



*The Encounter*, 2008, etching with drypoint on Magnani Pescia paper, 6 ¼ x 11 ¼ in.

## James Prosek | The Peacock and The Cobra

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Center for Contemporary Printmaking

*The Conflict*, 2008, etching with drypoint on Magnani Pescia paper, 4 ¾ x 12 in.



## W. B. YEATS, WALLACE STEVENS, AND THE PEACOCK

In *Responsibilities* (1914), William Butler Yeats has a small but potent poem, “The Peacock”:

What’s riches to him  
That has made a great peacock  
With the pride of his eye?  
The wind-beaten, stone-grey,  
And desolate Three Rock  
Would nourish his whim.  
Live he or die  
Amid wet rocks and heather,  
His ghost will be gay  
Adding feather to feather  
For the pride of his eye.

Doubtless Yeats, like Sean O’Casey after him, pronounced the bird “paycock.” The cry of the peacock, in Yeats, symbolizes the passing of an age. Peacocks abound both in his visionary prose and his magnificent verse, but I like best their manifestation as mystic doors and curtains in the outrageous story “Rosa Alchemica” (1897). There, Yeats is swept away in peacockian frenzy:

I had grown suddenly angry, and seizing the alembic from the table, was about to rise and strike him with it, when the peacocks on the door behind him appeared to grow immense; and then the alembic fell from my fingers and I was drowned in a tide of green and blue and bronze feathers, and as I struggled hopelessly I heard a distant voice saying, ‘Our master Avicenna has written that all life proceeds out of corruption.’ The glittering feathers had now covered me completely, and I knew that I had struggled for hundreds of years, and was conquered at last. I was sinking into the depth when the green and blue and bronze that seemed to fill the world became a sea of flame and swept me away, and as I was swirled along I heard a voice over my head cry, ‘The mirror is broken in two pieces,’ and another voice answer, ‘The mirror is broken in four pieces,’ and a more distant voice cry with an exultant cry, ‘The mirror is broken into numberless pieces;’ and then a multitude of pale hands were reaching towards me, and strange gentle faces bending above me, and half-wailing and half-caressing voices uttering words that were forgotten the moment they were spoken.

Wallace Stevens, Yeats’s only rival among modern poets in English, had a more naturalistic devotion to emblematic peacocks. In an excerpt from his superb early poem “Domination of Black” (1916), the peacocks cry out in a most un-Yeatsian fashion:

I heard them cry—the peacocks.  
Was it a cry against the twilight  
Or against the leaves themselves  
Turning in the wind,  
Turning as the flames  
Turned in the fire,  
Turning as the tails of the peacocks  
Turned in the loud fire,  
Loud as the hemlocks  
Full of the cry of the peacocks?  
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?



*The Emergence*, 2008, hand-colored etching with drypoint on Magnani Pescia paper, 5 x 8 ¾ in.

Stevens wants us to know that actual peacocks have a loud, fierce, rather fundamental cry, with a dying fall in conclusion. Vain and self-tormented, Stevensian peacocks recall that their ugly feet were inflicted upon them by the goddess Juno, according to the learned Eleanor Cook.

Does one prefer Stevensian or Yeatsian peacocks? Both are gorgeous, but I age away from my High Romanticism, and am equally content with both. The Celtic apocalyptic cry is answered by the plaintive American peacock, of the earth earthly.

HAROLD BLOOM, *New Haven, Connecticut, November 2008*



*The Mangoes* (detail), 2008, hand-colored etching with drypoint on Magnani Pescia paper, 6 x 9 ½ in.

## MANGOES

Serene Mangoes. I see nice ripe succulent mangoes pictured close by. Ubiquitous mangoes. I perceive five billion mangoes now. I spy those mangoes at night as well. Twelve bleats on the wristwatch have come to pass. It’s already half an hour into some Sunday morning. Three billion breathers have by now suck/ed mangoes. *Linnaeus, I too get the flak.* Those unserviceable *impulses*. Grin. Instinctual oral pleasures.

Rain patters on the windowpane. Raindrops rustle through the leaves and the branches of the Gold Mohur tree. A *Koel* calls from far far away, happily from some mango tree.

Urchins play in milky-tea-brown rainwater of wayside puddle, suckling mangoes. Push-carts mango-laden. Dust, flies, heat, but joy, on the faces.

Fertile mangoes. *Parsi* bridegroom plants a mango sapling -- as many children as mangoes on the mango tree. [Should have planted another sapling. Fool. What if this one died? Won’t you fertilize those mangoes? Make them] Swollen, tender and placid. Stored chemical potential for life-proving twenty-amino-acids and four-nucleotides.

Nutritive mangoes. Courtyard mango tree. Nutritional instinct indubitably does bamboo-pole mangoes. Hook atop a cloth-bag, bamboo pole’s end. Pull-Break. *Break* fast, and *more*, with mangoes, sugar and milk battered together at hundreds of rpm with fingers-unstoppable centripetal swirling steel.

Mangoes cut in cubes for steel-forked desserts. *Ahmed, Mitchell’s, National* and *Shezan* mango pickle, chutney, squash and jam, integral part of meals. Nothing like the homemade green-mango green-chili mint chutney and the orange-mango-pulp red-chili-flaked *dip* with freshly baked *roti*.

Mango-scented yards away after summer-afternoon Games. Mango-laden-sniffs trigger olfactory machines. School Tuck Shop mango milkshakes’ promise to parched perspired sun-baked athletes.

Placid mangoes bob in pail hypotherming to be sucked. Mangoes like *Titanic* clients in Atlantic iceberged.

Mango trees. No breeze. Sizzling Celsius forty-five degrees. Picking, pocketing, ripening mangoes to roll between palms: softening, squeezing...sucking. Spotting striped squirrels, red-beaked green parrots feasting in upper branches. Our nourishment needs. Open-beaked *myna* and solitary crow, perched far far below.

Moonlit Mango Picnics on the banks of the Sullej, the Red River. Stiff, hand-churned, mangoed cream, canistered in Fahrenheit forty wood-planked pails. Melon halves’ seed-cores displaced by densed mango-cream, scooped out of tin-canisters condensing in wooden pails. Boating along the boat-bridge on the lazing *Sullej* waters, watched by old colonial guesthouse, date palms and keekar trees.

AHMAD IFTIKHAR, *Karachi, Pakistan, November 2008*



*The Resolution* (detail), 2008, etching with drypoint on Magnani Pescia paper, 6 x 5 in.