

Soul-bird¹

They are chanting prayers,
But I watch a lonely hawk
Soaring
Amidst the swirling blue.

Wings darken
The whiteness
Of the rushing clouds.

It moves in hesitant circles
Emitting an unearthly sound,
Hawk-eyes seemingly riveted
On the mound below,
Fenced in
By newly-cut bamboo.

The mourners depart
From this obscure bit
Of disturbed earth.

But grandmother clings
To the new-made barrier
Guarding the fresh mound,
Until her grieving heart
Senses a presence
Hovering in the sky.

She turned her gaze,
Red-rimmed eyes
Settled on the circling silhouette,
And then with a sudden
Unseemly whoop
She draws me closer
Whispering in my ear,

'See that keening bird in the sky?
That's your mother's soul
Saying her final goodbye,

It is over
Come, Let us go home now.'

ⁱ In ancient Ao-Naga religion there is a belief that when a person dies, the soul takes the shape of a bird, an insect or sometimes even a caterpillar. The sighting of birds, especially of hawks, is considered to be the last appearance of the loved one on earth.