

The Flight of Birds

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***Abstract:** 'The Flight of Birds' is a retelling – and a reconfiguration – of a story contained in Katharine Briggs' *British Folk-Tales and Legends* (1977). It engages with the way animals are used in folk tales as symbols of human psyche, but, more importantly, the way animals in stories can move beyond simply symbolic value. In the original story, and in my retelling of it, birds appear both as extensions of the characters' emotional state, and as creatures with an agency and power beyond human interests.*

The piece tells the story twice: first as a simplified summary of the original, followed by what Philip Pullman calls a 'personal interpretation' or 'poetic variation'. In doing this, I attempt to show not only, as Miller and Hilbert note, that 'changes in history become changes in narrative' (140), but also to reflect on Reinhard Friedrich's observation that 'Animal Tales have a residual power that percolates up through sedimented layers of history' (196). In my double vision I play with the function of the birds as guardians of morality and empathy, while still maintaining their presence outside human experience, gliding above us in miraculous unfathomable patterns. The birds in my story, I hope, have the capacity to transcend the pettiness of human concerns. As Merleau-Ponty states, when trying to decipher da Vinci's symbolic use of birds, 'we are caught in a secret history...[it is nearly impossible] to decipher the riddle from what we know about the meaning of the flight of birds' (22).

There's an old fairy tale — I think it's Celtic, or from the north of England — about a farmer so jealous of his wife that he decides to take her out onto the moors and hang her. Why is he jealous? The story doesn't tell us; it doesn't need to. He's jealous, he doesn't trust her, and he is resolute in his decision to hang her. Nothing she can say will soften his heart, the story says. The farmer reaches for a hempen rope from the rafters of his cottage, drags his wife by the elbow through the stone doorway, and out into the cold night. It's a lonely farmhouse, and the moor is desolate. The wind is bitter. The farmer spots a solitary tree on the horizon, silhouetted against the midnight blue sky. As the man and his wife trudge towards it — dragging, pleading — a flock of birds sweep over them, fluttering against the wind. The story doesn't tell what kind of birds they are. Maybe they're crows, sharp-beaked and gloomy, their black wings barely trembling as they sweep overhead. Maybe they're sparrows, quivering against the brisk night air. I like to think of them as seagulls. The farmhouse could be perched on a clifftop and the wind could be an ocean squall. The seagulls lift off from the gnarled rocks below the farmhouse. They glide across the empty sky, over the lumbering couple, their white feathers glimmering in the moonlight.

The farmer and his wife reach the tree. It's a dead husk, grey and leafless, like a skeleton's hand reaching out of the ground. The birds have settled on one of the branches. They stare down at the couple, silently, with only the occasional twitch of a wing. The farmer puts the noose around his wife's neck; she's too exhausted to struggle any more. Her face is spattered with tears. The farmer throws the rope up towards the strongest bough, the one where the birds are perched. The rope arches over the branch, but doesn't stick: the rope slides over the birds' silken wings. The farmer tries another branch, higher up. But the birds swoop up and land on that branch, too; once again, the rope slips and coils itself to the ground.

The man sees another solitary tree, sharp against another horizon, across the expanse of the moor. The couple move towards it — stumbling, weeping. The wife's head is still in the noose. The birds fly with them. The farmer and his wife reach the tree: it's another hollow, barren shell. The birds settle on the branches and, try as hard as he might, the farmer cannot

fasten the rope. He hefts the rope again, but it slithers over the birds' feathers and falls to the muddy ground.

It's lighter now and the wind has dropped. It's that still, pale time of morning before the day begins. There's one more tree to be seen across the expanse. The farmer and his wife set off. The birds soar high in the air, off, and away. Maybe the birds have forgotten the wife; maybe they've caught a scent of a fish on an ocean wave, and left her to her fate. The farmer and his wife shuffle and sob towards the next dead tree. Much to his relief, the branches of the tree remain birdless as he flings the rope up. But as he throws, there's a great whirr of wings, the birds whoop down, as if from nowhere, and the rope falls once more. The man tries again.

He is sweating, his arms are aching. The wife is quiet, as still as the morning. The farmer looks at his wife. The first rays of the dawn break over the moors, over the clifftop, over the ocean. The rays catch the wife's face. She's smiling as she sees the birds' wings fluttering in the early morning light.

I don't remember how the story ends. Maybe the woman's smile makes the farmer's heart soften and the couple—repentant, forgiving—wander back to the cottage, hand in hand, exhausted. Maybe he succeeds, and the rope is fastened to the bough of the next tree. Or maybe the birds swoop down and, wings flapping wildly, they surround the wife, and lift her up into the air, away from the wasteland of the moors, away from her husband and her barren life, never to be seen again.

The young man has not heard this story, and is not interested in fairy tales. At this moment, he's not interested in anything. His mind is a blank; well, not quite a blank. He's trying to keep focused on the task at hand. He's sitting on a rattling, sweaty bus. The bus is not important to his story: it's just a means to an end. A way to get from his empty flat to the ocean. His destination.

