

## **‘Ravens in Lockdown’: A Poetic Diary of Data Collection**

*Terry Gifford\**

### **Fairy Cave Quarry**

I don't think it was actually illegal, but it was certainly 'against advice', my driving out just before dawn to visit Fairy Cave Quarry. Driving a short way from my home, along the spine of the Mendip Hills in Somerset, UK, I would meet the slowly rising sun ahead of me. When, seven years into my retirement, I moved with my wife to the Mendips from Derbyshire to be nearer to our grandchildren, I had no idea that this disused quarry was nearby. After a lifetime of rock-climbing in Derbyshire, I did not expect to find, hidden in the local woods, a rock-climbing venue that not only had slabs (easy-angled climbs for the aged), but its own guidebook (conveniently cheap for the pensioner). Furthermore, it was fenced and locked, with the gate code known only to the climbers and cavers who had permission to frequent it. As the name suggests, the caves exposed by the quarrying are apparently among the most spectacular under the limestone hills of the Mendips. My personal preference is for airy, open balance moves rather claustrophobic crawling in the dark.

It is hard not to be aware of the ravens nesting under an overhang on a loose face of the quarry which is not climbed on. Their distinctive harsh calls greet every visitor. This is a 'good news' story – climbers, cavers and birds co-existing together on the crags. There would also be peregrine falcons nesting on these cliffs if climbers and cavers were not so regular year-round visitors. Peregrines come prospecting each February, having recovered as a species from persecution and from years of post-war pesticide poisoning. Like Rachel Carson's evidence in *Silent Spring* (1963) in America, the research of Derek Ratcliffe in the UK resulted in the banning of DDT just in time to save our peregrine and raven

---

\* Terry Gifford is a writer, a poet, and a visiting research fellow at the Research Centre for Environmental Humanities, Bath Spa University, UK.

*Cairo Studies in English* 2021(2): 249-256. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>  
DOI:

populations, at the top of their food chains. In 2017, I decided that it was time to add to the data on Somerset's ravens by having the young ringed at Fairy Cave Quarry, hoping that eventually ring recoveries would tell us more about their lives. So, I assembled a team of licenced ringers and experienced climbers to gather on the quarry rim above the nest on April 6. Because ravens nest under an overhang, it is impossible to see into the nest, but the abseiler called up that there were three huge chicks in the nest before placing them in a bag for hauling to the rim where they were duly weighed and ringed with an individual number. Thus, we have proceeded each April since, more usually finding four young in the nest. But during the lockdown, there was no chance of our being able to ring the young for our records in 2020. However, I was determined that I would at least monitor the nest, and record the date that the last bird left the nest, for a successful fledging record. I had returned in early March, from a conference in France on the work of the English poet, Simon Armitage (soon to be appointed Poet Laureate) with Covid symptoms. After two days in bed and two weeks of listlessness, I recovered without the need to consult a doctor. But a farmer in our village who, on the day I returned, was at the crowded Cheltenham horse races, sadly died from the virus. My wife, who also shared my symptoms, and I were in isolation, but I knew that in a brief dawn visit to a remote locked quarry I was unlikely to meet anyone, as indeed proved to be the case for all of my visits.

As I sat on my rocky viewpoint, in the empty quarry opposite the nest, with a flask of coffee and binoculars to hand, everything around me became special, heightened and imbued with significance. If it were not so cold, it might almost have been spiritual. I was intensely aware of all the dimensions of my privileged position. This scruffy, post-industrial jumble of abandoned boulders and buildings was being reclaimed in front of my eyes by nature in its spring greening of bushes and trees, ferns and mosses. But my attention had to be fixed on the ravens and their nest. I looked and listened. I made notes. The language of the pandemic was in my head. Incipient poems began to form on my notebook pages. From my twelve visits the eight poems of 'Ravens in Lockdown' emerged. Scientific data had turned into poetry. Data collection will contribute to a poetry collection. In a small way, Covid has produced a special quality of care.

## Ravens in Lockdown

### I

#### The Worm

(15 April 2020)

As the curtain of gold crept  
down the crag, in air so soft  
my breath was clouds of virus,  
probably, although the lassitude  
had gone, the on-duty Raven rose  
to give me her health-check, black  
fingers accusing, black wedge tail held  
like a monitor, black cry a warning,  
as if I needed one for this 'against advice'  
dawn drive to the locked disused quarry.

She turned above me, suddenly filling  
with black movement my binoculars,  
drifted over, dived down to a green ledge  
on the grey quarry wall, and alighted.  
First, looked at her feet, second, turned  
about and stabbed, stabbed the thin grass,  
pulled something out, and flew straight  
to the nest where three gaping red mouths  
raised themselves to their highest gasp.  
I wriggled guiltily home through the lanes.

