

# Also by Gail Sher

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Lines: The Life of a Laysan Albatross

Fifty Jigsawed Bones

Saffron Wings

Marginalia

One bug ... one mouth ... snap!

La

Like A Crane At Night

Kuklos

**COPS** 

Broke Aide

Rouge to Beak Having Me

(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem

From Another Point of View The Woman Seems to Be Resting

# FIVE HAIKU NARRATIVES

Like A Crane at Night
One bug ... One mouth ... Snap!
Saffron Wings
Fifty Jigsawed Bones
Lines: The Life of a Laysan Albatross

**GAIL SHER** 

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#### **PREFACE**

Each one of these "stories in haiku form" was originally printed as a small, limited-edition book, hand-wrapped in Japanese paper and given as a New Year's gift to friends and family. Using extended sequences of haiku to describe the life-cycle of small animals in the wild—including turtles, butterflies, and cranes—stretches the poetic form in ways that are unexpected and, I hope, revealing.

May this one-volume collection bring enjoyment to a wider audience and happiness and the causes of happiness to all suffering beings wherever they may be and whatever form they may take.

#### **CONTENTS**

Like a Crane at Night 1

One Bug ... One Mouth ... Snap! 45

Saffron Wings 133

Fifty Jigsawed Bones 197

Lines: the Life of a Laysan Albatross 251

# Like a Crane at Night



A day at Kushiro Marsh, nesting ground for Japanese Cranes on the northern island of Hokkaido

#### DAYBREAK

daybreak—
vapor rising over
just-stirring birds

silence

but for buntings

twittering in the sedge

notes of a reed-warbler riddle this icy morning

male on nest—
his cry
in the rising meltwater

## SUNRISE

sunrise—
swelling in the marsh water
new grass

April thaw—
twigs in ice
cover the bud

straggling through the cloven ice yellow floweret dead stalks of *kitayoshi*conceal the nest
from the gunman

kitayoshi = "reeds of the north"

## MORNING

spring morning—
a speckled egg
on the grassy hummock

snowflakes

dust

the new-born chick

From December to April, Kushiro Marsh is almost completely frozen over, thus snow is still present in springtime.

righting itself
shuddering—gently
shaking its wings

staring at the second egg tawny chick still

#### NOONTIDE

broad-winged bird silhouette swaying in the noontide

wind-driven snow
and you—oh white bird
bouncing, leaping
treading air
in the squall

white bird, blue sky
wingspan arched
gilded by the sunlight

swift upbeat of wings followed by slow feathering of the air

#### SINGING

her solo

pierces

the winter sky

a full-throated call—
arching, hoisting his wings
toward the trespasser

necks cross

puffs condense

in the chilly air

Crook, Crook! he cries then ceases abruptly when it's over

## FEEDING

thick green duckweed—

a yearling

dives under to feed

a fledgling drinks ...
insects float
on the stagnant swamp

minnow in its beak young crane stops in the rippling bog

a wriggling fish

tossing it

catching it

further down

the bill

The small eel-like dojo, a kind of loach or mudfish, is the crane's favorite treat in spring and summer.

# PREYING

passing a cow
four cranes—graze
the summer pasture

craning its neck scamming the bird red fox motionless

dashing through

a stand of spruce

beneath the airborne flock

shooing the buzzard away from her chick in a whirl of snow

# DUSK

dusk—
creeping fog
darkens the estuary

shroud of fog ...
mallards bob
among the spongy islands

shadows
flutter
under
hovering

wings

dips below the horizon ripples of pink in its wake

### **TWILIGHT**

twilight—

back to roost

in the silver birch

a V of shrubs

alights a clump

among

gliding

shuddering

wing-tip stunned

by the

wire

moonrise—
a silhouette drifts
along the inlet

# MOONLIGHT

no-necked crane

plumage folded

one

leg

lifted

off

the

sandbar

raising it
shaking it
then tucking it
in its
breast

washing in the pool
long black legs—and more—
long black legs

sable throat
vermilion crown
glowing in the moonlight.

