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Weathering a graphic essay

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Weathering

a graphic essay

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Abstract

This graphic essay is part of an ongoing collaborative effort that combines ethnographic research on the relationships between falconers, birds of prey and their environments with research on drawing as an anthropological method and “style”. Through a combination of text and drawings, the essay shows the affective materiality of the world through a focus on the aerial perception of birds of prey as they move with the currents of the wind. The term ‘weathering’, developed in previous work by one of the authors, is here presented as the transformational activity of the weather that is fundamental for the way in which falconers and birds of prey perceive and experience the environments in which they engage. Here landforms and the aerial spaces above are not perceived as separate spheres but rather as mutually constituting each other through the ever-present and ongoing effects of the weather.

Keywords: Weathering; Birds; Falconry; Human-animal Relationships; Drawing; Graphic Anthropology.

Weathering

um ensaio gráfico

Resumo

Este ensaio gráfico corresponde a um esforço colaborativo em desenvolvimento que combina a pesquisa etnográfica sobre a relação entre falcoeiros, aves de rapina e seus ambientes com a pesquisa sobre desenho como método e “estilo” antropológico. Reunindo texto e desenhos, o ensaio mostra a materialidade afetiva do mundo com foco na perspectiva aérea das aves de rapina enquanto elas se movem junto com as correntes de vento. O termo ‘weathering’, desenvolvido previamente em outro trabalho por uma das autoras, é apresentado aqui como a atividade transformacional do tempo atmosférico que é fundamental para a forma com que falcoeiros e aves de rapina percebem e experienciam os ambientes em que se engajam. Aqui as formas terrestres e os espaços aéreos não são percebidos como esferas separadas e, sim, como se constituindo, mutuamente, uma a outra por meio dos efeitos sempre presentes e contínuos do tempo.

Palavras chave: Weathering; Pássaros; Falcoaria; Relações humano-animais; Desenho; Weathering.

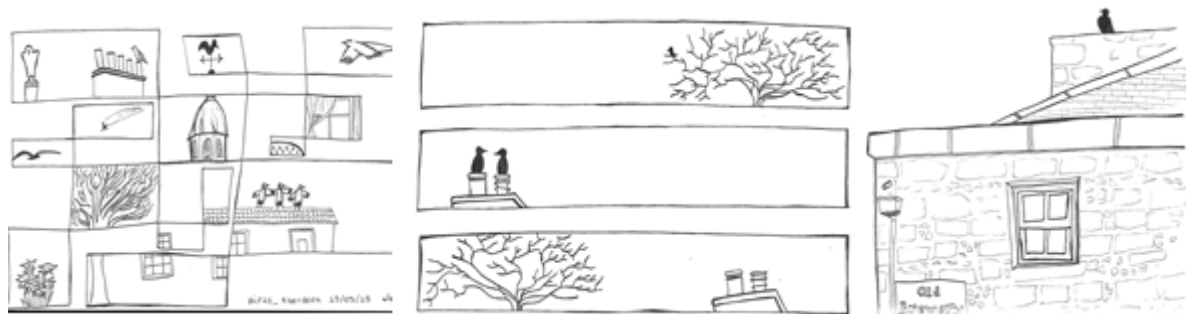
Weathering

a graphic essay

Aina Azevedo
Sara Asu Schroer

In a city like Aberdeen, far up North on the east coast of Scotland, a visitor soon gets used to silence, occasionally interrupted by the sound of forceful, hauling wind. In this apparent monotony, an intriguing presence may become the source of attention, movement and liveliness; Seagulls sitting on top of grey sandstone chimneys “conversing” with each other or flying down-wind in skilfully executed manoeuvres to snatch a sandwich from an unknowing pedestrian. Always present both visually and acoustically these birds certainly dominate the ‘granite city’ where they live and propagate abundantly — even if most Aberdonians may not be proud of their ambassador. For a visitor, the strong presence of seagulls can be impressive and has the power to change the way one perceives these feathered beings as well as the city in which they dwell.

Ironically, it was the remarkable presence of these rather “common” — and sometimes feared — creatures that awakened Aina Azevedo’s interest into the lives of birds, rather than the colourful abundant diversity of birds in Brazil (her home country) or the plethora of wild birds in the mountains and along the coast of Scotland. Coming to Aberdeen in February 2015 for a one-year post-doctoral research fellowship at the Department of Anthropology her first impressions of the city were described in a couple of drawings where seagulls appeared as the main characters.



Fortunately — some will say —, the graphic essay we are presenting in this volume is not about seagulls. It is the result of an ongoing collaboration between Aina¹ and Sara Asu Schroer, also postdoctoral research fellow in Aberdeen. It all began through a writing group in which Sara shared the draft for an article that has been part of her PhD thesis on falconry — a hunting practice in which humans and birds of prey learn to hunt in cooperation. The draft entitled deals with a poetic narrative of how falconers learn to perceive their environments through the birds of prey they are training and hunting with. Sara here develops the term “weathering” to refer to the ways the weather — understood as an ongoing activity — influences the movements of human and nonhuman animals as well as the ways they perceive and experience the world. The land and the airy spaces above are here not to be understood as two separate spheres divided by an interface but rather as caught up in a continuous process of transformation in which

¹ Aina Azevedo is indebted to CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education, Brazil) for the scholarship received during her post-doctoral research that was fundamental to the realisation of this graphic essay.

the lay of the land and the currents of the air are co-constituted. Here air and weather both phenomena that have not been part of much theoretical scrutiny in anthropology so far, take on material, affective qualities that, for living creatures, can be supportive at times and dangerous and forceful at others².

Utterly absorbed by the draft, Aina started drawing on the borders of each sheet during her reading. These sketches resulted in a preliminary ensemble of drawings attached to her office wall during half a year. Finally, we decided to spend a weekend together to focus on a collaborative work of text and drawings, realising that the process was much more complicated than we imagined. Our challenge was to create something different than “just” a text with drawings as illustrations. What we are aiming to achieve is rather a combination of drawings with text, in which both are complementing each other, giving space to drawing and writing as means of exploration. To come closer to this idea, we found ourselves dealing with a mix of script and storyboard that gave shape to the process of drawing and re-drawing the graphic essay as it is presented here. We experienced this collaboration as a very fruitful one, through which we learned from each other and through the experimentation with the media of texts and drawing; Not to mention the steep learning curve Aina was going through, when it comes to birds of prey and the manifold air currents, lifts, thermals and wind-directions through which they move.

This essay builds upon both our academic interests into human-animal relationships on the one hand and drawing as a method and “style” in anthropology on the other. Sara is based in Aberdeen since her PhD and has been doing research with falconers and birds since 2008. Her thesis “On the Wing: Exploring Human-Bird Relationships in Falconry Practice” (Schroer 2015) traces the complex relationships involved in taming, training and hunting in cooperation in which falconers, birds and dogs are involved. Focussing on processes of emergence in both becoming falconers and becoming falconry birds, Sara develops the notion of “beings-in- the-making” in order to emphasise that humans and birds grow in relation to each other through the co-responsive engagement in which they are involved. Currently, Sara’s research is based in Arctic Domus, an ERC funded interdisciplinary research project based at the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen. Here she is interested in how the concept of domestication might be rethought through finding a more nuanced language to talk about the dynamism of human-animal relationships away from notions of absolute human domination or stark categories of the “wild” and the “tame”. In her current research she is building upon her PhD research whilst also looking at the practices involved in captive breeding of birds of prey, with a particular focus on human-bird communication, co- learning and the built environment.

