

Birds of Celtic Twilight

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Birds of Celtic Twilight

A NOVEL IN VERSE

Gail Sher



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For Brendan

Birds of Celtic Twilight

Birds of Celtic twilight. A fen, a sea, strong wind
and her Maggie, rough-hewed, interior, brash. Rocks,
her secret Gaelic love. Windiness alone, above all
else in bleeding.

Pull her nightly to the tall dark cliff. A rain of birds,
raptors and the snouts of sea animals.



A chilly day. Wind cracks the fog banging on chimes.

A lone owl hoots. Gregorian notes crash riotously as
the wind howls, bumps against the dirty glass.

She stood shivering, gazing at the scrawny hill.

There a seal there a gull amidst the tide, slapping the
coastline. Full-to-the-brim it tumbles leaving its echo-
roar to disturb or not the flock that just landed. A palish
sunrise hacks at the cold day.

She stalked the edge, the very precipice of the universe.
(Such were her thoughts as she walked this dawn, next
to the water, singing.)



It wasn't clear what kind of day it'd be. Dune flowers
relaxed, softly swaying. She faced the sea, its moody
blundering.

Gradual swelling, then long, windy nothingness. Raw-
ness climbed the cliff. The gulls' slow arcs above the
graying clouds like half-dried sheets, soppy, not crisp.

Her thoughts fell to the boy who knew now that he
loved the girl who, the day before, had married a man
she didn't love, had never loved. Her mother saw his
yearning. She couldn't stop her daughter, she felt, so
she tried to stop the boy from making a fool of himself.

Facing the moony shore she shook her finger at its
whitecaps, which plunged regardless. So much pain,
yet *pfumph*—there they go.

Later she stood, backhanding crumbs from around
her chin, swishing them from her bodice. Stars shone
brilliant above the sleepy sea. She walked out into the
night, the full moon reeking, fire flowers flitting
through the bountiful air and sky. Crunch crunch

crunch. Her footsteps on the gravelly path down to the beachhead.



The birds were silent when she woke dizzy with her violent dream. She lay there listening.

The slappy sea. Pounding, roaring, lashing out its non-message. She lay awake, sour breath melting salt-sea night.

Rain and sea, a hovering mist cycling and enclosing her world. (She felt like an island.)



DEAD. This manner of speaking referred now to his father, the man who saw God twice.

First God told him to paint. Later God told him to stop.

Does anyone do more?

She woke into the brilliant morning knowing the answer.



A high sun shone. So bright. So bright that its rays struck the coil of a road up the green-capped blindingly-glistening hill. Cows grazed with their backs toward it.

She stripped her toast of crust and buttered it lavishly. Her *hoya*'s blossoms twirled along the ledge, gulping the sunny sun. She sipped her coffee, dazed, staring out, comforted by her tangled dream that wrung from her her terror, twisted it out like a wringer twists out dirty soapy water.

The room was quiet. The slight jump of the wall-clock's hands. The tipping wind on her outdoor flowers.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. She felt paralyzed. As if the significant click, the one to which her life had for years looked forward, had taken place in the dark, during her dream.

The intensity of the brawl still present in her body.

And so where are they brethren

And so where are they brethren. The child wouldn't be dashed. Nuns in a convent. Oh well.

“The girl was eighteen. Only eighteen.” These words kept rolling through her head as she double-swept the cobwebs from out behind the sofa. “To go strolling out the gate in the middle of a blizzard, before her last exam, no hat, no destination . . . not to mention the greasy-haired man . . .”

Man. That was it. A man needs a mother and something for his dick. Beyond that, a woman needn't get involved. But they do. No one tells them.

This eighteen-year-old, whose father was too soused to recall the details of what he knew he had to say to her, what was imperative for him to say to her, before she sailed for her last semester. “Now what was it?”

And before she heard what it was, she was out in the blizzard . . . in the man's red car. Without even knowing the rest of the story and guessing that the time in the blizzard would equal the sum total of time in her life FREE.

“Well,” her thoughts were crowded this morning, “let's say her father *had* gotten it together. Let's even say he'd gotten it right. Would the daughter have stayed in the convent, taken her exam? And if she had, how many days afterwards would she have strolled out into the blizzard? Would the sum total of her life's FREE time have added up different?”



Retro (as a concept).

Kittenish, cerebral, the plot devised (not innocent).
Fulcrum of time, leather-bound, preserved, animated
beyond the speed of light.

I am thee, sire. I am the breath that swims along the
avenue. Spanky neon (in a warren of little streets),
her pert, beaky profile closely parsed.

Here a bugle, there a horn. So much anatomy hop-
scotching across the way. Ganders wallow which way
toward the sun? Will they take off soon? Leave the
ducklings land-locked, stranded?