### AKNOWLEDGMENT

Thanks to author Dorothy Britton and photographer Tsuneo Hayashida whose elegant book, The Japanese Crane: Bird of Happiness (published by Kodansha International, New York, 1993), informed and inspired these poems.

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE: 1996

One bug . . . One mouth . . . Snap!



A Year in the Life of a Turtle

# SPRING

the swamp—it's musty smell—airs in the crisp March wind

alders the

above

curly- cry

cues your

of tailing

mist

absorbing the rain the quagmire sleeps . . . steeps in the morning sun

between the cries
of a black-crowned night heron—
the sound of unseen birds

\*

burning off the morning haze
a sunbeam spots
the tip of her nostrils

beneath a layer of leaves in the pale light her plastron still

the sun shifts
she shifts—then
dives into the water

spring-green leaf-tips erase the sky

gilded yellow bars also gleaming in twilit waters a male's eyes locking forelegs and necks
the pair
counter-clockwise

silent night—
stars swim
a black and blue ocean

silence

but for

two shells

grinding together

in the dusk

\*

afterwards
what's left of her tears—
dark wet mud

Turtles sometimes shed tears as they lay their eggs.

tamping her nest
she lumbers away—
laden with dirt

stalking down the slope she vanishes in your shadows . . . softly blowing bluestem one pink-white egg nestled in the earth . . . the moon

\*

starless sky
nosing the flask-shaped chamber—
five flashes of white

groping, missing—
a black-masked hunter
rakes the twilight

fondling for a moment the morning sun— her barren nest

carnage over
tiny bits of sun-dried shells
wind and weather-beaten

\*

shrouded in fog
a tiny dinosaur
inches toward dawn

across her nest's sandy ridge dragging her spiked inch-long tail from broken shell to clump of bluestem . . . making a dash for it

kerplunck—
scurrying through the grass
then plopping in the water

morning sun—
dozing on a mat of reeds
a baby snapper

spinning orange and yellow through the sunny pool . . . little cooter, your spots on a tuft of moss

near a flowering cranberry

eggtooth intact . . .

more strikes and afterwards . . . swirling pondweed

foraging the lagoon
a hatchling
choked by weeds

the shadow moves the yearling . . . freezes

under a pine
and mounds of pine-needles—
another mound

one bug
one mouth
snap!

smack of a jaw slap of a tail . . . silence with whiplash speed
plowing through the swamp
lily pads stuck to his dome

hunt over . . .

a water lily

bobs in the waves

upside down
caked with mud . . . a tortoise's
sun-bleached bones

## SUMMER

high and still
on the milky horizon—
summer clouds

steamy morning
lulling me to sleep—tree frogs—
their rubbery croak

the afternoon purrs stroked by soft summery light night falls—
lying on a bed of leaves
the moon

\*

hot windless day
even the song-sparrow's nest
is deserted

a puff of cloud . . . its trailing edge in the quiescent sky the heron stands . . .

bakes

in the hard dry air

circling the cove immense blue wings stir the stagnant ether day in, day out—
bull frogs and
the echo of bull frogs

```
night, dawn,
noon, dusk . . .
will they ever stop
```

slapping them, grabbing them, swiping them
out of my hair

landing on a spear of rush bending the rush—
your rattling wings

## AUTUMN

softly

on a barely-detectable north wind a whiff of autumn

lowering sun:

a few red leaves

blaze in the pale grass

from blade to blade
picking seeds
from the toppled reedgrass

clear blue sky
warm winds crook
the deeply-yellow flower heads

\*

drizzly day: darts and wiggles in the waterweed a kingfisher's call
through the shallow rain—
riverbed deserted

no chirps

no twitters

just rain

oncoming storm—thunderous ghosts patrol the horizon

\*

thunder—
in one haywire jolt
the forest's silhouette

one bolt searing the landscape white

thunderstorm over rainwater—its sound—seeping into the earth

thunderheads occlude the sky at dawn, at dusk . . . the moon's absent face

scorching
a no-longer-summer landscape—
summer heat

hot restless wind—
treading it
with your fairy wings

she cocks her head—
algae wave
in the sunny floodwater

hot-purple bellies sinewy stems undulating in the heat

\*

little water, no rain one by one exiting the marsh

without its yellow flowers bladderwort—deflated splattered with mud

## fingering

the parched riverbed

trickles . . . then rivulets . . .

