

A Gradual Thing

‘A Gradual Thing.’

Soon, now. The birds tell, in their own way. Three white gulls circling above, the sea-crow this far inland. Other signs, too, from ‘before’ – inside you. Heart pulsing slow, slower, breath catching in your throat, idling there... no longer retching from you, not even when the skua dives down, again, again. Not enough breath to live... or fly.

Birds need air to fly.

And yes, you are tethered now, have found this place in the lee of a rock, a new nest, elbowing the others away. No more breasting the wind, no cresting the waves, no more diving like God’s arrow on the silver fish beneath.

You never liked the sea.

‘If I live on an island, I must like the sea,’ you said once – to him, you suppose, when he said you must go, too. That was when you were human, ‘before’ – before you came here, to this other place, to live among the birds; before you became one of them.

What else could you do, where there is nothing else?

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First, you took their flesh. There was no choice, the provisions he left lasting no more than days. Besides, why not? They killed each other easily enough – you had watched the skua gangs drive a single gannet under the waves, smashing its skull; your feet wallowed through petrel carcasses, with each step walked. Snap. Crunch. But the meat you needed must be fresh and, so... a stick, a club – something else he must have left. You got used to it, the thwack of wood on bone, the spatter of innards, as

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you got used to the raw shreds of bloody tissue, torn with your teeth. Until you thought 'fire' – they could give you that, too.

A flint... or glass... he had thought of those, but not that there was no fuel – no trees, nor bushes, nor grass, nor peat, such as there were in the old place. You scratched your head... Them, instead! Their wings, their bones – the parts you could not eat – and oil, wax gleaned from their preen glands. The first time, you stood before it, them, flaring, hands worshipping the warmth, then feasted on their cooked flesh. And thought 'maybe'. But, no. No, you were always meant to die.

Later, you took their children. The egg, to begin with, the beginning of a child. It seemed easier. All you wanted was a change from meat. But, no, it wasn't easy, at all. They fought more for their children than for themselves, their wings beating, their beaks, their claws, snagging, tearing your skin, your hair. The stick, again, and a shawl over your head.

Then, their chicks. A different flavour, another change. Why not? It seemed fair enough. Others took them, why not you? You had watched the gulls, those with the great black backs, swoop down on them, lift them in their claws. Or watched as they killed themselves, tottering down the cliff, then falling into the water, with only some rising again. Their mothers' frantic cries.

Is this motherhood, you wondered? You, who had chosen to be married to God, not man. God gave many things, but not children, not to his brides. Yet, if your brother had had his way... You do not blame the birds.

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This, now, is their revenge, you think. This is fair enough.

They are watching you. They are waiting, gathered around you, all of them. The gannets, the gulls, the fulmar, the kittiwakes. (The kittiwakes were your favourite! Smaller, gentler, a kinder diet, spending most of their time at sea. Yet they have come here for this. Most have come here for this.) And all are kind enough to wait for your last breath, kinder to you than many of their own. And then, your eyes first, and then they will pick your bones clean. And soon the sea-crow – it will be the sea-crow, you think, the cross he makes when he lifts his wings to dry matching your God's, your brother's – will build a nest beneath your ribs (an unpleasant thing, slipshod and stinking of fish), where it will lay its eggs.

A child inside you, at last.

You tried, once, to fly. No, not that. No desperate leaping from the cliff, though, perhaps, you should have done. Getting it over with, straight, quick. After all, you knew this day would come. Water. Food is all very well, but water comes first, and there is no water here.

Did he not think of that? The small keg he gave lasting only days. 'Rain. Rainwater. There will be rainwater gathered amongst the rocks.' Did he say that?

And yes, it is there, in the hollows, festered with the dung, slime, feathers, blood of the birds.

And yes, when it rained, you stood there, with open mouth, you, and the keg. It has not rained for a while, now.

There is the snow, which is not snow. But no rain...

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Your mouth parched, your tongue glutted, your teeth gone – your only food, now, the kidneys, the liver, slipped through your fraying lips, wetted for a moment by their viscous slime. A heart, once. Or was that yours?

You asked the birds, once. Could they not bring a few raindrops in small pouches made from their gizzards, or the webs of their feet? You had heard of such things – albatrosses carrying messages in these bags. An albatross had passed by, once. But no, they could not, or would not, do that.