Scalpel, cross-bar, the harassment thick. Agony slims me down. How many trees make a final place of torment?



Sheaf of what? Flip through the eon, which explains the flood (Noah + descendants). Shimmy over the water and get to the desert fast. Succulent agaves saved Odysseus from a parched stomach more than once.

Oh God. Wind fixes nothing.

Shelter me with sky, please. Toss the thunder over the prayer-flags where His blue face shines. Licking it tenderly, maybe I'll get well. Pebbles steam with mountain air, it being past noon.

Magdalene, madeleine. Fat and sweet. One crumb sloughs around my thistly tongue, clings to its brindled, flowery, show-room. The edgework is black, the better to sheen its pearly stalks as they prostrate toward the mountain cleavage.

Nuptial in tact. Right on time. A hulk. One, two valleys.



Sliding into night, the dark ocean clouds drifting over the water, sidling into place near her bones.

The bony man, father of the Irish boy. Stark bones +
silence. Did she too?

Hangers for air. Bones provide a shelf for this or that
air. They rage, shaking the world by its shoulders.
(That meant he could seem shiftless.)

Like a chameleon. If the crowd was gruff, he was
porous.

The texture of enamel, scraping it off with his finger-
nails. A yen for blue, then bluish-white, scraping and
sucking till he was sick.

One blizzard day he jumped into the sea. Bones and
fingers turned sea-blue. Wind whisked him up the
dune. A translucent carriage sloughing its way toward
the horsy.

Wish-bones paced the young man's life. His lady friend
secretive. Her young woman, robust, joyful. Not bony
at all.

Wildflowers are shocking

Wildflowers are shocking. A lingering patch of snow. Her *hoya* had grown. Its gutsy limbs flashing snow-white petals.

“Was that a bird?” she thought awakened from a dream. Her room is dark, pre-dawn still.

One bird starts. Has the premonition. “Is it the same bird who leads off every morning,” she wondered, “or is it random. Whoever’s conscious first?”

She lay under her covers in the middle of the night and sensed the state of birds. Not for the birds. Her real interest was sleep. She knew the birds knew the bad-news of dawn and could gauge from their activity her chances for one more dream.



Ambrosial yet stolid (a kind of princess-peasant strength that seemed learned—to have been cultivated—not intentionally as in gaining but intentionally-for-its-own-sake as in steadfast/one-pointed).

Self-made. Therefore magnetizing. She fetched and at the same time carried remnants of the non-fetching way her life might have gone, easily gone, probably would have gone.



So he took her by the hand, YANKED her hand.
“Let’s go,” he said.

She wasn’t ready, but she couldn’t say why.

“Well, what’s wrong, babe?” He wanted to know, or, he wanted to go.

“I don’t know,” she said.



Rain pounds. There are bird walks, cow walks, stones, dun. Rain wind and to think. That’s why it’s so freeing.

The day that she danced at the edge of the sea, as her brother played faster and faster the instruments in his head, That day was what she was headed for.

Yes. No. It depended on that day, that feeling, would it bring her there.

But she didn't know and she couldn't tell. So when he YANKED her hand, the YANK itself was not the deterrent. It was more his stubby fingers.



Bones, slender fingers, so slender that the knuckles were knots, the skin taut having to stretch to go the distance. Fingernails clean, round, pale pink, cropped for things. He played music but his fingers were chunky. His greyhounds were more elegant.

Sleek dogs, bred to win. Bred to sprint beyond the ordinary mutt. Potatoes half-boiled, that gently released their steamy ambrosia, they ate them in a large swept hall with a little melted butter. They walked at sunset in an anti-clockwise wheel, great jags of rock, hymns, wind and the fawn sun whispering into cocked delicate hounds'-ear shells.

Sea-slime. Green and shell-green. Her dark hair swept forward creating a forked path on her silky pink skull. She sensed the wind's cold fingers feeling for its path as if to etch it deeper. Go *this* way.

How could she say no. His YANK meant nothing in the face of the wind's fragily deliberate message.



“No,” she said. “Ooooooh” was heard puffed off by “N.” The fullness of the word, its amplitude in reverse proportion to her thinness. As if she were a gust of air.

Like an earthquake, you didn’t detect her feelings, their gigantic intensity, but noticed a great littering of them surrounding you in the aftermath. “Wait. What just happened?” But she was gone. A rattling of bones just stops.

Her frailty startled. It was hard to believe. “Wait. Are you alive? It’s impossible that you’d be alive.”

Like the silence after a quake, she’d leave and nobody spoke. A hush would descend. A great tall quietness stalking the peons. Femur, tibia, thigh jostling around in her bag of skin. A butterfly in its chrysalis, translucent in the sun, juts and pokes less awkwardly.

