

The Birds: A Great Rushing of Wings

written by Guest Contributor | March 21, 2018



The funeral was on a Thursday morning. The memorial service on campus was scheduled right away for that Friday, but I told my mom I'd stay for the weekend, maybe longer. A few weeks, a month if she needed help in the house. School had just ended and weeks of unstructured, empty days lay ahead of me before lesson plans for next year are due for the upper school team meeting in August.

Mom and I had spent most of the week leading up to the services sitting in the kitchen, alone in a shared silence or with company exchanging rehearsed, hollow words. A colleague that dropped by with a pink box brimming with more pastries and breads or a neighbor that brought over another vegan lasagna or casserole, always in a glass tupperware easy to heat. The house had emptied out by the weekend, but the fridge was still filled with precariously stacked dishes, and the dining table was still covered in vases of wildflowers and white lilies, with cellophane-wrapped bouquets of roses that had clearly arrived too late.

Saturday we both slept late, or at least took advantage of the first free morning to stay in bed on our own. It was early afternoon by the time we were sitting facing each other over cold mugs of coffee, my plate dusted in flakes of croissant and my mom's with her banana bread still neatly sliced on her plate, the smeared butter starting to harden.

"Caroline," she says, coughing to clear her throat, scratching as though she hadn't spoken fully, loudly in days. I look up.

"I'm feeling," she swallows, then meets my gaze as her lips tilt into a weak smile. "I'm going to lay down for a while, I think."

I nod.

She begins to walk out of the room, then turns back to kiss me on the crown, a quick and forceful peck before walking down the hallway to her first-floor bedroom in a rare gesture that was attempting warmth. I'd hugged my mother more times this week than any week I can remember, each time bending my knees to meet her small, taught body where she stood or sat, keenly aware of the weight of my flesh as I wrapped my arms around her. When I graduated college, she and Dad, both respected professors, handed me my diploma on the stage and

hugged me hard as my as I turned my tassel. The great, broad weight of my father was familiar, comforting, so much so that I barely registered his pride, his affection as he scooped me up into an embrace. But as I enveloped my mother in a hug, overpowering her small frame, I noticed the hard pulse of a shoulder squeeze punctuating the embrace, as if she knew how light she was in comparison. I'm here, Caroline, each sharp squeeze seemed to say. I'm here, I'm here.

A breeze shifts the curtains, filling and lifting the checked fabric and my eyes flick toward the motion instinctively, but the billowing curtains landed back in place. Outside, I can hear a bird warbling, though through the window I only see the empty backyard, the edge of the garden, all obscured by streaks of disinfectant. No one is here.

The room feels too empty.

I don't have a room of my own to retreat to, but I go upstairs anyway. My parents bought this house across town after I graduated college, after my mother had leveraged her academic expertise into a series of best-selling Regency romance novels. Though it was my mother's royalty checks that funded the upward mobility, my parents searched for a house together, a joint venture with mutually determined must-haves: large bathtubs, two sunny rooms for offices, built-ins large enough to avoid sharing shelf space. Mom was adamant about space for a garden, and my dad wanted a yard filled with tall trees, where he could look out the window to see a nest of sparrows or catch a dash of red as a cardinal took flight. Ultimately they both settled, because the house had to be historic, and this one came on the market at the right time.

I head to the small guest room on the second floor of the old house where I usually stay, a room with low ceilings and wood trim around the creamy walls. The walls have a few botanical prints, a wildflower I don't know the name of with a diagram of its bloom cycle and a small cactus that feels out of place in this distinctively New England house, in this small northeastern town. The iron-framed bed is covered with a lilac quilt, the floral pattern starting to fade. A leather trunk at the foot of the bed holds extra pillows and more blankets, all in various creams or pastels, all plush and heavy. But now that I've made it here, I don't want to lay down, don't want to rest. Instead, I grab my tote bag resting by the closet, fish out a pen and small journal and move to the little desk in the corner, in front of the windows facing the street.

Sitting at the desk, in an unforgiving old kitchen chair, I can see the beginning edge of a fence around the Daniels House across the street. The fence must have been whitewashed once: the two-story brick building wide, low windows with white borders and black shutters announced wealth. Behind the house, the lawn opens into a large backyard, lined with old oak tree tall and sturdy enough for tire swings and shady enough for mid-day picnics in early summer. At the edge of the property, twenty cedar boxes, several pedestal bird-baths, and series of iron archways, all covered in vines, form a rose garden fit for a walk in a Henry James novel, and a brick outbuilding houses the pots and hoes, the seeds and soil necessary for its upkeep.

