

BUNTING

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My, she could whistle! After shedding the trappings of language, my eighty-year-old mother, Alaw, took to whistling, and not any old whistling either. She draped nightingale melodies around the utilitarian, steeped-in-piss furniture at the old people's home and it was so, well, *appropriate*. I am here, this is my place, observe me.

Luscinia megarhynchos. The nightingale. 'A medium sized songbird of shy and secretive habits with a discretely rufous tail.' A bird that sings so enthusiastically during moonlit hours it's been known to die in mid-warble.

It rated high as entertainment. If ever Tony Bennett cancelled a gig at Caesars Palace you could have booked her in his place, although God only knows what the Las Vegas punters would have made of a fragile and rickety woman creaking her way onto the stage as an augmented orchestra struck up with something brassy. But if they'd been patient for just two minutes while she got her breath and adjusted her sticks – if they'd just sipped their cosmos and margaritas and their industrial-strength rusty nails, and just shut the fuck up, simply offered the old dear that much good grace – they'd have been transported. They'd have actually heard the music of the spheres, leaving the empty husks of their bodies behind to fly as iridescent dragonflies around the chandelier-lit room – swear to God they would – which surely had to be worth the price of admission? Worth five hundred bucks of anyone's money.

But her melodic brilliance – those glimmering notes, those pitch perfect descants, the rising scales that could be soundtracks for epiphanies – was confined to the tightly hemmed-in quarters of the home, where she was loved by residents and staff alike, but loved especially when she whistled. Whoo-ee-oo. Whoo-ee-oo.

There was never much silence in Noddfa, what with the barkers and shouters and screamers – all the cacophonous soundtrack of the Elderly Mentally Infirm. It was worse at night and worst on moonlit nights. The place sounded like a shearwater colony. In west Wales they call shearwaters cocklollies, to mimic their macabre calls. Someone once described the shearwater's call as it returns to land under cover of darkness as a rooster in full cry seconds after its throat has been cut. Imagine tens of thousands of seabirds all making that sound and you begin to hear what the caterwauling was like when all the crazies at Noddfa started up. But during a rare lull, when all the shearwaters had flown away, my mother's aspirated notes could command wonder. Nurses would put down their urine pans. Rapt inmates would listen as if to the sound of a pin dropping.

She had never whistled before, not that I remember. And she hardly sang either, only in chapel, where the only real audience was the woman standing next to you. In Gerazim my mother stood next to a woman called Hetty who was as deaf as a post, which left my mother just singing to God. She did so with gusto – that entire back catalogue of dirgeful Methodist hits – which collectively assembled more Welsh rhymes than you'd countenance for words such as redemption and pity. Imagine trying to find a rhyme for 'anuwioldeb'. Her favourite hymn was 'Wele'n Sefyll Rhwng y Myrtwydd', not least because it had been written by a woman. She liked the emptiness in the tune, the chasmic space between the notes. And she liked the simple language, homilies expressed in a minor key.

Before the whistling started there'd been a severe decline

in her ability to express herself through words. Syntax splintered. Grammar was wrestled out of shape. Order dismantled. Day by day she lost the world. And she was also spatially confused. When my aunt went to see her she alleged she was in Russia and her descriptions of St Petersburg's Nevsky Prospekt – that grand thoroughfare's busy acts of caretaking and commerce – were as vivid as a marionette show, until you remembered that the old woman had never been there. She had been to Bulgaria once, on a package holiday, but that would only explain a certain foreignness of vision.

When does a person die in your mind? When his or her name is finally forgotten, flashing away like a trout upriver or when you have no recall of a single moment you shared together? No single moment. I cannot pinpoint when things really started to go awry for her, when her world was cut loose like a balloon. Maybe the notes in loose scrawl reminding her of things she had to do. Pay gas. Bring keys. Empty cupboard.

I wanted her to find herself a bower, a shaded settlement among dark leaves where she could build a nest of comfort about her, but that wasn't to be.

On the January day I spotted a glaucous gull near the Cardiff heliport, one of the staff from Noddfa phoned me up to tell me that she'd been fighting. It's not a call you expect to have, ever, let me tell you. About your mother, fighting! Some old collier had taken a pop at her in the dining room – an altercation about digestive biscuits apparently – and she had slugged him one on the nose in return. My mother – the biffer, the bopper, the old scrapper. At least she won the bout. That's a new species of pride. The octogenarian pugilist. The woman who nursed me.