even as you screech
your imminent
silence

\*

your mournful call crosses my mind this wet cold morning

now after they're gone . . . their ceaseless cries

```
winging low
over a field
whose
springtime
bluets
are
gone
```

frogs wait, birds wait, snakes wait . . . the season shifts

## WINTER

pine needles laced with snow—between their clusters
your departing V

cold air sinks—the hollows
a black network
of bare
elm

roiling, tumbling,
riding the winter wind—
witch grass

darker

colder

each day

arcing

lower

\*

more than wind
more than cold
rustles through the stiffening reeds

dusk—

a lone Canada goose vanishes in the leatherleaf

brown leaves shrivel—

pock-marked fruit

fail to ripen

in the weak

October sun

not hawks

but wind—

the branchless saplings dead

mucky river
and you—eyes closed tight—
lodging among the roots

her breath stops—
the frozen moor
covered with night

winds howl

snow mounts

the wintry thicket . . . lifeless

under ice, under mud deaf to the whistling winter birds

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these poems

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE 1997

## Saffron Wings



Soaring

Courting

Mating

Egg-Laying

Hatching (as larva)

**Pupating** 

Emerging (as butterfly)

Basking

Nectaring

Surviving (Weather, Predators, Humans)

Migrating

Roosting

Overwintering

```
р
       u g
      g
          d
     n
           n
    g
   g
             g
  a
              d
  Z
 g
              О
i
               W
    teeny alpine n
Z
```

no two!

no five!

in the iris-colored clouds

big blue butterfly past my eyes and

out

to

sea

poof . . .

your lacy path

over the vast

mountainface

rockslide

frisky lady
around the cow
across the ribgrass

tippling with dew painted lady in the understory's half-light

monarch:

spearing the sun as it sets on the pylons

## scarlet wings

in the brewing storm scuttle by the lek

after the chase arrested by a flower in the verdant gulch

behind the shrubs
at the field's verge
caught by the fiery sun

balanced on a sunflower
her wings—encased in his—
grow quiet

mating over
she drops to the ground
dark and soft with loam

stinging nettle leaf . . . glued underneath her small pile of eggs

curled beneath a bud
her abdomen—
caressed by the lowering sun

swollen streambed:
depositing her egg
on its cavernous bank

gravid nymph
grasping a leaf
with your claw-like toes

surveying a stem of hairs its plump prickly body atop a creamy egg-case

nibbling the blade

chewing, excreting . . .

whorls of leaves

wandering instar

on the highway's dusky shoulder

paused . . .

o caterpillar . . .

in your wake

a sump of leaves

windless day—
dangling from a web
a silver of bark

monarch pupa . . . swaddled in green dotted with gold

iridescent checker

your prenatal profile

etched evermore deeply . . . darkly . . .

skiff of snow:

on the barbed wire

a pupa blows

a monarch pupa cracks—
tiny ichneumon wasps
scramble into sunlight

unfurling

in

a wings

shaft gossamer

of

light

waving long legs
dragging itself through the widening split
in the pre-dawn light

from treelimb to violet little imago's almost-somersault

chestnut wings
warming them
in the morning sun

high noon
lime-green sulphurs
mud-puddle in the canyon dust

an arctic basks—
wings tilted toward
the salmon-pink sky

the boy dozes . . . perched on his fly rod a red admiral

horse-mint ripe . . . a din of silverspots in the noontime hush

landing on a spear of rush bending the rush—
your rattling wings

satyr:

your darts around the stand of Turk's cap

little snout
beyond the jetty
flanked by flowers

gust of wind—

a hairstreak tips

on its maple leaf perch

sliced by the squall wings litter the dirty sand

rain

bends the umbel . . .