The great gangling length of her cradling tulips like a babe-in-arms. She was not tall but felt tall. Anyone would guess five or six inches more. Silence adds height.

Loved ones spoke for her. Puttering through chores, arguing with the radio, shrieking at the *telly* chef while rain lashed dementia-like against the window pane.

Vata-esque. She knew she was mainly air. “Primarily” air was more correct, but saying “mainly” felt more grounded.

Inhaling a bunch set off a fire. It started in her joints then spread along meridians to all points north. People, she heard, felt she was all mind. In truth she was all cold air.

A stultifying life, the bored smile of hype—the opposite air from hers—set off a deep old, very old shudder.

“No,” she said.

The great white sky

The great white sky. Mountains pale blue. Rain and rain and rain on the winding road.

Her wet hood seeped—through mounds of hair, sunken eye sockets, purple veins, gaping bones. So wet, synonymous now with her nature, became more wet. Soaked. Filled to the brim with fresh glacial spray. The climb forced it more palpably into her lungs, wheeling oxygen. TIM BER.

A cyclist in the distance looked like an ant. Or waterbug with his yellowy black sheen. His back humped. His thighs arched against the wind. His knees bobbed out with weakness. Time turned back, then raced forward. They were on the moon. Just the two of them but they couldn't talk.

Crabgrass clumped. The roots of mossy stone. The stone was tooth; the grass plaque. The wisdom in the teeth inaccessible to the grass, whose grasp weakened in the teaming ether. “It could erode them. On what day would come the breaking point?” (Her thoughts bizarre, even to herself.)



Winter fights, she realized to her disappointment. She wanted to believe that the strong were so strong, they were beyond fighting. “Well, what’s the matter with a fight?” If her mother was mad, did that say anything about *her*?

With the sixth sense of madness. Probably her (the daughter’s) best bet was to say, “God told me so.”

Why was freedom so important? Probably because no one knows what it means. By now the corduroy in her parka stuck to her blouse that stuck to her undershirt that stuck to her ribs. Tethering rain. Yet she felt wild and free.

Bones want just a thin layer of covering. Just a gloss to keep the blood from spilling. Skin is a container. Yet it breathes free air puffing up the hollow gawky insides. Saying so, please, let me always be able to say so.



Fear detained but also anchored, tamed, corralled her curiosity. Like a palm pressed on her bony shoulders, it held her back, gingerly but with a sense of “be it as it may.” Under the glowering of clouds, the coming-and-going rain, she gathered her flock, the meaning of her memories.

Then it was June

Then it was June. Pink. Crab pink the morning rose, dazzling. Across the bay schooners darted, preening in the water's rippleless mirror.

"I SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT FLOWERS" was the name of one. Her eyes lay on the calm sea watching the boat slosh in the image of its own hull. The blue water was so smooth, so smooth. She let her mind's eye drift.

She had come here to think, to slow down, float. Her life was at a crossroads. There was time for her to stop, switch directions, follow the dictates of her frailer and frailer plan.

She wended her way around the shore to the gangly rock that jutted its silver-blue head into the soft-green foam. Its spray skirted her skin, hair, washed her eyes, dribbled down her cheeks, throat, chest until a small

trickle nestled in her belly button. A baptism of her own in the flying falling spurts of sea-water.

A bell tolled. A dark spot on a distant crag turned out to be a seal. Blubber spackled the chips of sun as they sprinkled about the chunky moss. Gulls sunned their stark white bellies, all in a group facing the yellow rays.



Pigeons. Dirty grey birds on the windy corner. A dark man with a cane, an aftermath, a brouhaha of shuffled feathers, crusty doo, a sharp flap upwards. Milling around, not getting excited, the group of them in their neck-walk.

Puddles are what they are after. Curb water.

The dark-haired woman who sews. Her daughters sew and she sews and sings and makes food. Simple face, black eyes, sleek hair pulled up and back, out of the way of her handwork.

Embroidery. The sudden wanting of it. Thin threads of hot colors, criss-cross, criss-cross, criss-cross.

Scholar, translator, mother—of one who feels unloved. Her progeny are texts, thick, fat, yielding. Her daughter fucking textual grandchildren.



Dark like me. The oven cools. It is brisket. Her sandy-blonde hair stiff with spray should be silver. Why isn't it silver?

She stooped over the roast, basting its plump curvatures, inwardly chuckling. Bits of fat splattered her smock. When one hit her chubby forearm she jumped. Still she failed to see the spots and the sour wet tarnish of her necklace rubbing off on everything.

She said nothing. She rarely talked. She simply declared things.

“Dinner's ready” is one. But it was far more than a declaration.



