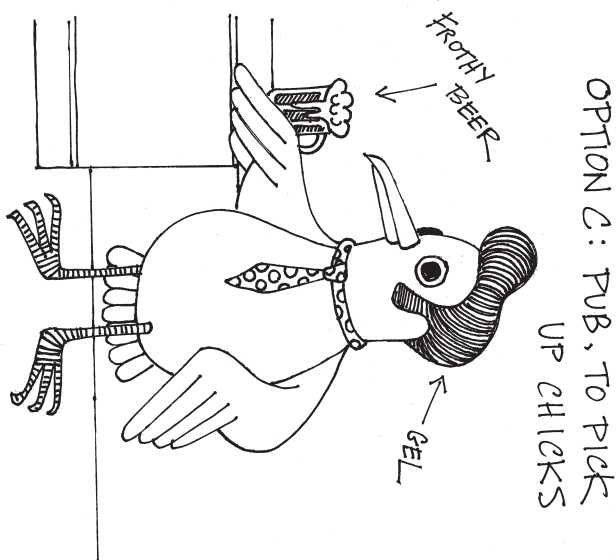
'The bird sings with its fingers'.

Within minutes it had vanished. In his muddled state Batan didn't find this unusual. As a veteran New Media advertising consultant of almost three years, his first thought was that this must be some sort of elaborate PR stunt; teasing brand announcements seeded in hilariously worthless junk. But wirelessly activated with





OPTION D: DUCK IN PRISON



OPTION C: PUB, TO PICK UP CHICKS

What couldn't be foreseen then was the shifting environmental conditions in decades to come. A cabal of intangible and overlapping forces, managing to galvanise a few random sentences miraculously spared from oblivion. Like Lazarus, words rose to the surface, transcending tombs cast in pulp. To those who toiled in

"Ici Londres ! Les Français parlent aux Français..."

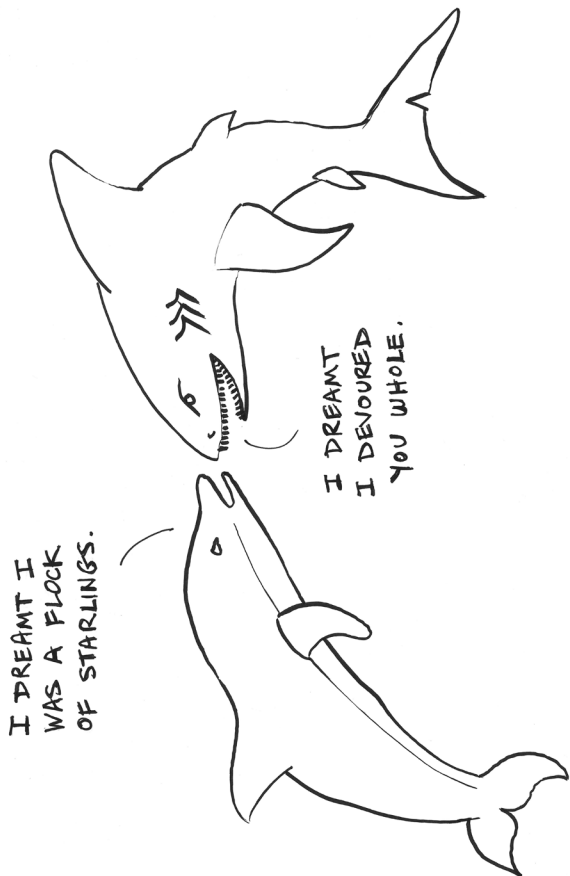
subversive poetries flowing into a hoard of innocuous teacups, plates, jugs – even helmets.

During World War Two this process was introduced to less banal leftovers of the material realm. Secret documents were brought to Thetford under armed escort to be bleached and rendered, cleaving apart reams of hard-won knowledge and desperate pleas like the splitting of bonds between atoms. Churchill's cabinet papers. Orders from the Imperial General Staff. Enigma intercepts. Ministry of Supply requisitions. Diplomatic cables. All these and more joined the vast, whirling slurry and were transmuted into Pulpware. It's funny to think that even scripts for 'Radio Londres' broadcasts from the BBC to Nazi-occupied France, riddled with coded messages for SOE agents and the Resistance, were flung into the vats, their subversive poetries flowing into a hoard of innocuous teacups, plates, jugs – even helmets.

the Thetford mills this would seem as unlikely as turning gold back into lead. But the concept of a radioactive cloud, an ozone layer ravaged by solar flares, or acidic fog: all would have sounded just as fantastical.

