

Summary

In the unusual format of three-lined stanzas, the poet presents a picture of an early morning scene at a lake, the title having clearly set the scene. As it is autumn, we know what to expect in nature at this time of the year. A stork visits the lake very early one morning in early autumn. Surprisingly, it is the only bird there. The suggestion is that this is a break in its migratory journey, as it seems to be very tired, "too tired to arrange/his wind-buffed plumage" (1.6-1.7). It stands in the water, looking like a pillow resting on sticks in the lake. The puffy shape and feathered outline of the body make it look like a pillow. Then we are forced to change our perspective and we look from the water upwards, so the bird's legs look like sticks or stalks that are growing out of the water. The seasons are changing, forcing birds to migrate to warmer climes as the wind and the rain become forces to reckon with. The tired bird does not re-arrange its feathers, as birds usually do, but perches, pulling in its beak, to brace itself against the elements. It seems to be thinking about the long journey ahead of it. It has already seen foreign starry skies ["star vistas" (1.11)] and crossed great distances ["black migratory league" (1.12)]. It strikes the speaker as strange that the bird is alone, having arrived ahead of other birds. Then the sun breaks through and every part of the early morning scene is bathed in golden red light. Now, as the bird is warmed by the sun, it realises it is time to go and it seems to sigh at the thought of the distance ahead of it. As it lifts its heavy body with an enormous effort, its strong wings beat the air almost violently ["he clubbed/the air" (1.17-1.18)]. Although tired and struggling to lift its feet in line with the rest of its body, there is still a majestic air about this creature. It points its beak in the direction it is headed - it knows exactly where it has to fly through "his invisible tunnel of sky" (1.20) on its instinctive journey.

Themes

- The wonders of nature
- Patterns in nature
- Animal intelligence.

Form

- The poem consists of seven stanzas, of three lines each.
- All the stanzas flow/run on into the next one, except for the first stanza.
- The lines are unrhymed, but there is a suggestion of rhyme in the first and third lines, a para-rhyme: "there/water"; "rain/arrange"; "weeks/reeds".

Poetic techniques

Metaphor: "the pillow of his body" (1.2) - the 50ft, downy shape of the stork's body looks like a pillow; also pillows are made of the downy feathers of birds; "pencil-slanted rain" (1.4) - the rain falls at an angle, reminding us of the way in which we hold a pencil; also the rain falls in a thin, straight line, like the shape of a pencil; "he clubbed the/air;" (1.17-1.18) - such a powerful action as the bird lifts off, it is almost violent, not the easy motion we normally associate with flying; "his invisible tunnel of sky" (1.20) - the bird has a specific route imprinted in its brain and it flies only on this route, needing no guidance other than instinct, as if in a tunnel; this image makes one think of tunnel vision, a human attribute, which can be used figuratively and literally, in which we tend to see only the central part of the image we are looking at.

Personification: The bird is "too tired" (1.6) - normally we don't attribute tiredness to animals, but they must also get tired; the bird is "ruminative" (1.9) and "contemplative" (1.10) - it seems to be thinking, probably about the long journey ahead of it, as it looks at the landscape around it, thinking of distances already covered and what lies ahead; "carefully climbed" (1.19) - the bird is able to expend only the energy needed to lift itself off and doesn't waste energy now that will be needed on its long journey.

Alliteration: "carefully climbed" (1.19) - the sharp c-sound emphasises the bird's slow movement as it directs its body on its route.

Mood: The poet creates a quiet sense of wonder at this miracle of nature that happens on a regular basis.

Questions

1. Explain lines 6 – 7 in your own words. (2)
2. How does the poet personify the bird in stanzas 3 and 4? (2)
3. Why would the bird be —earlyl (line 14)? (1)
4. What does the word —regallyl in stanza 6 reveal about the poet's attitude towards the bird? (1)