He's had his destination mapped out for some time. He may not read fairy tales, but he has read *The Waste Land* and knows all about Phlebus the Phoenician, who forgot the cry of gulls and now swells in the deep seas. He's seen the end of *A Star is Born* when James Mason, defeated, walks into the Pacific. He's heard the story of Virginia Woolf filling her pockets with rocks to weigh her down in the water. The young man doesn't have rocks, but his pockets are laden with packets of pills. Their plastic cases rustle like dead leaves. Some of the cases are already empty. They're just painkillers, but there are enough of them, he hopes, to be productive. The plan is simple, obvious: once he's drowsy enough he'll take the plunge.

Why does he want to do this? He wouldn't be able to tell you. Maybe it's an impulse he's inherited, or it's a chemical imbalance in his brain. Maybe it has something to do with his circumstances: the no-man's-land of his early twenties; the deep mud of boredom and the disappointment of adulthood. Or maybe in life, as in fairy tales, there is no reason. In any case, he's embarked upon the journey, and nothing will soften his heart.

The bus reaches the end of the line: an exposed, grassy headland; a carless car park. It's on the edge of the city, an empty place overlooking some sharp rocks and the open sea. The brakes on the bus hiss and the young man — the only passenger — stumbles off. The ground feels uneven and the blue horizon lopsided. The young man lurches forward. At the far end of the car park is the way down to the rocks and the sea. He has to stagger down a wooden staircase. The structure feels unsafe. It clutches the cliff like temporary scaffolding, like matchsticks that might snap.

At the base of the stairs he plonks himself down, groggily, and takes off his shoes and socks. It's probably not the time to be worried about walking in grit, but it's an old habit. He's been here before, many times. He looks out at the grotty expanse of sand. On the weekend it's swarming with children and bikinis, but today it's uninhabited: there are only a few chip packets and cigarette butts to indicate human visitors.

Of course, there are the birds. Seagulls. Two or three of them, pecking at the sand and prodding the stubbed-out cigarettes. The young man ignores them. The birds flap a little when he hobbles past, but, for the most part, they ignore him too.

He wanders haphazardly over the sand. The beach is not his destination. He's picked out a spot around the next headland. He has to scabble over some rocks. He climbs his way around the headland. There are maybe one or two birds hovering high above, but the young man has his head down and his thoughts on other things. He's reached his destination. Well, not quite his destination, he thinks. The water pulses against the rocks. The young man sits.

The horizon is sharp today, even when seen through the young man's hazy eyes. A thin strip of midnight blue; an overwhelming sensation of bright blue above. Some days the sky can seem deep and dense, a whole spectrum of blues, a depth of space. The young man doesn't see that today. The sky is flat, a monochrome screen at the end of the ocean. The sun is too bright, the blue is too blue, and this moment feels like an overexposed photograph. He sits on the hard rock and stares at the flat sky.

The ocean approaches and retreats. The tide's coming in. He'll sit here for as long as he has to.

It takes him a while to notice the seagulls. They've flitted down one by one, chosen perches on outcrops nearby, or on the flat shelf that separates the young man from the grabbling water. They're interested in him, it seems. They twist their heads towards him and make small awkward jumps towards him. Of course, these are not the birds of a fairy tale: sleek, intelligent, benevolent. They're a dishevelled collection, ripped and ravaged. To the young man, the seagulls' feathers look moth-eaten, tinged with dirty yellow. The red beaks are faded, sun-bleached. One bird is missing an eye: the black jagged hole glares emptily. Another is missing a foot: it's been severed by a net, or hacked off by schoolboys, the young man imagines, or tries not to imagine. He tries to keep his mind focused on the pills and the swelling ocean. He puts his hand in his pocket. A flash of movement ripples through the flock. They teeter over the rocks. The footless bird makes the littlest movement, the slightest tilt of the head, the tiniest

hop on its single foot. It gives out the feeblest noise — more like a bleat or a cough than a squawk. The young man can't bear to look at this battered creature. He feels sweaty and dizzy. He wants to lash out at the bird, at the birds, to rip off all their feet and pluck out all their feathers. He feels hemmed in by the birds and the flat, overwhelming sky and the ocean shuffling towards his feet.

And then it happens. As if they'd choreographed this moment, all the birds unfurl their wings. They all lean to the left, they all lean to the right. Then they all glide skyward. For a moment, the young man isn't certain if they all levitated or if the rocks dropped from under him. They're all in the air above him, sharp against the blue sky. They form a perfect, synchronised circle that wheels above the young man's head. Even the one with the missing foot flies smoothly, turning this way and that, letting the sun glint in different angles. Even the one with the gaping eyehole can hover and swoop through the air. In fact, it's impossible to tell which bird is which: they are all perfect, all elegant, all miraculous. The young man watches in awe at this sight, as the birds float across the flat, empty sky, their white feathers sparkling in the sunlight. Then they soar out to sea, skimming down to the water and up into the air again. Then they're specks against the sharp horizon. Then they're gone.

The sun's in his eyes. He blinks. He looks at the space where the birds used to be and the dark blue ocean rolling—relentless, mesmerising—over the rocks.

When he's ready, he makes his way home.

The young man, exhausted, sleeps on the bus, dreaming of seagulls. Years later, he will find a book of fairy tales in a second-hand store. He'll read the story of the jealous farmer and his wife, and he'll remember his own flight of birds, rescuing him from a heart that wouldn't soften.

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