Aina, in turn, has been a visiting research fellow at the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, in another large ERC interdisciplinary project, *Knowing From the Inside*, led by Professor Tim Ingold. During this time her main goal has been to develop an approach on drawing in anthropology. Here she focuses on drawing as a possible methodology of research and an anthropological “style”. This interest in drawing began during her PhD fieldwork, carried out in South Africa, where she realised that some observations and experiences were best expressed by means of drawings (Azevedo 2013 and 2014). Her theoretical approach is inspired by the “graphic anthropology” developed by Ingold (2011a, 2011b and 2013) and based on drawing as a coetaneous and engaged way to observe and describe, giving a particular status to the knowledge acquired through this practice. Ingold’s approach does not end here, but starts, given rise to a research agenda where “to know” and “to learn” became activities of practical engagement with materials, techniques and so on. Aina is also inspired by the growing literature addressing different aspects

² A notable exception is Ingold’s work, where he has argued that we need to pay attention to the co- constitutive dimension of the earth-sky-world and the weather as medium of perception (2005, 2007, 2010). Furthermore, geographers such as McCormack (2010) and Olwig (2011) also note the importance of understanding of the “aerial” and “atmospheric” qualities of the world. These authors share a criticism of current approaches to humans’ perception and experience of landscape and the environment in which the dimension of the air and weather are often forgotten (see also Irigaray 1999).

of drawing and anthropology, such as the work of Newman (1998) and Ramos (2010, 2015) exploring drawing as a way to present the anthropological research³.

The graphic essay presented in this volume, presents an innovative and collaborative effort, to further develop drawing as analytical style in anthropology. This collaborative work experiments with the challenges and potentials of a “graphic anthropology”, which aim it is to find ways of expression that move beyond purely text based forms of knowledge production.

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3 For further reference to drawing and anthropology see: Geismar’s (2014) analysis of fieldwork sketches by Bernard Deacon, Kuschnir’s (2014) work on teaching drawing to anthropology students as well as Colloredo-Mansfeld (1999 and 2011), Ramos (2004), Hendrickson (2008) and Taussig (2011) for reflexions on drawing as methodology.

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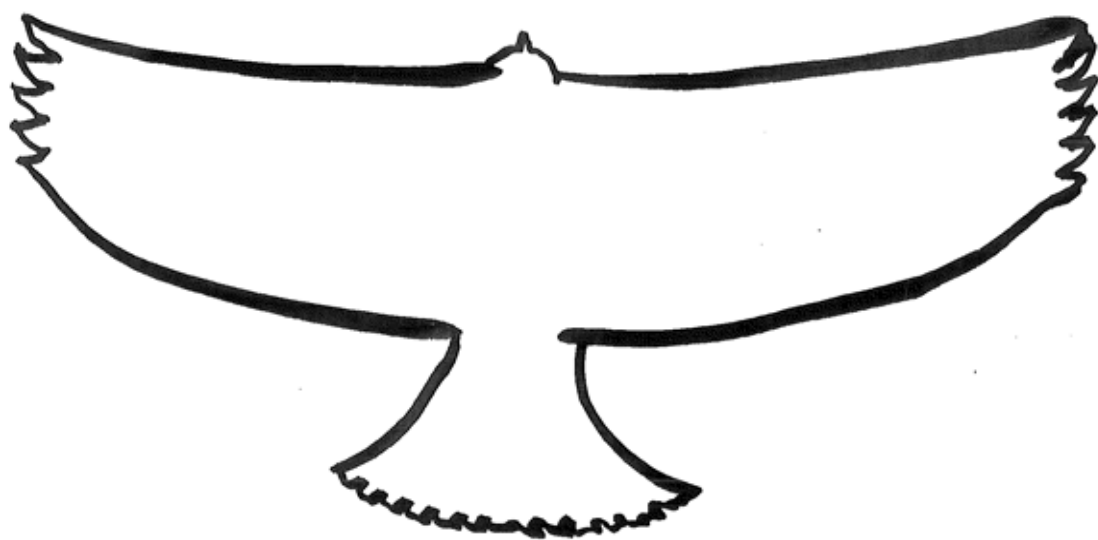
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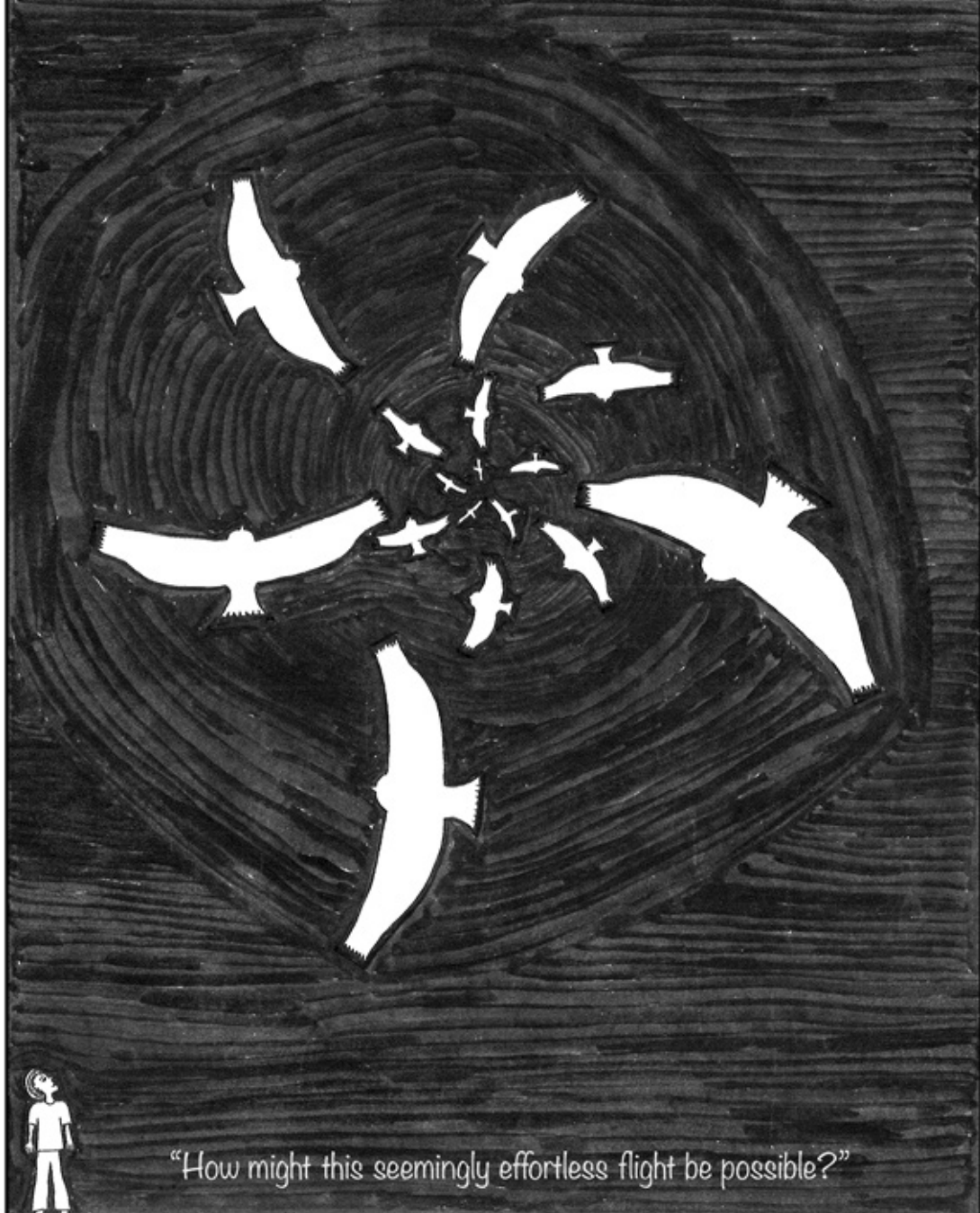
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Weathering



a graphic essay by
Aina Azevedo & Sara Asu Schroer

Birds of prey flying on motionless outstretched wings, rising higher and higher, thereby apparently defying the gravitational pull of the earth...
Circling in broad spirals, without any visible exertion, the birds disappear out of sight in the bright sky above...



