

# PRISM

international



WINTER 2023

*Aefa Mulholland*

## AN UNOBTRUSIVE BIRD

*February, The European Robin (Erithacus rubecula)*

My mum missed feeding the birds, so we gathered them to her, every way we could.

Text messages announcing curlew, ibis, oystercatcher sightings in Donegal, Johannesburg, London.

Books about jackdaw hospitals.

Stuffed toy red-winged blackbirds that whistled when squeezed.

Recordings of nightingales singing along with cellists in Berlin.

Calls to her bedside with phones held skywards as swifts shrieked overhead.

I was home with her, so I relayed the messages, delivered the books, pressed play on recordings and videos.

Each day, I found myself showered in birdseed, stale buns, last week's berries as I tried to hump them onto the garage roof, so she could see the flocks feeding when she was well enough to sit by the upper window.

From the bed my dad and I made her in the dining room—once she couldn't get upstairs anymore, she watched the woodpigeon nest, worrying about the proximity of the squirrel until the chick was fledged.

One early morning, when she was too sore to sleep, the robin she'd fed since he was hatched sang to her from the sill.

*March, The Grey Heron (Ardea cinerea)*

I'd risked a rare outing. I was aiming for the main road, but instead slipped through the back gates of the Botanic Gardens, into the green. I ducked down the path to the river. The Kelvin. My favourite river, the one beside whose banks I was born.

From Kirklee, the Kelvin flows in a wide, sullen churn through the Botanics. It pours past the hems of North Kelvinside and races and swirls under Kelvinbridge. It slows and gleams through Kelvingrove Park, past the Gothic Revival towers of the University of Glasgow, the art deco Bandstand, the proud red sandstone and spires of the Art Galleries.

By the stage the Kelvin reaches Partick Bridge, the river is bright, splashy, joyful—you can almost hear it chatter its excitement about joining the River Clyde, waiting around the next bend. In this, its last rush, as it passes what was once the maternity hospital, the Kelvin is shallow—it sparkles, reflects the light, as if it has left all its depths and darks and weights behind.

As I walked through the greenery, I imagined my mum tucking me into a blanket, emerging into the light to take me home—the heart-lifting rush of the Kelvin's rapids one of the first sounds to reach my tiny ears.

I started along the river walkway, but only got as far as the weir. It's wide and mysterious here, forbidding, the water dark, swirling with unknown depths, glinting as it streams over the reeded hummock of the weir. Midstream—a grey heron stood motionless, poised, ready to plunge at the slightest flicker. Twenty feet away, I had the same frozen posture. Holding my breath, bargaining—with the heron? with nature? with God?—if the heron didn't move, my mum would come through, if the heron stayed stock still, she'd—.

The heron's head thrust down into the stream and back out, a wriggle of silver in his beak. My phone rang.

I hurtled home to another urgent, terrified bundling of my mum's fragile frame into another ambulance, another ward, another unknown.

I called the family. In they swooped—from Germany, England, Ireland, and South Africa. My mum perked slightly, briefly, reminded of childhood birdwatching adventures back home in Tipperary. But this time she was too weary to rise.

She faded, lost half her body weight.

Sometimes I snatched fragments of sleep with an expectant heap of clothes waiting at the foot of the bed. Sometimes I didn't undress.

I filled the smallest cocotte dish with her favourite pie.

I arranged and re-arranged minute morsels of eggs on toast, crusts carefully cut.

I wrestled with an uncooperative chicken and far too small a pot to concoct broth from the mottled recipe in her battered school cookbook. I re-enacted my battle with the chicken at her bedside. "...but the wretched thing just bobbed back up to the surface, all its stupid legs pointing accusingly at me!" She smiled the tiniest smile, tired even by that. The soup congealed quietly on her tray.

### *April, The Eurasian Woodcock (Scolopax rusticola)*

She'd been sinking for five weeks when I found it. A glimpse of russet orange and grey as I pelted to the hospital in inappropriate shoes. Half hidden under piles of wet April leaves that huddled near the university, there was a bedraggled feather, barred with tan and black, grey-tipped.

I washed and blow-dried it, tucked it in a pocket, snuck it into the hospital.

My mum's eyes fixed on the feather. She held out a hand. "Help me sit," she whispered.

I hoisted her upright, hindered by her turning the feather over and over.