So... no water.

And yet you are surrounded by it.

You never liked the sea.

‘one feather, two feathers... a thousand feathers.’ You cannot count beyond, but know there are more numbers than that. All those stars in the night sky. All God’s words.

All the feathers here.

You thought it was snow, at first. Saw it as snow from the old place, when you looked across to the west. You had liked the thought of the west then, the way the sun sunk into it.

‘Snow,’ you thought. ‘An island covered in snow. It is snowing over there, but not here. Here, it is green, and pleasant and sunny.’

You thought it again, when you stood on the rock for the first time... as soon as your mind groped towards thinking, beyond the deluge of smell, noise. Your senses beaten, your body cringing. Hands to ears, shawl to nose and mouth. That smell! But no, it did not need your nostrils, your lips to enter you. It came through the pores of your

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skin, made its way to the depth of your entrails, to push up, out of you, again. And again, and again.

And then, when you had coughed its last, had straightened bone and sinew, opened lungs, airways, again, looked around you, this.

Snow falling on to you. 'Strange, how it is not cold; strange, how the flakes do not melt on touching me.'

Stranger still, that there were none of the starred crystal shape of flakes, that they were all the shapes of feathers.

It is not snow. Of course it is not snow. It is the feathers of the seabirds, the gannets, in particular, falling down, as they wheel around, so many of them, always knocking into each other, always squabbling, for a nesting-place, for a fish.

And the ground... the ground isn't covered in snow. Snow makes the ground pure, leavens it. Yes, the feathers themselves are pure white, except those that are black, or yellow, or brown... But they are blighted with blood and dung and spewed up fish and egg. So... white from a distance, from a neighbouring island, or if you were out to sea, if you were approaching from afar, you might think it a rock covered in snow. But it is not. It is a rock covered with birds.

You tried other ways, first. Other ways to escape. To leave your prison – what else was it? You, treated no better than tyrannical emperors, monstrous deviants sent into solitary exile. Your brother your accuser. God your judge. The sea your jailor.

'A boat'. A boat had brought you here; a boat could take you away. 'Fish skin,' you thought, finding it littered among the feathers. You would dry each piece, big and small, then patch them together to make the outer skin of the boat. You had a needle,

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fashioned from a fine bird bone. You were proud of that. But no... the pieces crumbled to dust in your hands.

Seal-skin, then. Much better, much stronger. True, you would need a stronger needle, and tougher thread, the gut you used being too weak for seal, but...

The seals lay at the foot of the cliffs, on the far side of the island, far below. You could not climb down there, you could not kill and skin a seal, you could not climb back up. You were foolish to think of seals. You were foolish to think of a boat.

God. God had led you to the other place, tempting your brother with promises of sainthood and life-everlasting, if devotion were given in return. And being 'there' had brought you 'here'.

Could God not take you away? You made an altar, a heap of stones, a cross from two fulmar bones on top. You knelt, you prostrated yourself, you prayed and prayed and prayed. If it could be as it used to be, if He could lift you out of your body, fill you with light and wonder, so that you would float away...

But no, you had forgotten about the Devil, how he had marred that light, how he had led into temptation. Making an offering of you.

Besides, God cannot hear you over the din of the birds, the ceaseless accompaniment to your days. The birdsong you knew was the gentle trilling of warblers, the harmony of the thrush. Then... this. The rough growl of the gannets, the mewling of the gulls. The haunted wail of the shearwaters – your first night, you thought there was a child abandoned somewhere, and spent the hours searching!

And all this with the blather of the wind, the scold of the sea. On and on and on.

So, no, God does not hear you anymore.

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Something else, then.

‘Three feathers... a thousand.’ It would take a lot, you saw, to make your wings, but carried on gathering, counting. The touch of a feather... you liked it, at first, the softness licking your fingertips. It reminded you of something. That was when you still had feeling in your fingers, before they became as raw as the gobbets of seal-meat the gannets dropped from on high.

‘A hundred feathers...’

The long, broad quills of the gannets, the gulls, the stiff, tapered shafts of the fulmars. These, you criss-crossed together, ‘in, out, in, out’. Filling the gaps with the finer plumes of the guillemots and petrels. Then the down, this, from the chicks. The wind blew the down away, as fast as you gathered it. You used the whites of the eggs, for melding and hardening, the preen oil, for waterproofing. You thought you were clever.