If only she could build a nest for herself. If only those chicken-bone fingers could gain enough dexterity to start to weave again. She could then gather spiders' webs, from the undusted nooks and arachnid corners of Noddfa and with

that gossamer – strong enough to strangulate bluebottles, delicate enough to trap wisps of dew – she could knit-one-purl-one, give shape to her bower. She could line it with the fine grey hair that candy flosses out of her yellowing skull.

A strong nest, that's what she needs. Consider the long-tailed tit, that busy grey and pink denizen of the willow world. It builds a nest made of moss, hair feathers and silvery threads of gossamer which it shapes into a gourd, strong enough to hold the weight of two birds, and then more eggs, in fact as many as sixteen eggs, and then the rapidly growing chicks and finally the fledgling birds. The whole extraordinary architecture – shaped using as many as two thousand feathers – lasts just the length of a season and then falls apart as if it's never been. So my mother's nest could be one of gossamer, and she could sit contentedly within its silvery threads. Snug as eggs. Her eyes are meshed with red flecks, like a jackdaw's egg.

It took me until I was a fully-grown man, somewhere in my early forties, before I could tell my mother I loved her. I'd visit her every week, without fail, and would take her shopping to the Carmarthen Safeway before it became Morrison's where she would display all the parsimonious skills of someone who lived through a world war, finding every discount sticker and always taking the newest yoghurt pots from the back of the display. We'd always stop for lunch on the way back home in a village so off the beaten track it probably had werewolves scouting round the refuse bins at night. It was in a sharp sided cwm, which never saw daylight, exacerbated by swathes of Sitka spruce that had been planted twenty years ago and now seemed to lay siege to the place. The old lady would eat an enormous mixed grill of chops, eggs and kidneys with all the avidity of a gannet downing mackerel.

The next time I visit Noddfa someone has installed double glazing over her eyes, and poured liquid cement down her ear canal. She is a shop window dummy and a very sad display at that. Like a down-at-heel florists' showing a wilted

tulip in a vase of green water. Zombification doesn't suit her one jot. It's all a matter of meds. You'd have thought that the mighty pharmaceutical industry with its concrete acres of laboratories and infinite profit horizons could devise something to take an old gal's anxiety away without bugging up her locomotive functions. But there doesn't seem to be a magic pill to stop her fretting, to control her hallucinations. One experimental concoction, a mix of chemical stun gun and elephant tranquilliser, knocked her clean into a mini-coma for five days.

I know this guy, Billy Wired down in Burry Port, who claims to have tried every drug in the world: injected ketamine between his toes, snorted peyote in such quantity that he became a pterodactyl for four days and subsisted on nothing more than the occasional Mesozoic fish. He once tried a narcotic from New Guinea that turned his skin permanently green. Even now his skin has a sickly hue. So my guess is that Billy would be able to rustle up something to banish all her anxiety. But at the moment she's at the mercy of the rattling pill trolley in the care home, doomed to a whirling world of hallucinations so powerful that, were I still a drug-hungry student with a penchant for nightly brain alterations, I'd be more than mildly envious of her – someone who could conjure up visions at will, like a starving saint in a cave.

One day Alaw believed a gang had kidnapped her two sons. They had them gagged and bound in the coalhouse and there was dark muttering about being inventive about the torture. Another day she took a sled out over the pack ice to where prowling polar bears scouted for seal cubs, but she could explain little of this, only rounding her lips into a perfect 'O' and making the sound of a tiny hiss. Then, one day, her mind was just one enormous rapture, as colours danced in kaleidoscopic choreography: lilac, diesel blue, mango green shimmying with powder grey, pea green melding with black of night, aquamarine melting into

sunflower and milky cream, and, more luminous than the others, queen of the dance, a shimmering titanium white, executing some dazzling disco to the strobe of her own liquid skin. Billy Wired would have envied her the brain-cinema.

The day we met the consultant at Brynmeillion hospital was a day of cheery weather, with a pearl sun in a Mediterranean blue sky. When he showed us the scan results I thought immediately of tetrads, those kilometre squares I used when mapping breeding birds, from greenshank, spotted by satellite in the Flow Country, to buzzards pinpointed in the Cornish countryside. Spots on the charts marked strokes she's had. The consultant held the sheets as if they were on fire.

'Do you understand?' he asked her.

'Does she understand?' he asked me, noting the vacancy of her stare.