I smirk remembering the first trip to the Daniels House, with Dad. He loved the house, loved Sylvie Daniel's poetry and the history of the prominent family also from our small town. In the great hallway leading from the front parlor or the library to the large dining room at the back of the house, my dad pointed to portraits of the family members line their walls. Sylvie as a young woman had long, dark hair, her light skin flushed. Her other sisters, Katherine and Frances, and even the much younger Mary Margaret, all enjoyed tight features interrupted by high cheekbones and large, open eyes, almost birdlike in their appearance. Sylvie was different; her forehead was too wide, with no cheekbones to balance it out, and her eyes were small and dark. But there was something in those eyes that brought her alive for me, while her sisters remained pictures on the wall.

I told my dad then that I'd write a book about Sylvie and her poetry. He had Latin poetry, my mom had Austen. I'd have Sylvie.

The next day he brought me a small, thick purple volume of her book, *A Great Rushing of Words*. The pages were coarse and yellow, the type thick and dated. But the words moved on the pages, dipping and jutting out, forming sets of wings as a I flipped through the pages. While my parents spent that evening in their studies, I'd focus on my own book, my own work, I told my dad. I remember his face pulling into a smile, his cheeks rising and warming.

I blink quickly and press the pen to paper, writing words from these scenes to see if free association will help clear my mind. *Dad, Sylvie, house, poem, Rushing, rustling, feathers. Funeral, mourning, lament, chorus. The Iliad.*

I tell my students that their free associations will surprise them, should help alleviate censors and let ideas already in existence rise to the forefront of their mind. I guess I've done the exercise well.

I took a class with Dad in college. Not Greek or Latin, though. These were his favorite courses to teach and he was always recruiting for the dwindling Greek program. Even though we'd always been close, I knew a course that discouraged alternative interpretations could be cause for conflicts in the classroom. My dad tried to tell me these classical languages would be a great break from studying poetry, would be a great supplement to studying literary criticism. It'd be good for that book on Sylvie, he'd suggest.

But I took "The Great Epics" instead, and I spent the semester tracking birds throughout the great narrative poems of Greece and Rome. The bird analogies throughout *The Odyssey* were as I had expected: gods and goddess moved swiftly like birds, had comparable grace and power or sight to birds. But in *The Iliad*, the first birds appear in Book II. Jove sends punishment in the form of a vicious serpent, who spots eight sparrow chicks in a nest and consumes them all. I was always struck by the single sparrow that remained, the mother who flew in languorous circles above the tree, above the serpent in her nest among the remains of her children. The bird warbled a mourning song, a funeral chant that was more effective, more emotive than if a whole Greek chorus had sang it together. I wonder if my father was disappointed that I didn't choose a Classics major, hadn't tried to reapply to grad school in his discipline.

Instead, I was settled in my track to a career that would never happen. I had used my English coursework to deepen my understanding of the meaning of poetry, to practice my own writing. I used my thesis as a chance to study Sylvie formally. I had thought that would be my way in.

“Caroline, it’ll all be okay,” my dad told me. His voice was always deep and booming, commanding a room, but this had been near a whisper.

“Your mother and I are so proud of you, Caroline. You don’t need graduate school to be a part of this family.” A rasp caught his words, coloring their comfort with his own doubt. I felt the sting, worse than the rejection letter, worse than my mother’s unfeeling silence earlier.

“I know, Dad,” I lied, “but I want it. I still want it.” I broke down in tears, devastated by rejection and loss.

I remember reading that only children often become a third member of the couple, promoted to equal decision maker and often shouldering the responsibility attached to this. My parents met during graduate school, and they followed each other across the country and back to post-docs, to visiting lectureships before they settled in the east at a small institution that would hire both. Their deep respect for one another was rooted in scholarship. Looking back much later, with a therapist and a decade to help carve out some much-needed critical distance, I realized that I had felt that growing up, I internalized it. I grasped for laurels and letters to earn their love, to earn my place, and the sting of the rejection from those schools felt like it was from my mother, from my parents, from my family. I wanted to hear my dad tell me again that I was still a part of this family, even I didn’t go to graduate school, even if I didn’t have the option, even if I just taught high school, even if I never wrote that book about the poet across the street. I wanted to tell him that it was growing up with him, with the professors down the hall that had more of an impact on me. I wanted to tell him about the mother sparrow, mourning her young. I want to ask what tune she would have sang, to ask if she ever landed to rest from flying in endless overlapping circles.



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