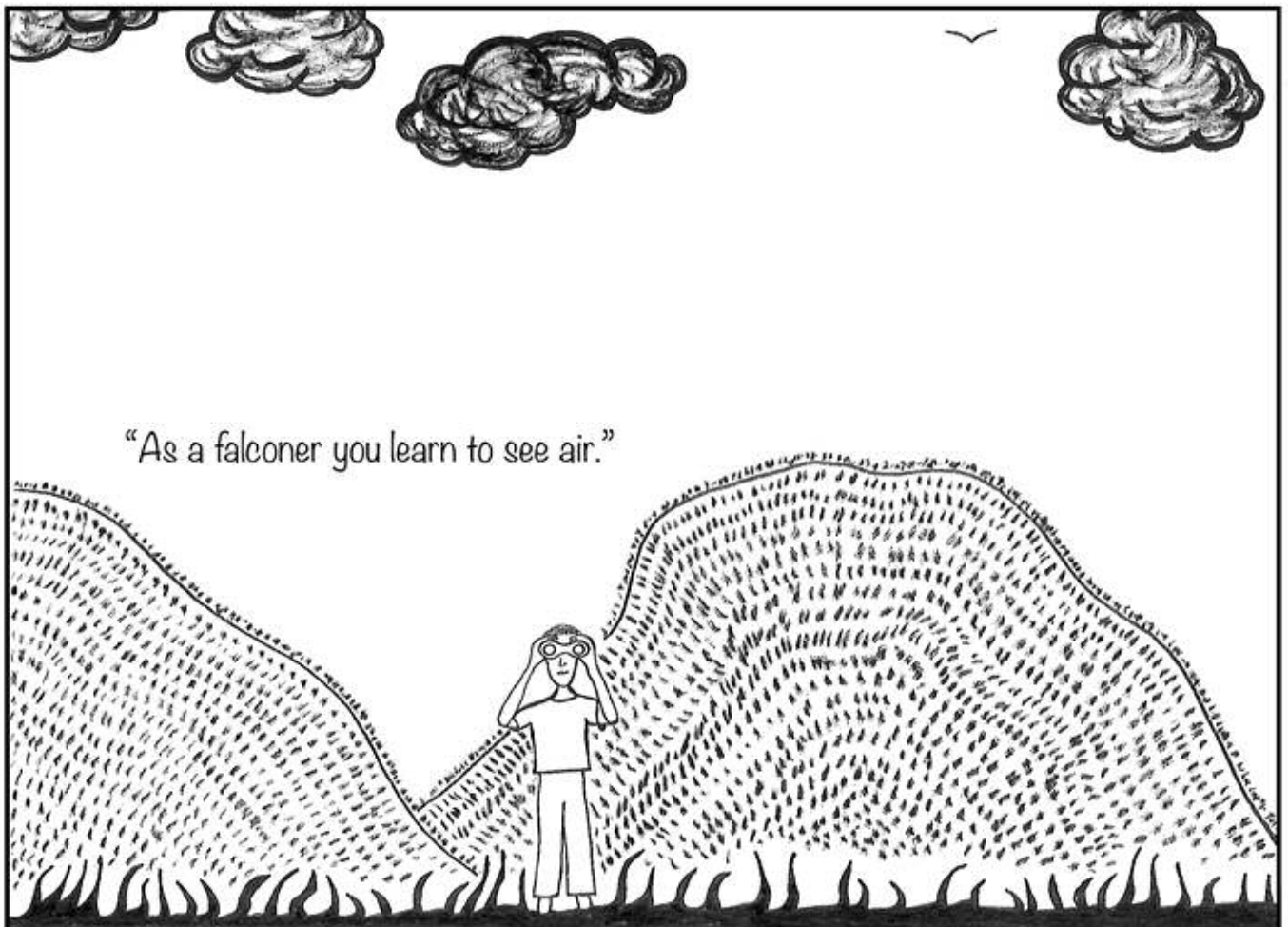
"How might this seemingly effortless flight be possible?"

Through the engagement with a winged and feathered creature...

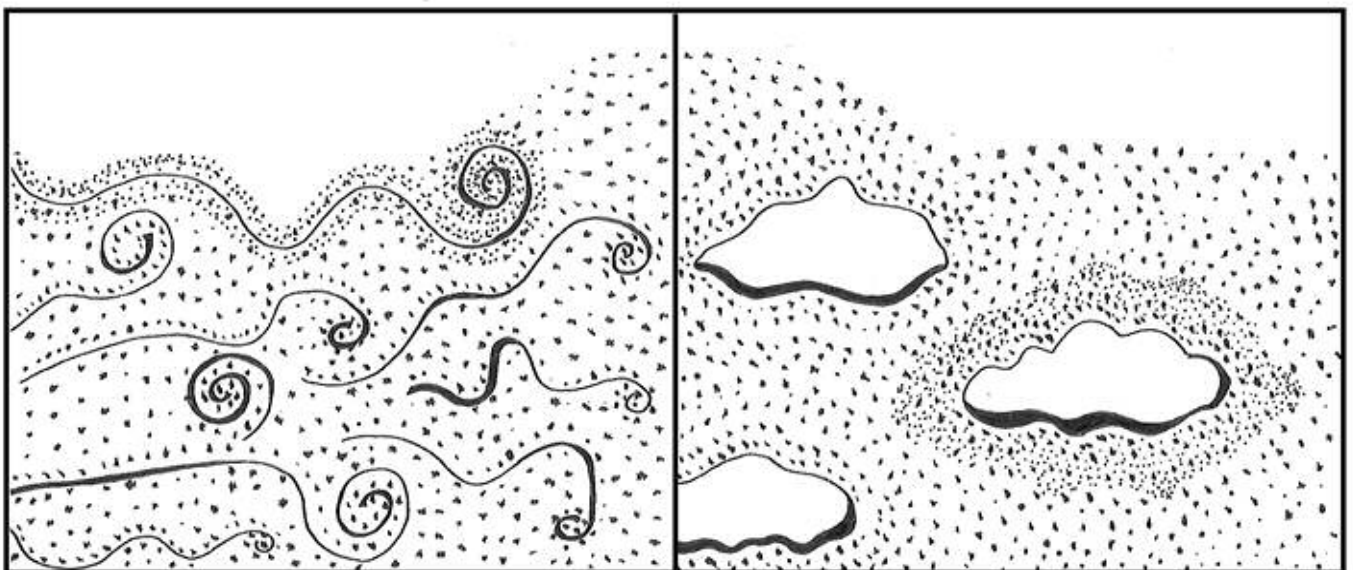
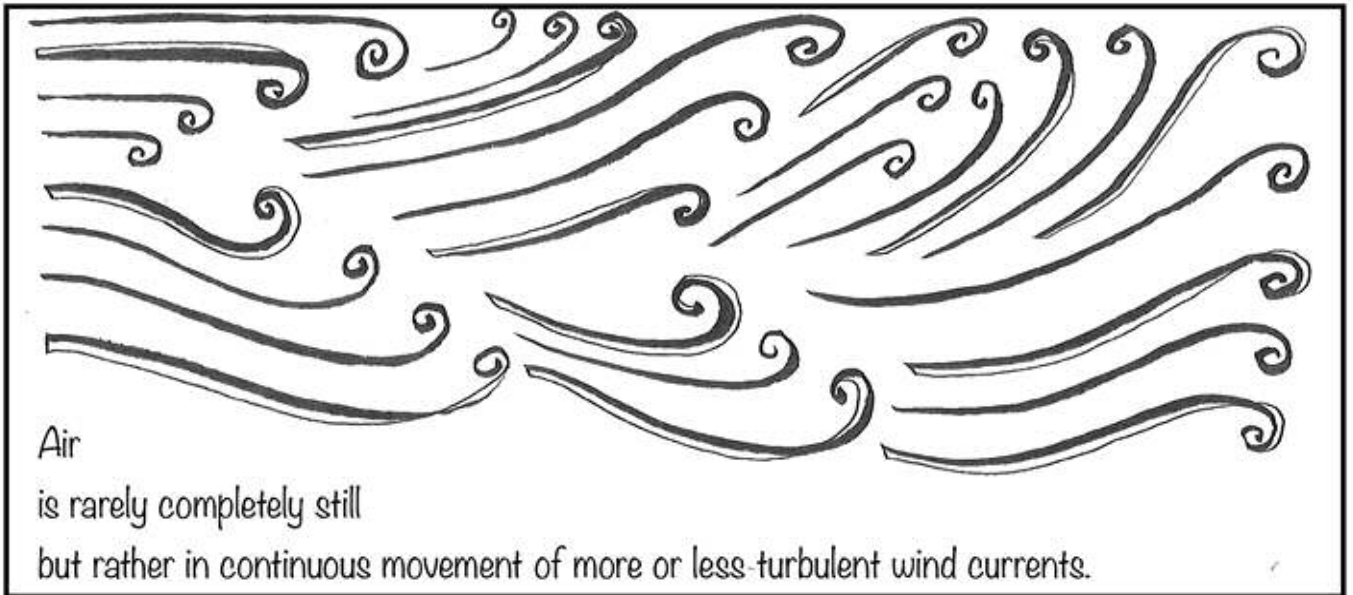


