

The Shag

Some thoughts on Christopher Isherwood's famous comic verse:

The common cormorant or shag
Lays eggs inside a paper bag
The reason you will see no doubt
It is to keep the lightning out.
But what these unobservant birds
Have never noticed is that herds
Of wandering bears may come with buns
And steal the bags to hold the crumbs.

Poor harmless, unsuspecting shags
no longer lay in paper bags;
their primary reason now, no doubt:
to keep the oil pollution out.
Though arguments are sometimes bitter
which is the most pernicious litter,
the paper bag will surely rot
where polypropylene will not.

So which material is forming
the bigger threat to global warming?
Paper costs trees, but doesn't take
quite so much fossil fuel to make.
Plastic's made to last; so it's
all breaking down to tiny bits,
which drift with slow, relentless motion
down brooks, streams, rivers, to the ocean.

So all sealife not breathing air
faces a world-wide plastic layer,
not fit to breathe, deadly to eat.
So what about our fishing fleet?
With few fish left, perhaps you've wondered
the price of fish in twenty-one hundred?
Now's the time to give priority
to bio-degradability.

Shags themselves could not care less
That their shoreline home is in a mess.
That's why we find along the shore,
adorning shags' nests by the score,
those bits of polypropylene
in brightest orange, blue and green
from fishing nets washed up as jetsam.
the keen-eyed shag flies down and gets 'em.

To him they are like precious gems
amongst the rotting seaweed stems.
But fish-nets now are made to last
through summer heat and winter blast;
some come as jetsam, some as flotsam,
unharmful, as water never rots 'em.
Sadly this kind of litter kills;
it gets entwined in wings and bills.
For shags, when chasing fish, are reckless
and don't expect to catch a necklace,
when diving for their tasty prey
far from the surface light of day,
a necklace that will never rot.
It's death to gannets, auks, the lot,
all diving birds which only wish
to live as nature tells them to, on fish.

Perhaps you're one of those who cares
what's happened to those wandering bears
which used to come in hordes with buns
and steal those bags to hold the crumbs?
Perhaps you thought the bears were Polar?
They'll soon die out when all the solar
heat that's trapped by CO²
melts all the snow and glaciers too.

This raises levels of the sea,
(which luckily will not harm me,
as I live well inland). But shags
will not use any kind of bags
by then, but will have nests that float,
made like a polystyrene boat
adorned, as now, with lengths of twine
and countless bits of fishing line.

There'll be no paper anyway
with all the forests felled; so, pray,
what could shags hide their offspring in,
as plastic bags would be too thin
to stop the deadly penetration
of ultra-violet radiation?
By then the punctured ozone layer
will not retard the solar flare.

And so birds' eggs will cook and die
from man's pollution of the sky;
or even worse will slowly boil
in pools of solar-heated oil.
Perhaps they'll learn to lay eggs in
a more protective empty tin,
a far-fetched evolutionary plan
to use a washed-up baked-bean can.
Darwin, I fear, would see some snags
in such survival hopes for shags.
Perhaps our perspicacious poet
wrote deeper truth than he could know. It
could be true. I have no doubt
they'll do it to keep the lightning out,
when tropic storms and darkening skies
bring thunderbolts of frightening size.

When global warming's finally come,
who knows what creatures will succumb
to storms and tempests, rain and hail,
and winds far worse than any gale,
and hurricanes at every hour,
with thunderstorms of deadly power?
Ah then! What use to any shag
a paltry, sodden paper bag?

There'll be no threat from wandering herds
of any beasts. No bears, few birds;
and man, for long the sole protector
of each environmental sector,
will find that science, however brave,

has no more species left to save.
So what's the future? Where's the hope
when politicians cannot cope?
With dwindling votes and no support
for all the measures that they ought
to push through Parliament, a range
of bills to cope with Climate Change,
MPs and public, we're all together,
crewing a ship in stormy weather
not weeks from the rocks, not days but hours,
threatened by Nature's awesome powers.

Will we see sense? Will we change course,
or just drink beer, bet on a horse,
glued to TV and football-crowd mania,
"Strictly Come Dancing" or anything zanier,
men in T-shirts, girls' pretty frocks,
while the Captain steers full ahead – for the
rocks.
No more babies and no more storks
if we choose the path of those sad Great Auks.

Meantime shags may be the last
survivors from a richer past;
with other kinds on higher ground,
when shoreline cities all have drowned,
and England's green and pleasant land
is a lifeless wilderness of sand.
Perhaps then, as they did before,
shags will survive along the shore.

But is there time to stem the tide,
with new technology on our side?
With all our skills, it would be strange
to lose the battle of Climate Change.
But if we did, bird-watchers too
would wish they'd watched the CO²,
and not just counted every gannet,
but taken steps to save the planet.