So, in late April 1986, when irradiated plumes from the fallout of Chernobyl were swept towards the East Anglian coast, tainting the soil with exotic particles, residents of Thetford had no idea that this was why their taps had begun to yield water with a slightly odd taste. When masked with heady infusions of Earl Grey, only a master tea taster could tell something was amiss.

One tearoom, down a quiet side street in the town centre, had exclusively been using cups and saucers made in the nearby pulp plant. Patrons of the establishment, especially the daily congregations of elderly women, relished these artefacts for their inherent value of thrift which, alongside a mistrust of 'la-di-da' fine china, brought forth memories of proudly coping during the tough times of the war. Peering into their cups on a Monday afternoon, one such group saw strange marks amongst the milk-marbled dregs. They weren't stains or sunken crumbs as was first thought, but strings of distorted words, stretched and smeared around the base ring. The abstract inscriptions faded before they could be deciphered by most, but Vera Mulden, 86, claimed she could interpret, squinting through cat-eye glasses as if

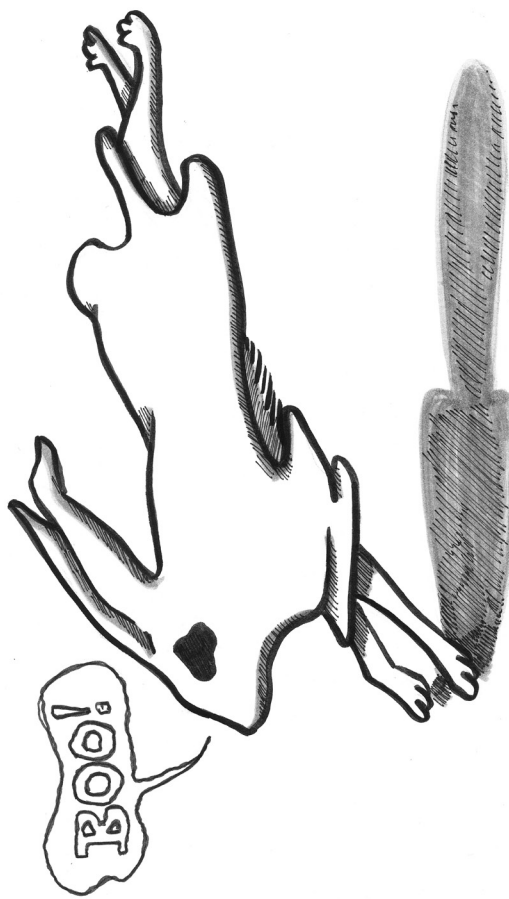


The Pulpware Hoard

by Giles Lane and Hazem Tagiuri of Proboscis

No one could say quite exactly why the messages appeared, or what they meant. In much the same way as we attempt to decipher dreams in the polarity of our waking life, clutching at tangled bundles of surreal imagery to unravel their significance, true clarity is ultimately elusive. However, what is undeniable is the range of opposing theories spouted by those individuals who discovered them. Not that we should suppose this surprising if we consider the unique personalities and circumstances of each case. Nor if we consider the well-known phenomenon of contradictory eye-witness testimonies. Nevertheless it seems that humans prefer their own singular truths. It is a rare soul indeed who is content with utter mystery. For in the absence of certainty, do we not devise our own creation myths?

The conduits for these messages were everyday objects of Theford Pulpware, a recycled material formed from pulped wood, bagging, rags and fibres; boiled, shredded and compacted, withered to a dense husk of matter. After being slathered in oil to provide water resistance, then decorated, the final products were thus inconceivably detached from their humble beginnings – as if subjected to a kind of industrial alchemy.



The Castrats



Starling