Bird, Woman’s Wardrobe and The Birth of Humility

Edited by Gillie Bolton University of Sheffield, Sheffield
myself, scrabbling at reassurance, squeezing her hand. She knows about change, has mastered how to sit out loss, but this uncertainty is intolerable. “Anyway, tell me something nice,” she says.

I go with her to the hospital. We’ve brought doughnuts if it’s a celebration, and a bottle of whiskey if it’s not. We sit and wait, leafing through Homes and Garden magazine. The nurse calls her name and we take our seats opposite the silvery haired one. “What you’ve got is psittacosis, totally curable, a bug you’ve picked up from your domestic bird. You’re going to have to get rid of the creature.”

Back in her flat, she opens the door of the birdcage, and watches as he peers out, takes tentative steps along the plastic shelf, glances one more time in the mirror, then launches himself into the room’s air. He circles twice with his eye on Esther, winks at her and disappears through the open window.

Gavin Yamey is a Medical Practitioner, San Francisco

**Woman’s Wardrobe** by Sheena S McMain

Mostly, I don’t think about it.

But sometimes, who knows why, I open the attic wardrobe and stretch my hand into the scented darkness at the back. There’s the usual faint smell of lavender and old pencils. The same old scuffed sandal falls out and there’s the same unexpected feeling somewhere between excitement and apprehension:

Suddenly I’m a small girl hidden in the soft dark mystery of fur coats: my mother’s evening dress, black scratchy net with a splatter of damante stars, hangs fragrant with powdery smells of perfume and lipstick. There it is, hanging where it always does.

Like my grandfather’s ceremonial kilt, under a faded flannelette sheet on the back of his bedroom door: there was wall paper the colour of cold tea with a pattern of vermilion birds and an eiderdown that smelled faintly of damp or cold.

Look, here it is . . . the silk is soft, the veiling fine and delicate. Only the stiff petticoat forced into a bag, like someone doubled over.

I can’t believe I ever bought a wedding dress.

And yet it seemed a wondrous thing to do that grey January:

more superbly feminising than a first period.

For the first time to choose, so sure of myself in choosing.

For the first time to believe myself capable of rare beauty.

For the first to sense mysterious connection:

My mother someone’s lover, my grandmother a bride.

On that Saturday, the day our marriage died before it was born there was no fitting funeral.

I took the dress from the back of my bedroom door, under its white cotton sheet and hung it in the wardrobe, still unworn.

And there it is now, a papery long-dead fetus, bleached and dry: as negligible as a pressed leaf, but too precious to discard, a symbol of what was and might have been and is still: this ivory remembrance in my wardrobe.

Sheena S McMain is a General Practitioner in Leeds

The Birth of Humility by Robin Waller

Diabetic woman
On a long stay ward.
She’s not my patient,
Not really.
But at night
On duty
She’s mine.
For I’m the new doctor
Who can do anything.

In pain,
Rotting buttocks
Maggot deep bedsores
Moaning, forever moaning
Her suffering invades.
The nurses are silenced.

I push morphine
Into her body.
More and more and more.
How much will it take?

Sweet Jesus
It shouldn’t be like this.
Her pain
And my pain
Now Siamese twinned.

Die, please die.
End our suffering
End my suffering.
Murderous thoughts
Scab inside.
It’s the birth of humility.

Robin Waller is a Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist in Sheffield

Gillie Bolton, Editor of Opening the word hoard, is Writer and Research Fellow in Medical Humanities, University of Sheffield. Email: g.bolton@sheffield.ac.uk