the fritillary below

after the storm—
jinking about the
leeward flank of the dune

hovering around the bloodroot—
fresh billmark
across her wing

reeking of the sea facing the sea fat white grub in its beak

eaglet ripping the soldier free from the asphalt

spitting out the Queen the yellow bird's shrill call ghostly wings
an orange-black heap
against the curb

slipping on the scree her wings smeared my fingers powdery still drinking the phlox beneath my net . . . a swallowtail August moon overflowing the jar with its wire-mesh mouth

softly scudding clouds . . . a gaggle of sightseers points at the roving flock

from the prow of the ferry
watching them spin ever faster
over the bay

flat pink sea:

saffron wings

flutter over the prawn boat

cold snap:
riding a tailwind
a male skipper

winter sun—
pale wings
flutter about the woodpile

following the drift ice grazing the coast . . . pallid overwintering blue

whirling with the tide in the shallow's flattened stubble

twilight . . .

fast asleep

in the silver birch

snow melts . . . the fir tree sags from the sleeping flock

behind the storm-window latticed with ice . . . dangling threadbare wings

winter's end:
curled along the window's ledge
its brittle body

under ice

under snow

a gracile wing

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE 1998

## Fifty Jigsawed Bones



A Sea-Turtle's Life

## HER EARTHLY SCENT

expelled by the surf
nosing the sand
tasting the red ploughed sand

wild, skittish shedding the sea its alabaster light snout to sand
along the beach
pausing, her oval shadow

breast-stroke slow
among the tangled weeds
her grunt above the backwash

moonlight shears the rustling grass a lone raccoon its prowling shadow

dome to earth, gut to sky
wheeling overhead
the seagull's thighs

afterwards in the hollow the whirr of stones the echo of slow water

in the scrub
above the waterline
a skeleton

bloated with eggs—
her belly
then his

delicately the urn
under her tail
too close to the marked high tide

shallow pit swollen with eggs this burgeoning Easter morning in shreds beneath the sky
one hundred globes
of soft white parchment

silent night, silent sea she blinks, peers . . . her saucer silhouette turtle . . . moon . . . face to face at the water's edge

flying through shallows chased by waves steadily her paws just before its crash the wave's well-defined rim

## BEYOND THE LAGOON

clear skies, calm waters
the little nest covered & hidden
quietly bakes in the sun

an embryo steeps in the dark wedged securely morning sunbeams
flatback tracks
hidden in the high water

grazing the island
hovering on a thin breeze
the sound of an approaching oar

first one, the pop!
a few false starts
igniting the clutch

hot June night
a spasm of squirming
up the chamber's flask-shaped neck

tap tap scritch
a bottle-cap body
stretching, wiggling into dawn

bop! a head keeyow! a gull phloop! into a seaweed patch thousands, by the light of the moon scampering toward the light of the moon

now none
now millions
scurrying among the pebbles

just after dusk
the squiggly pack
covered with flying sand

caked with sand, clobbered with sea picked up, spun about the water's doily-edge glare—
not moon—
the turtle stops

pink sand
lizard's mouth
wingbeat close behind

snip snip
a shadow severs
beneath the ghostcrab

clack, click-clack turtle's tail drifts into the tide sprint, little turtle
don't stroke the water—
let your flippers fly

shadow above
movement below—
quick!

whitecaps whirl, breakers build from their billowy faces dark little eyes snap

gulp

eyes ahead & steady

## A YEARLING SLEEPS

the raft drifts
sun beams down
on the August pasturage

rocked by wind, rolled by current in your sargassum cradle foreflippers tucked

splop! up for air
a baby crab, a water strider
whoosh . . . the wave recedes

scree! scree!
from the bushy raft
gull plucks her dozing dinner

## THE SMELL OF WATER

dark coral cave
old turtle sleeps
through the sunny day

under a ledge, under a pipe scraping, scratching her faraway expression brown & crested tiny dinosaur still sunning on the bottom sand nudged beneath a rock green turtle's sea-washed shell

one female, one male as they mate the other seven

scraping, thrashing
two shells submerged—
their mutual gasps for air

his grappling nails
her deeply-notched scars
after dark in the unstable mud

shell gouged, shoulders slashed she drags her body away from the bull

## WASHED UP - DEAD

flippers tied . . .