...falconers gain intricate knowledge about the movement of air currents and the interconnectedness of weather and ground conditions.

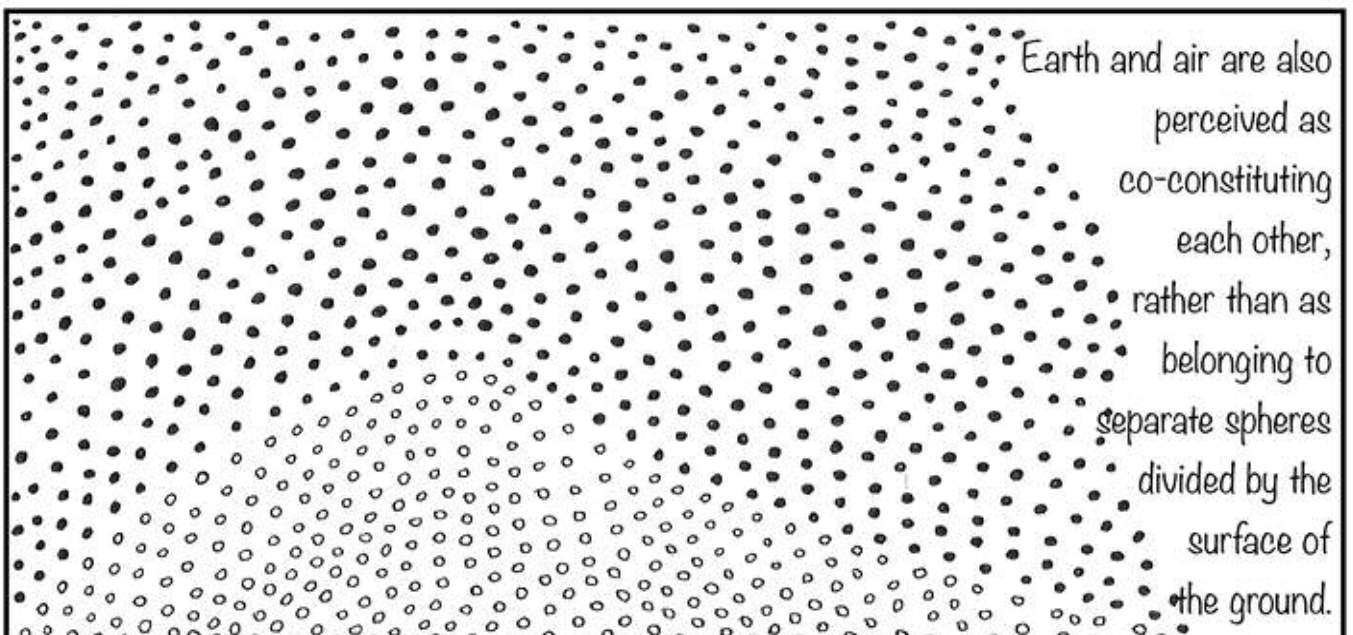
When training or hunting with a falcon, hawk or eagle a falconer's attention is drawn to the airy spaces in-between landforms and the open sky, into which at times to the human bound to the ground, a flying bird seems to disappear.

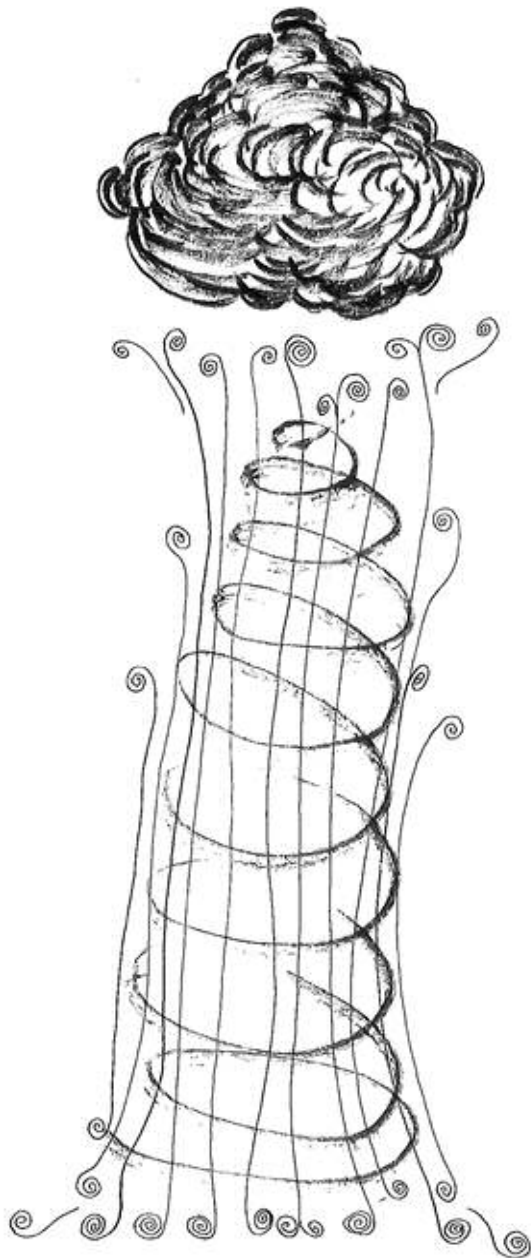


"As a falconer you learn to see air."



In the world of falconer and bird wind and weather take on affective material qualities.





A difference in air temperature may lead to thermal currents, warm air rising horizontally from the ground, characteristically topped by a cumulus cloud. These clouds are one of the few clearly visible signs to the falconer on the ground, indicating warm air rising from the ground, drifting over the land with the wind.