You strapped them to your arms and stood at the eastern end of the island, and raised your arms. You thought of going back, back to that green and pleasant land, where corn and barley grew and four-legged animals grazed, until they graced your table. But why should you return to him?

You went the other way, thinking ‘is there something there, another land, another island?... surely... Please.’

The east wind came behind you, took your feet and breath away, left you tumbled on the rocks, your wings broken. The birds peered down and laughed.

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You knew, then, it would be no good. But, still, it was good to keep what was left of the wings close, wrapped round you as you lay in your shelter. Or become your shelter, when the frail timbers of the roof of the ancient bothy gave way. On storm days, the waves wash over you now. Snow, again, nuggets of foam, this time.

So...your roof gone, no water, food no more than bloodied innards, and so it has come to this.

Soon...

Which one will take your body? All of them... It is what they do. It is what you have done. 'The Lord will provide.' For them, too.

Little by little...

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They have already taken your hair, began, as soon as you arrived, and started walking amongst them. Catching it in their claws, using it for their nests. You have seen it.

Stepped over nests bound with red skeins. Good. Good to have some use of it, in spite of the catching, the tearing, the tearful, fearful pain.

Nothing like the soft touch of his fingers through it, as he came up behind you.

Until... 'Do not wash your hair where I can see you,' he said. 'And cover it, a shawl, perhaps, at all times.'

Then it will be your eyes.

'Lower your eyes, when you look at me. You should not gaze at me in that manner.'

What manner was that?

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Then the soft parts of you, though, in truth, they are gone already, with the hunger and want.

‘Bind yourself, and wear loose garments, rather than this flaunting of your womanly shape.’

‘Do not lift your gown as you climb. It is not right that you show your legs.’

It is good that your body should go. Your body was the root of all evil. The Devil’s tool. Your body was the cause of your sin. Your body is the reason you are here.

‘You must go elsewhere,’ he told you. ‘It is not right for you to be with me, here.

There is that other island, where, God willing, all will be well. See. Over there.’ Here.

And yes, you are down to the bone, now. The whiteness of the bone, whiter than the feathers, the snow, the snow-feathers. You like the purity of bone, you like to be pure, once more. The smell gone. For yes, it was not long before you, too, stank, like the birds. Spat on by the fulmar, spewed on by the skua, shat on by all. Something else they gave you. Until you had it for your own.

And yes, the sea-crow, the cormorant has come, just as you thought it would, and raised its wings above you in cruciform shape, proffering the cross for your grave.

And yes, it has done as you thought, as you have seen the small birds do – made use of the hollow cage of ribs to make its messy, foul-smelling nest. The comfort of bone.

It, you, to keep the eggs safe.

Almost, then.

Which one of them will take your soul?

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The fishermen on the mainland spoke of such things – those who believed in religions older than yours, spinning their tales of all who rode over and under the waves.

Telling stories of seabirds and their ways, naming those who hold the soul of a man inside.

You look at them, looking at you. Is there one you would prefer?

The gull? The one who took your eyes, and waits for more?

The gannets – so many of them, you will be lost among them, no more than a cloud of snow flakes lost in the sky.

The petrel, named for Saint Peter, a holy bird. But your brother is a Saint. You have had enough of them.

You had thought God would own it. You had such hopes for it. You had such hopes for Him. But then you sinned.

It will be a bird, or nothing, you think.

Now.

He will know that I am gone.

He will miss the smoke from my fire. Or God will tell, sending word down from Heaven, as he prays. Or the birds... of course, it will be the birds, flown across the strait, with languorous flaps of their consummate wings.

He will come, then, to look for what is left, my feeble remains. And the cross of the cormorant will tell him where I lay, and he will see the bird's nest between its marrow-sapped, sagging bars.

Empty, now. The eggs hatched, the fledglings fledged. The chicks staggering over the rock, ducking from the beaks of the gulls, scampering to the edge.

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The bird's young, my young, gone from where I carried them, succoured them,
birthed them.

Not so barren, after all.

And if he stays through the night, he will hear the cries of a child. And he will look
for it, as I looked for it, once. And wonder... And I, you, we will watch him from
above.

Where we fly.