the slow boat back

her bloody, sliver-moon eyes

sewage & petrol
their shifting film
inching up her parched caged body

swaying in the sky strummed by the breeze her flat gonglike belly dawn:

scooping out blood

forcing the ladle

down

into the beast

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE: 1999

## LINES The Life of a Laysan Albatross

## LORD OF THE AIR

"the goonies are here!"

"the goonies have come back!"

squawking, squabbling

their drowsy hum

from the bush

on lime-green flats little water-spout tracks the pelagic bird stops
through roaring troughs
her hulking shadow

dusting clouds
slender waves
tacking through the spindrift

>>

two nests

too close

their killing stare

settling on the egg talking to the egg shhh . . . listen . . .

pssstt . . .
the babe turns
slowly . . . slowly . . . crack!

matted fuzz, spiky fluff kicking away the blunt shell end >>

a newborn sleeps, a father stirs on the atoll's floor gossamer prints open bill
on open bill
crosswise

coaxing its face forward
pointing, peeping
scooping its tail toward his chick-pouch

folding wings straightening feathers his long gaze at the sky >>

on flight-stiff legs

her beeline

toward the fledgling

gulping, guzzling wiping its beak in the sand

chick pauses to swallow dangling from its mouth mucousy strings of goo the still-small bird
away from its nest—
its expression seeing father

## MONARCH OF THE OCEAN SKIES

>>

silent tide, silent sea

crest to crest

her graceful arc

rocketing higher
gliding right up the wind
shrinking to a pinpoint

her flight line dips now vast, now toward starlit moonless water surfing the air
its rushing edge—
the long bones of her wings

>>

tropical Kuroshio, frigid Oyashio hush!

do you hear the fishing grounds?

birds scatter, birds drown catching squid in a vicious typhoon

one breaker's spray
the spume of the next
cold northwest blast

after dark

down

as the ocean swells

& forward

up & away

like a storm-driven snowflake

>>

head tucked, feathers flat on the sea's slick skin a watertight bird look!

loligos!

small

alive!

fresh!

one dying saury
one dead squid
in the dusk's sloe light
impaling them
on her bill

following a breeze its wafting scent of pup-filled sharks

## RULER OF THE SUN

>>

heels rooted, toes raised in the undulating air a youngster pants

hugging the trees'
broad strips of shade
hundreds face away from the glare

one thin reed one still fowl in its sun-spotted shadow

neither stirring
nor breathing
hauled to the incinerator

>>

circling

oops!

the lagoon's greenish water

breast to ground

reeling forward . . .

a little too fast

churling birds, whirling sand the grizzled sea a white-capped chop over aerofoil wings—its gentle lift savoring the glow in the bow waves

## RIDER ON THE WIND

>>

"hey!"

but the youth

quickly departs

dive-bombing, blanketing him with droppings

"you can't come here!"

"you can't come here!"

a truck driver honks climbs down from his cab the juvenile's gawky stare shady lawn skidding rear the smashed-bird's face >>

he, still

she notices

will she stay?

drawing himself up
he remains rooted—
she tosses a twig aside

"moo" clacks the bird croaking, whistling shaking his feathers into place

regaining her balance
settling her wings as they
shriek, fight, stumble over one another

>> erect, a skyward victory scream after a nap in the rare spring sun

throwing grass

he bows to the ground

"eh...eh... eh...eh" he murmurs

she sits

he sits nearby

gently nibbling her neck feathers

caressing his bill she raises one wing—the male's rapt look

>>

two birds touch, lower to the ground through nubile limbs their dappled bodies

she watches quietly
the tip of her beak
on his expanded breast

water ebbs
surges on the sand
the rising moon's flickering shadows

morning sun
in its chiseled lace
turtle's mottled shell

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE 2002

Five Haiku Narratives

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