Opening the word hoard

Bird, Woman’s Wardrobe and The Birth of Humility

Edited by Gillie Bolton University of Sheffield, Sheffield

Bird by Gavin Yamey
She sits in the armchair by the birdcage, watching the cockatoo’s doomed attempts at flight. The porcelain swans on the mantelpiece are loved for their regal shine. She crochets baby clothes to the music of Val Doonican, sucks on boiled sweets with hardened gums, finds solace in card games and brandy.

Once a week she visits her doctor. “Hello Esther, what can I do for you today?” She has her six minutes, he hears her confession, she leaves with some new pill-lotion-powder, the modern sacrament of healing. The doctor finds himself lost when she has gone. He writes something vague in her notes, like “lumbago” or “skin rash,” to validate these meetings. He knows he is ministering, but never dares suggest any other arrangement, for he finds comfort himself in what is unsaid.

She is in exile. She once dried her own ostrich meat, stripped flesh dessicating under a distant sun. There were family gatherings on porches, barbecues, outdoor cinemas, children’s races captured with early cine, all gangly pride and toothy grins in deep colours with the shiniest of buttons.

I have not seen her in a while, so I ring the bell and wait. I hear the click, shuffle, click, shuffle of her slow march with Zimmer frame and concentration, until at last there is the usual cry-through-letterbox, “friend or foe?” She looks tired, a woman filled with early cine, all gangly pride and toothy grins in deep colours with the shiniest of buttons.

Later on that day she plays rummies with the Old Girls, a notorious match where the stakes are pennies and the scores are hot to touch. They take it in turns to host the game, with rivalry in the lightness of the cakes, the freshness of the clotted cream, the achievements and height of the grandchildren. There is fierceness in the pride of their survival.

She sits on the balcony as the sun sets, sucking on a menthol cigarette, watching the smoke rise like a ghost; it wisps, shades, disappears. From here she can see the surrounding suburb. Over there is a distant church, where a swallow has nested, home to her babies whose beaks can be seen as they stretch open, reaching up for parcels of food and love. Esther coughs, wheezes, itches. Her face is golden in this light, its lines a web of past smiles, joining up at junctions where tears once softened the skin.

She’s back at the surgery for her ten o’clock appointment. “It’s my chest, doctor, I just can’t seem to get the phlegm up, and I’m all bronchial, it’s like there’s an orchestra down there, do you understand?” He feels her pulse, lifts her four layers of sweaters, listens intently through his stethoscope. He notices the little red dots on her skin and remembers the gentle beauty of their name, Campbells de Morgan Spots, harmless markers of aging like rings of a tree trunk.

Something’s not quite right, but non-specifically so. Perhaps he’s just being sentimental, for he has cared for this woman for decades, knows her fear, insomnia, heart sounds and blood sugar, humming layers of knowing someone—in the flesh, under the microscope, from her dreams, he the steady stone in a stream that runs to the sea that meets an ocean across which she once sailed on her journey here.

Her cough is part of something bigger, but today he is happy to give her antibiotics and let time dictate events.

The swallow’s babies are getting bigger, and harder to please. She seems to spend all day bringing worms.

Once I remarked how well she makes lasagne, and today she gives me the recipe, written in biro on a shoe box cover. Always add a little paprika, it says, to make it look special. She would cook this for her husband, a country vet paid in milk and eggs. Time spent without the lost loved seems wasted, hollow.

She was a glamour queen then, the village’s own Jackie O, sunglasses, pearls, and a bee hive so perfect that it fooled the honeymakers themselves. In the department store, she holds up cardigans against her face and checks the mirror, close to the window for the natural sunlight, choosing warm, deep colours with the shiniest of buttons.

She has become breathless, even doing nothing. In her doctor’s face she sees gentle concern. At her local hospital she is x-rayed, breathes into machines, gives samples of blood and phlegm. A tall silver haired physician sedates her and eases a telescope into her lungs, takes washings and brushings and even a bite from the delicate maze of breathing tubes.

“If the news is bad, I’m not letting them dose me up with drugs,” she says. “Drugs is what killed Irene, I mean it, she was bald and sicken up the whole time. I’m not having that.” I am all fear
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 whisky 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.

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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.

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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.

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