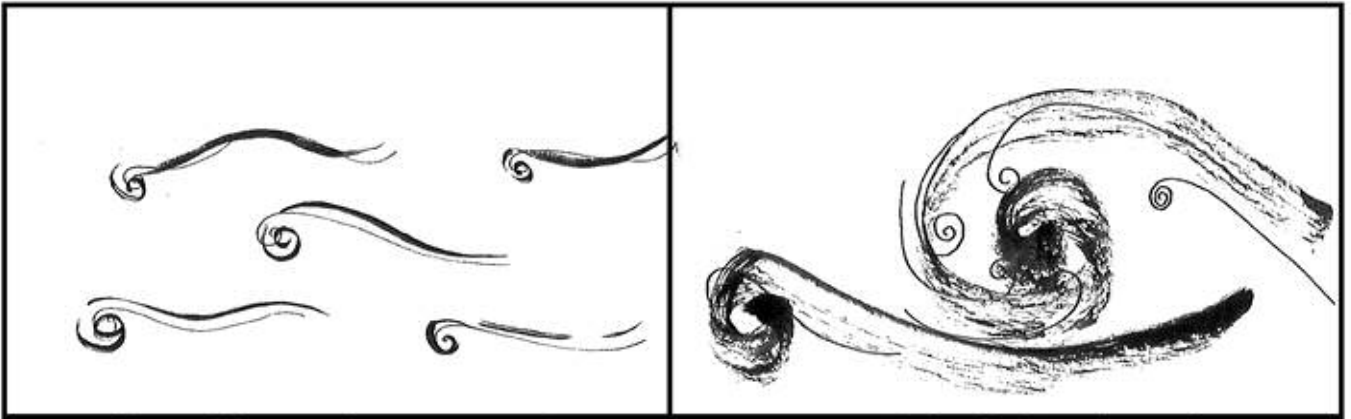
However, the absence of clouds does not mean that "there is nothing going on up there"...



Throwing up a handful of dry leaves makes visible the transparent texture of the up-wards moving air in which we are immersed.

When falconers
talk about
the soaring of birds
in thermal currents
their stories
often imply
that the birds
very much enjoy
this kind of flying.
If birds are flown
in the summer months
and catch one of these
thermal currents
they are often said to be
in a kind of "trance".
They forget about
the despairing falconer
waving pathetically
on the ground
and instead
join other birds
in their spiralling ascent
into the cooler air above.

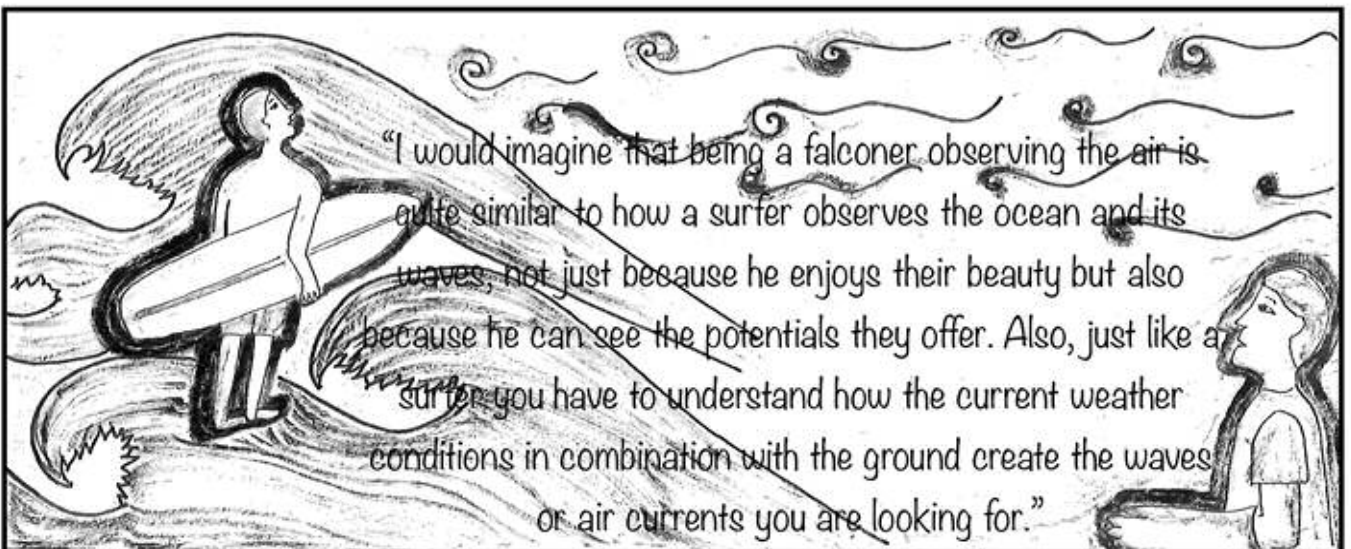




Some falconers have compared air and its currents with the fluid medium of water as it flows in rivers and oceans, highlighting its tactility.

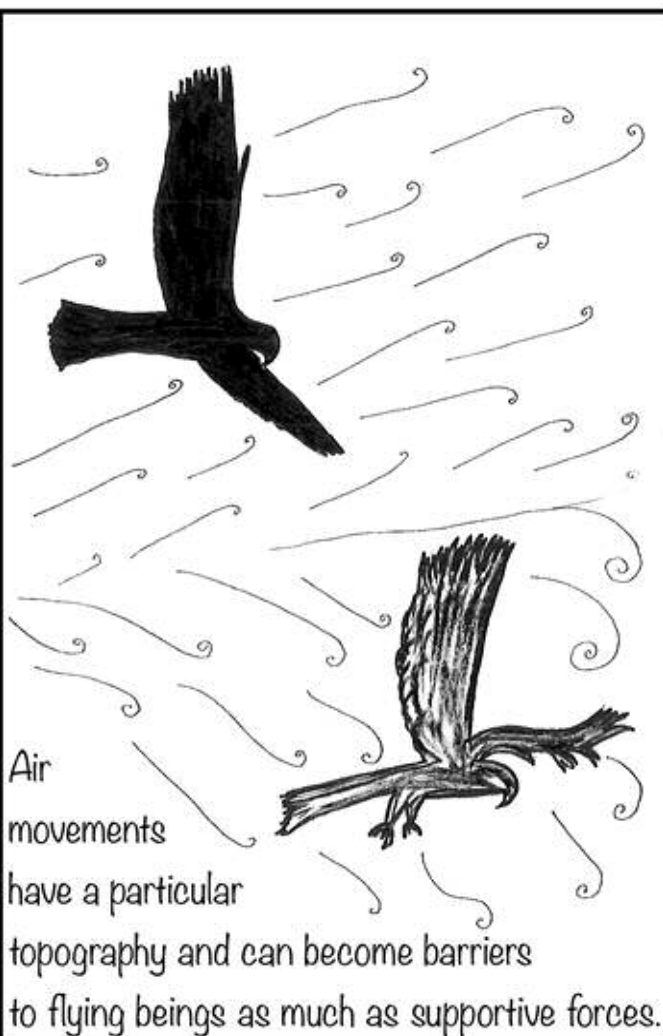
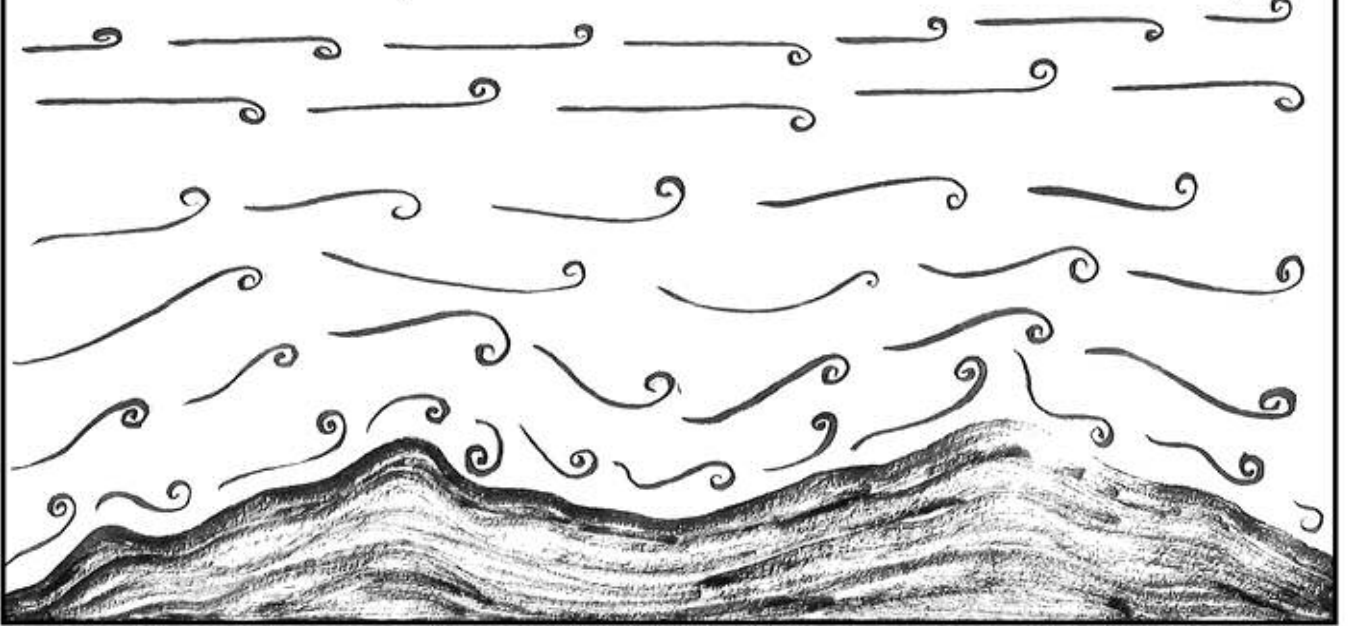