### II

#### End of a Shift

(27 April 2020)

Well, the three birds  
have been safely fed.  
My coffee's gone.  
I'm getting cold.  
I was here at dawn.  
Nice to hear, now

I've remembered  
my hearing aids,  
that Green Woodpecker  
laughing at me  
and bobbing,  
bobbing high above  
my flat rock-  
perch at the base  
of the Alpine Ridge,  
a Pied Wagtail  
waiting for my shift  
to end. It has.  
It's eight o'clock.  
Driving sleepily home  
past the Mendip  
Golf Course, suddenly  
there's a Red Kite  
shouldering the wind,  
a rare reward.

### III

#### **Hard to Focus**

(1 May 2020)

It's hard to focus, friends say, hard  
to write anything. Too much time.  
Too much sun. There's nothing doing  
here but two fleeting feeds an hour.  
On my rock perch my bum aches.  
I contemplate the apparent increase  
in rabbits this year. One surprised,  
scuttles across the quarry floor,  
every other visit. I start to count,

without enthusiasm, the different  
greens in the quarry, accepting  
 clichés: shimmering silver birch,  
darker ash, some simple grass,

then this single snow-heavy  
thorn tree frothing at my feet.  
Calls announce another feed.  
Adjust the binoculars and, yes,  
there are four young in that nest!

#### IV

##### **Drone Surveillance**

(4 May 2020)

Here he is!  
So I see!  
I hear their three-call exchange  
from rim to rim across the quarry  
as I turn the corner into their sight.  
So, social distancing, I turn left, slip  
through silver birches on spoil heaps  
to my usual hard seat at the foot  
of the Alpine Ridge, with nest-level  
sight across to their sunlit crag.

This morning there's a home workout  
on the screen of their back wall:  
wing-stretching, wing-flapping,  
gripping tight with those claws  
on the twiggy nest-edge, facing in.  
Two youngsters get a bit giddy  
and flap-hop off right, onto rock,  
then hop-flap back home again.  
Showing off, one hops further  
to sit immobile, exposed, unsure.

Consternation! Cacophony!  
Where did it come from,  
this broad-winged intruder rising  
brown and white from below?  
Before it reaches the youngster  
Mother drops screaming from

her perch above the nest, diving  
at the Buzzard who zig-zags away  
up the west end, struggling  
to evade the full force  
of that truncheon beak.

## V

### **Essential Journey**

(8 May 2020)

I made it, alone, after all that anxious  
preparation and getting in a flap. Now  
I can't stop pecking at this strange grass  
or in crevasses and cracks of the cliff  
edge above the overhung nest I left  
yesterday, stinking, and quite white.

The amazing choices in this green  
supermarkets are so much better  
than the fleeting home deliveries  
and sibling battles for the best bits  
in that confined, over-heated space  
of our wool-lined, tower block room.

Here there's open sky all around  
and flying has gone viral, it seems,  
with calling Jackdaws. Good to leave  
that noisy couple in the apartment  
above our nest. Here one can flap-hop  
and hop-flap away from lockdown.

## VI

### **Klapping**

(9 May 2020)

Again, the full-throated kwark echoes  
round the quarry as I enter, a single sound,

like a sarcastic clap, from a rock neb  
on the thinly grassed rim opposite the nest,  
now bedraggled, leaking white sticks  
like a waterfall of wood under the shaded  
apex of rock where two fat young remain.

A muted swarb attempts an imitation.  
One sibling has found a flight over  
the ocean of air to an adjacent neb.  
In a post-flight quarantine here  
there are red berries on the balcony.  
Mother Zooms support over to the nest  
in a two-beat clap: Hang on! Hang on!

## VII

### On Furlough

(10 May 2020)

from adulthood, the last one to leave  
the family lockdown waits under this  
overhang of rotten tottery blocks.  
It really is a shithole now siblings  
have flapped and flown. Now dawns  
the true meaning of self-isolation,  
making your own fun in jumping  
off the nest to a block behind that  
little bush offering shade and shelter  
from the Buzzard's prospecting scans.

Not just on Thursday nights, the others  
can be heard play-fighting on the flat balcony  
above and even seen on the broken branches  
of its buddleia, tempting a break-out, up  
onto all that greenery and open space.  
One hop more and there's a ledge deep  
under another overhang, a cul-de-sac.  
On the south rim Mother can be seen  
taking off to lead two teenagers flying

for a little local exercise down the west end.

## VIII

### **The New Normal**

(12 May)

There's a frost melting on the Mendip meadows  
as I drive into sunrise for the last time this spring.  
In the grass patch of the quarry tiny yellow heads  
have been burned by ice in May. It's all change  
here, at six-twenty, when I round the corner to see  
that last youngster on the rim above the nest,  
freed of overhanging rock, awaiting a feed.

Each year, the young family assemble on the south  
rim where the other three now waddle into sight.  
There's a secret source of worms, and perhaps even  
afterbirth, behind the trees of the west end  
from where the adults fly to feed these juveniles.  
The arching cloudless firmament is egg-blue  
for their fledged future in the new normal.