"A kestrel? A sparrow hawk?"

It was a feather my mum didn't know. She insisted I take a photo and email it to the British Trust for Ornithology right away. They sent it on to experts at Stirling University's Biological and Environmental Science Department. A prompt but unexpected reply came back—it was the tail feather of a woodcock.

"The mystery is," said the email, "What was a woodcock doing in Glasgow's West End?"

"Give me the laptop," my mum said.

I changed her compression stockings as she researched.

“A fairly large wader,” she reported, ignoring me manhandling her withered legs. “Favoured by game shooters, with a long, sturdy, black beak and dark black and tan plumage, ideal for camouflage.”

Maybe not so ideal. The B.T.O. reckoned our bird was mid-migration. Flying by night, they usually move back to breeding grounds in Scottish forest, woodlands and plantings in March, but this year everything had run late because of prolonged cold. This bird could have been predated by a peregrine or sparrow hawk mid-flight, the B.T.O. suggested, or simply come down for a rest during daylight, snuggling up in leaf litter at ground level.

“Is that what happened to it?” my mum wondered, some days later, “Stopping for a rest on the way home, only to be snuffed out by a cat or a fox?”

But with just one feather, no surrounding scene of carnage, she imagined the woodcock escaped any such encounter—rising in a flutter of fright, leaving behind just one feather and an air of outrage.

“I can’t remember where safe is,” said my mum’s friend Sister Julia, having failed to find a poem she had put in a safe place.

“That’s the problem,” my mum said. “None of us can.”

### *May, The Herring Gull (Larus argentatus)*

Two weeks after I found the woodcock’s feather, my mum left the hospital, in a hospital bed, in an ambulance taking her for two weeks’ respite care at Saint Margaret of Scotland Hospice. She’d build up a bit more strength, then she’d be coming home.

As the ambulance trundled along Great Western Road, my mum took in May’s dazzle of pink and white cherry blossoms and the skirmish of herring gulls above. She watched them wheel, clutching my hand, the feather packed with her most precious belongings.

At St. Margaret’s, she settled in, the feather on her nightstand.

Steroids kickstarted her appetite.

Warned they can make people hyper, my mum remarked, “Well, anything has to be an improvement on being low-per.”

She put on weight, had her hair done, and was trundled along to Mass every morning.

## *June, The Common Swift (Apodidae)*

Two weeks became three. My mum roosted happily, giving my dad time to organise a hospital bed for the house, giving me time to practice giving morphine shots. She entertained visitors with tales of hospice goings-on, of the indomitable head nun, the thoughtful tea lady, the priests who came to call. Once my sister shunted my mum's bed outside so they could watch the first swifts, returned from Africa, circling high above.

A stained glass artist by trade, my mum started painting again, taking requests as to which birds. Swallows over Tipperary barley fields, an owl for the thoughtful nurse, those first swifts, a nuthatch that caught her fancy, and, of course, a woodcock's feather.

At the end of her fourth week at the hospice, she fell asleep holding the feather, and it must have been swept away with the bedclothes for the wash.

I searched in books, under furniture, in bags, between pillows, blankets, sheets, tearing through every card, letter and chart, on my hands and knees, crawling under the bed, hands scraping behind bedside cupboards, below the mattress, my mum watching my every move, but the woodcock's feather was gone.

She sunk fast.

A few days after the feather was lost, I called the family home for the last time.

## *July, Woodcock's Feather (Pluma scolopax rusticola)*

In a note I found afterwards, she'd written, "Usually people take white feathers to be signs, reminders of passing angels. I got a dark one instead—a symbol of an unobtrusive bird going about its business, unexpectedly knocked off its perch by disaster."

That photo of her hands holding a then-unidentified feather is one of the last I have of my mum. Then, it was a picture of my desperate hope that something, anything, might make my dying mother feel better.

Now, it's a picture of her unquenchable sense of wonder and joy, of the moment she found something to live for again.

Even as I took the picture, my mum's hands couldn't stop exploring the quill, the barbs, the barbules, as if they might reveal the story—did

an unassuming bird end its flight under a scatter of windblown leaves on a grassy northern bank? Or did it merely touch down, leaving a beautiful reminder, before soaring away to whatever lies beyond?



*Swan Battle* by Errol Cratt