Flying falcons has also been compared to surfing waves.



"I would imagine that being a falconer observing the air is quite similar to how a surfer observes the ocean and its waves, not just because he enjoys their beauty but also because he can see the potentials they offer. Also, just like a surfer you have to understand how the current weather conditions in combination with the ground create the waves or air currents you are looking for."

Thermal currents are of course not the only movements of air that become relevant when flying birds. Hilly areas have a much more turbulent and irregular flow of air currents. This means that they pose a greater challenge to falconers who have to be able to anticipate how these flows influence the flights of the birds as much as their own movements on the ground.

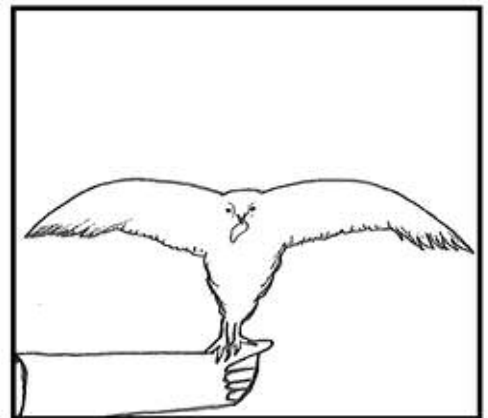
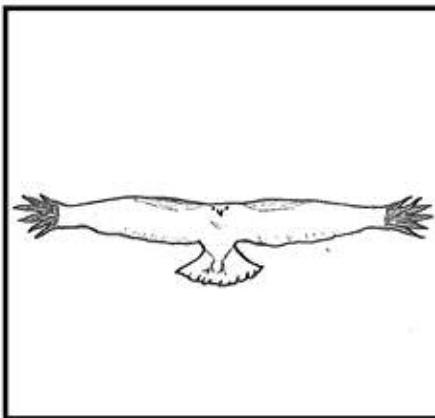


For the birds thermals and other upward moving air streams have the effect of a lift that they learn to take advantage of through using their wings as 'sails' when flying.

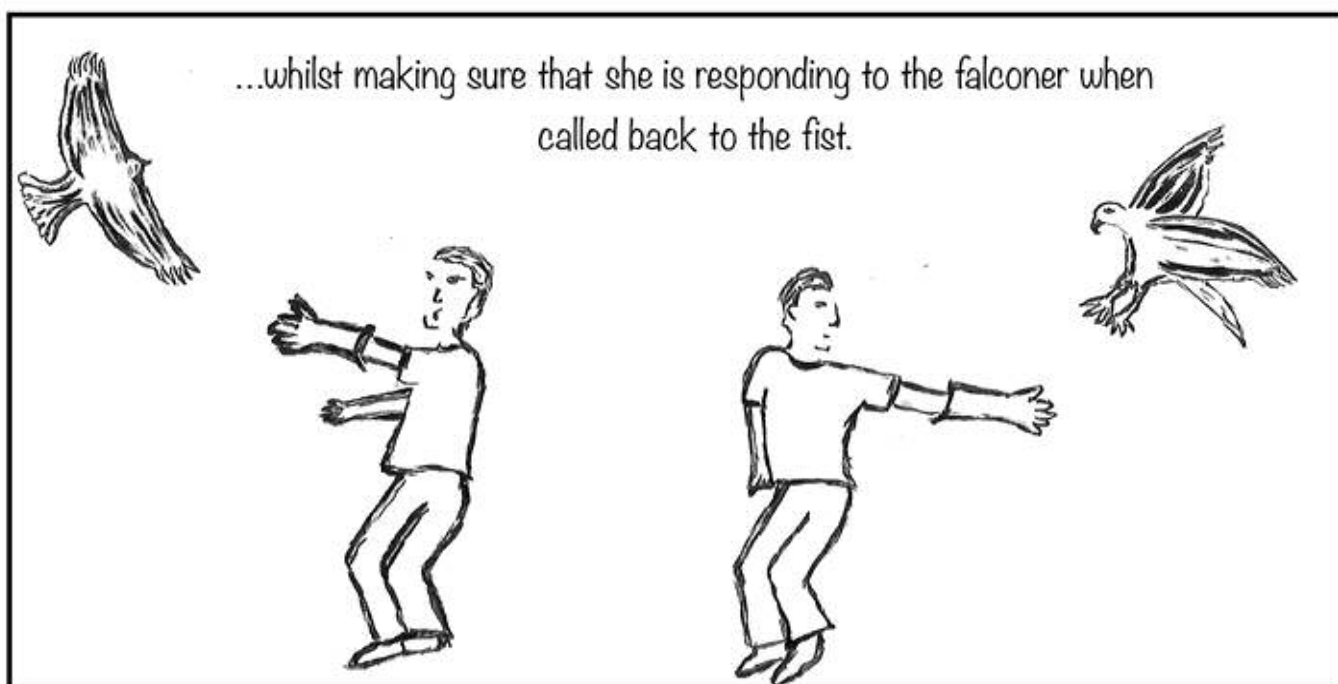
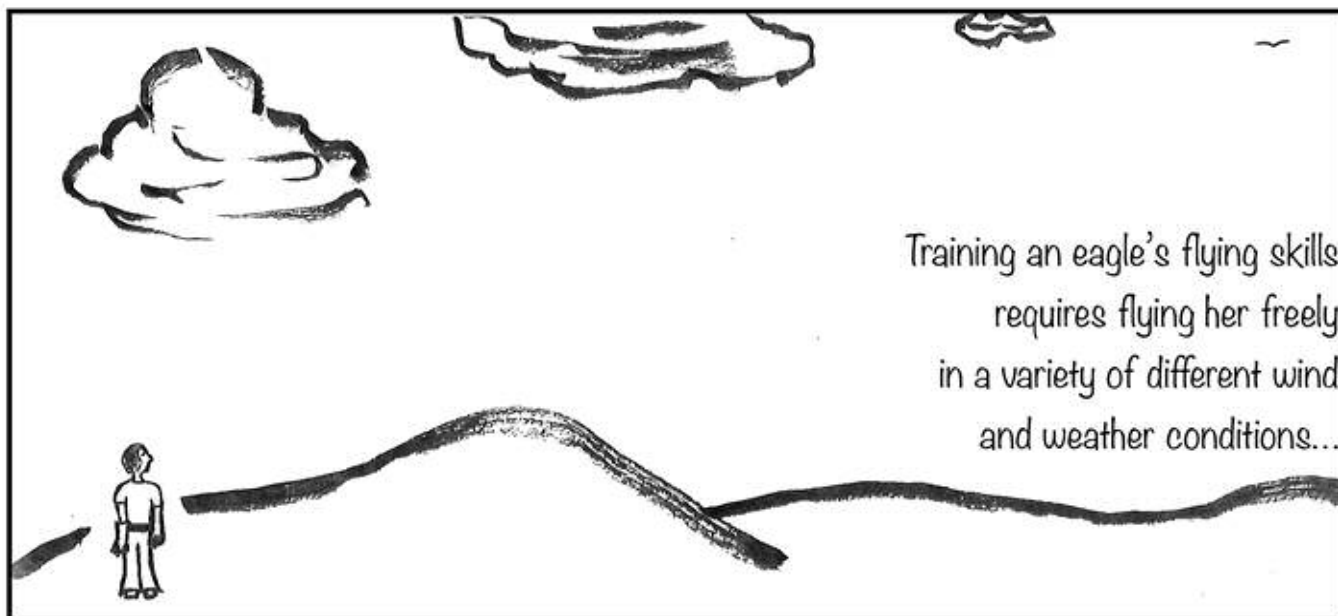