I looked at her head – the fine nose and the blood-flecked eyes. Despite her growing confusion these past months there had been nothing to intimate this moment. This demented moment. What goes through that imploding mind?

On a willow wand, serenading the settling dusk, the nightingale pens its solitary symphony. Its liquid voice is a rivulet of delight. But in her nun's room, stripped of decoration, Mam's eyes are wide with fear. They are coming for her. They will get her for certain. She knows. Her bird-like body is a cocoon of tightening feathers, as invisible wires pull her ribcage together, close to bursting point.

In a country she has never seen, the cancer-sickened President has ordered a meal for his penultimate night at the helm. He wants to taste guilt, and it comes in the shape of *l'ortolan*, the bright little bunting. *Emberiza hortulana*, to give it its Latin name.

The birds have been trapped deep in the south of this cruel country by men with lime sticks and near-invisible nets made of horsehair string. They were then blinded in keeping with centuries of tradition and kept in a small bamboo box for a month where they were fed a steady supply of figs, millet and

grapes. The ortolan. The fig pecker. When the fig pecker has grown to four times its normal size it is drowned in Armagnac. Steeped to death.

The gluttonous President is also having oysters, foie gras and capons but the tongue's great prize is the tiny bird. The erstwhile President tucks his bib into his tight collar, and despite his illness he begins to salivate like a puppy. He then covers his head with a white cloth as the small birds are placed in the oven. A priest with a penchant for finches and catamites started this gourmet tradition long centuries ago as a way of masking his disgusting gluttony from God, away from divine reprimand.

'Father, forgive me for I have eaten everything in the Ark apart from the tortoiseshell...'

The cook, called Fabien, busies himself with the diminutive main course. He reads his notes, because this is an uncommon meal and it is for the President. 'Place in oven at incinerating temperature for four or five minutes. L'ortolan should be served immediately; it is meant to be so hot that you must rest it on your tongue while inhaling rapidly through your mouth. This cools the bird, but its real purpose is to force you to release the tiny cascade of ambrosial fat.' Sounds tricky, thinks Fabien, who likes Indian food himself. Especially chicken vindaloo.

Under his shroud Francois Maurice Adrien Marie Mitterrand, the first socialist president of the Fifth Republic, places the entire four-ounce bird into his mouth, its head jutting pathetically between his lips. He bites off the marble-sized head and discards it on the salver provided. It will amuse the cat. He tries to savour his memory of a historic role as the first president for two full terms, his mouth full of bird-body. He knows the rules of history: how they will try to besmirch his name. Not that he thought of that when it came to Rwanda, or blowing up the *Rainbow Warrior*, or dealing arms to Iran, or running wiretaps or keeping his fig-pecker in his pants.

‘When cool, begin to chew. It should take about fifteen minutes to work your way through the breast and wings, the delicately crackling bones, and on to the inner organs.’

Tonight this is the loneliest table in the world, even though there are guests aplenty and an animated chatter resounding throughout the dining room. But at the head of the table is the President, marooned on a glacier of self-pity.

He can taste the bird’s entire life as he chews in the clouded light: the sibilant wheat fields in the shadows of the Atlas mountains, the salt ‘n’ seaweed tang of the Mediterranean air, the warm draughts of lavender and pear scent blown by a mistral over Provence and on to the Loire. The pulpy lips and time-stained teeth crunch down with a guillotine certainty toward the pea-sized lungs and heart, thoroughly saturated with liqueur. The tiny organs burst with a sherbet fizz. Quiet, the President is masticating! Listen to the crunch of bird bone. Listen to his loneliness.

Tomorrow is his last night as tour guide of the lost republic and tomorrow he will taste nightingale. Fabien has been given this special request. His men, slinky hunters, assured of success, are already deep in the green woods. They will bring him one, trussed in a net. With this much notice they were lucky to get one.

Fabien, brilliant in his kitchen habitat, will know what to do. He remembers his grandmother and her macabre lullabies: ‘Lark’s tongue in aspic, thrush in a pie, all the birds that ever sang, sing better as they die...’

The songbird’s last serenade will be as short as a gasp. In the kitchen, a man will strop his knife on the whetstone. It will glint, as if alive. He will enjoin his sous-chef to start a suitable sauce, let it simmer overnight. Let the flavours meld and intensify. Wild eyed on a twig, the songbird cannot so much as blow a thin note, such is its fear. The hunters’ boots crackle like fire through the dry understory. They are pacing out what remains of her terrified life. She knows they are coming, with all of heart.