"Young birds have to learn to work with the wind instead of fighting against it".

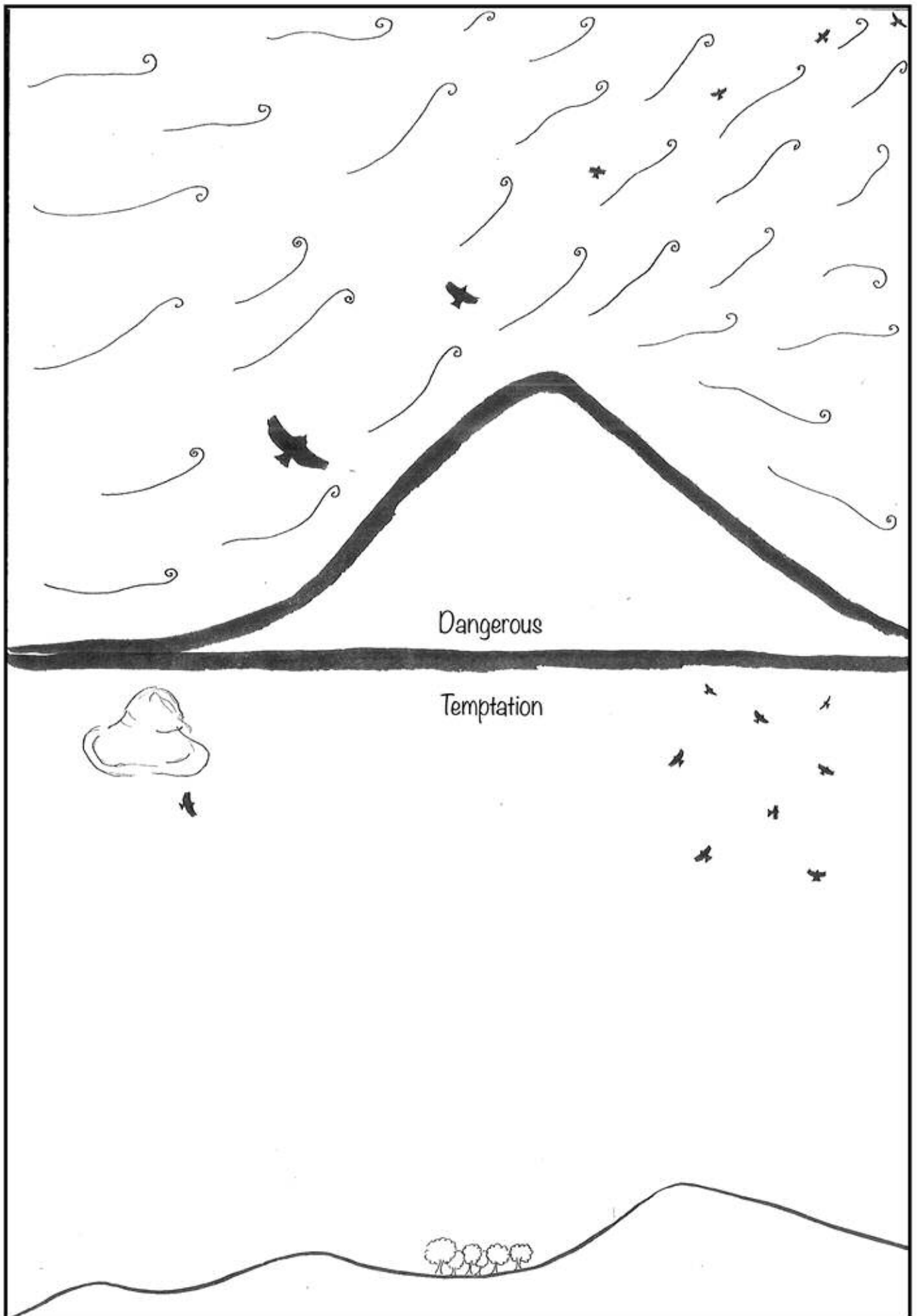
Soaring in thermal currents, for instance, is a technique of flying that birds have to learn progressively. Being able to stay within the rising air currents and to maintain control and balance requires skill and experience... and muscles.

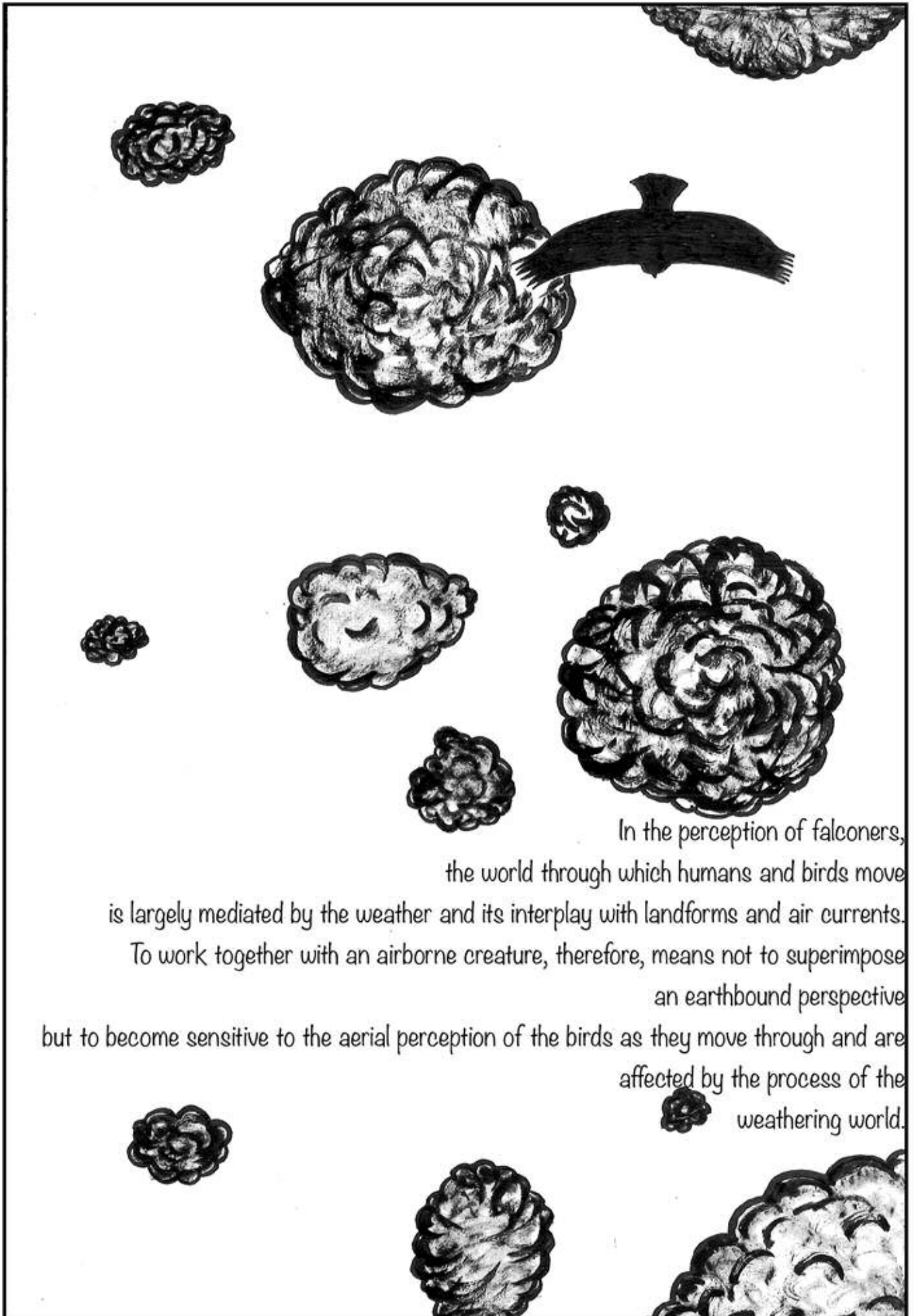


The apparent 'effortlessness' or freedom often associated with birds' flight can only appear as such to the uninitiated. For falconers' knowledge of birds of prey it also is crucial that they are not just watching birds in the air but also have them close at hand, thus being able to experience how their mood, metabolism and strength are influenced by the conditions in which they are flying.



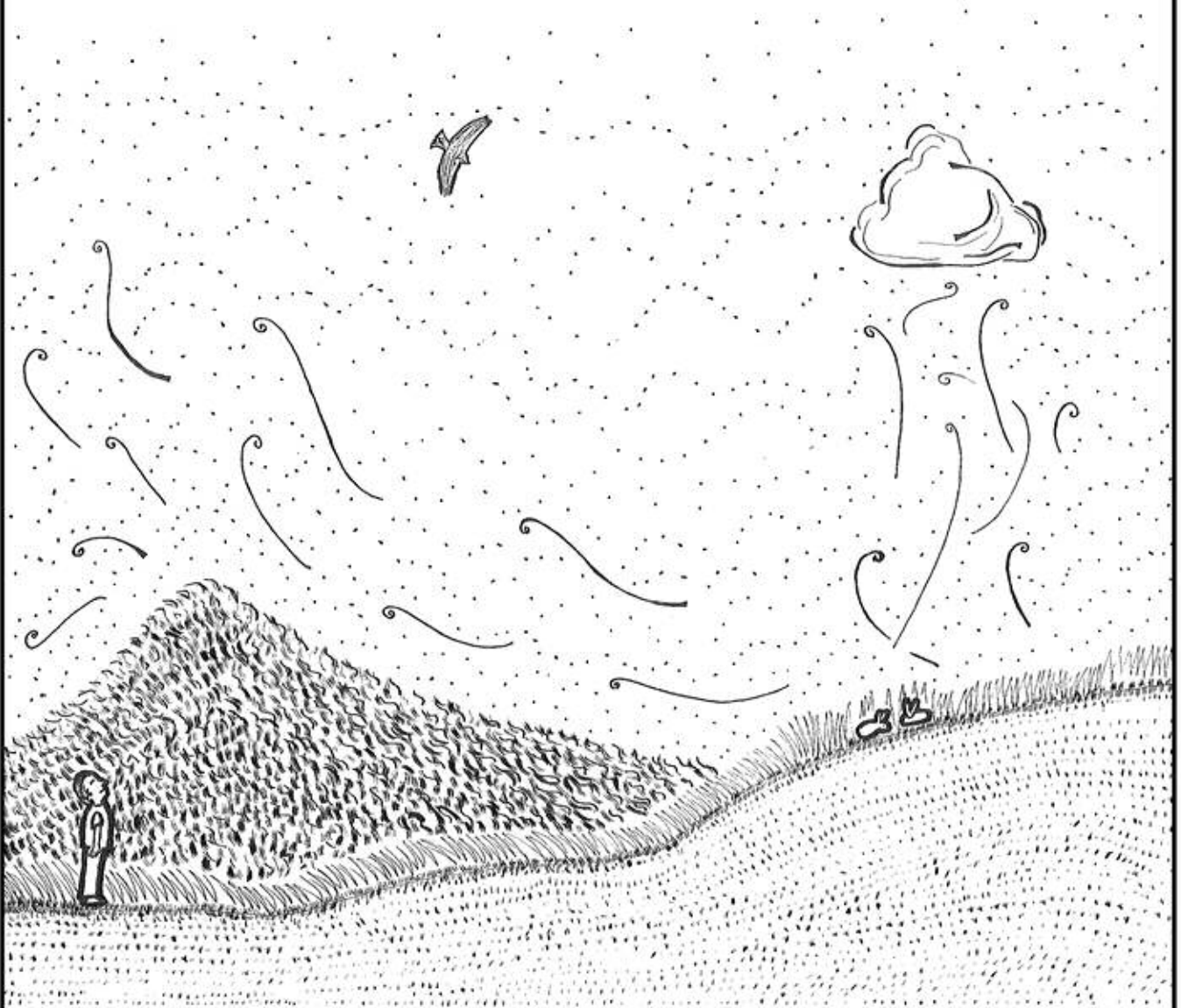
Falconers regularly emphasise that the training of falcons, hawks and eagles is only a mediocre preparation, since real skills and experience can only be developed when a bird is entered to hunting and learns her manoeuvres through engaging with prey animals in the weathering-environment. But before the hunting starts a hunting companionship has to be established, through which both falconer and bird learn to collaborate in a mutually responsive way. This mutual attentiveness is important when far away from each other, limiting the ever-present risk of losing a bird to dangerous air currents leading the bird miles away. It might also guide the bird's attention away from the manifold temptations that she might spot along the way... be it fellow birds or potential prey in the far distance, where the earthbound falconer cannot easily follow.





In the perception of falconers,
the world through which humans and birds move
is largely mediated by the weather and its interplay with landforms and air currents.
To work together with an airborne creature, therefore, means not to superimpose
an earthbound perspective
but to become sensitive to the aerial perception of the birds as they move through and are
affected by the process of the
weathering world.

The concept of weathering describes the weather as an ongoing activity that has a transformational force on how air currents and landforms interplay and co-create each other. It is further pivotal for mediating the movements of humans and other living beings that sense, perceive and experience in the midst of a weathering world.



Here, air, land and water are not delineated into separated domains but co-constitute and transform each other in a constant confluence of movements. Falconers realise this and they do not usually talk about the weather divorced from practical contexts. Instead, their stories evoke rich situated descriptions set in the midst of activities of humans and nonhuman forces, emphasising a world in movement in which the weather is its ongoing effects.