Nevermind. The woman's jewels said everything. But the mashed potatoes were lumpy, the blobs of margarine sickening.

She had a husband. They had a fight. He committed suicide. Now alone, she'd like another husband. Meanwhile the grandchildren come over.

They play, she cooks. They eat, she scolds. “Why can't you be better” is the gist of her statements. They seep right into the hearts of her grandchildren.

How is the son supposed to live with this AND his broken shoes?

An artist has his concentration. When that goes, it's over. Guilt distracts. Ambition distracts. That's why it's free (the art, that is).

But the son wasn't old enough.

His mother was. She came back. As a ghost she wasn't much different. She told her son what to do, how to think.

And still the skies were broken

And still the skies were broken and blue-black,
audacious and harrowing with their coughing wind.

It came like a sickness, the pebbles of sleet and still she
walked flaunting the vomiting sky.

The man who painted madly, in the six days between
storms, lost all his work to cows. “What,” she said
again to herself. “What did he lose?” She was confused.

Inspiration, love, skill, passion by a hundred-fold
blossomed in his breast even as the heavens railed,
spat, burped. They did everything but pour, draining
their anger. No. They held it in, just for him probably.
He thought he was making paintings but really he was
making cow toys.



Wind clattered the sash before which she kneeled, prayerfully. Chill air hurtled against her. It banged back hitting the house's bricks. The county's electricity dead, darkness crept over the meadow.

The shadows of *stupas*—alabaster coats of unmelted hail. Not a soul to be seen. But she knew that a princess had declared illicit love by heaving a boulder on top.



Falling shards of winter sky. Then March and spring nosed its way back across the steppe. Kittens, calves, all manner of fish, ducklings, flies, foals, mosquitoes flash-flying the raging rivers. Dryer-tossed clouds poofed above the gullies dripping with green sweat. Blue blue air. Blue blue ocean. The flower-lady got a canary.

Broad waist, hips, cotton-covered and stained with mint, bent over her bucket futzing with the stems and petals. A ring of them o so controversial. She sang while she worked, dazed with the weather, cautionary, unused to the pale white behind the day-sun's gleam.

Pails weighted with stones, river-rocks, shells and red mud. Cheeks ruddy. Hair askew, flying backwards.

Focused on her task she failed to hear the question. The little boy turned away. A shadow crossed the stamen of

a flower. For a minute she thought to look up but forgot before she was consumed by drifting sweet vanilla.



A translucent sky, clouds and the far off hills riding the horizon jauntily, not closely like a jockey but slip-shod and spread out.

She lay back on the bed. The room was cheap. She was glad she didn't have to undress.

Yellow hands. A pink and sky blue Buddha covered the dirty paint. When he greeted her his hand reached for hers and then wilted, shrunk, disappeared out of her grip.

A hand-embroidered quilt with little Thai designs. His shirt is soft with very thin purple and yellow stripes. Monk dolls on a shelf. Saffron, ochre, brown—each has a different colored robe draped over its bare-armed shoulder. Skin white, not dark. Not even orangey.

Along the rainbow of her bully self

Along the rainbow of her bully self. Moo cow Moo cow
Moo. Yes'm. No'm. To think that Sister Ignacia even
tried.

A coral window in the garret where the grey walls shorn
of hail peeled back the sky. Humpty Dumpty sat on it.
But he had a great fall and his shards couldn't be pieced
together. Even the great ones who you'd think . . .



But his mother could. Jealousy, fear, resentment, suspi-
cion made the lens seductive. It didn't take her long.
She knew right off the bat. She heard words and used
her mind's eye.

Which tool blazed what had yet to happen. "Are you in
trouble?" from mother of male to dashing young girl
can only mean one trouble. No is a lie even if it's not.

So she said “No.” From the deep recesses of the mother’s chins came instructions.

“Dear God. Will I?” Signed “Anxious.”



The daffodils had long ago wilted and yellowed up the car’s back seat. With leather leashes wrapped around his wrist, he slid through furze rain. Steamy pebbles from the piebald sky played loopy-loop.

He’d kick one. But what good would that do? His trousers were getting soaked. So it’s back to grandma’s.

Livery. All the king’s horses. Everyone tried very hard.

Sister Ignacia kicked her out so that she’d try hard. Harder than she’d tried up till now at least. She left, lied, left, lied, left, lied till she was blue in the face of the male’s mother’s mind’s eye. It radar-ed lies. Beep beep jaggered across the fen. She herself couldn’t tell the difference.



Shepherd’s Pie. A bit of stout. His smile and the girl’s across the room who took him for mad. He poked his pie then ate a bite of hot potatoed meat. He (his son) poked his but the steam burned him.

Next day he left. “Son,” he said. “I’ll be back in a week. Wait for me here.” The son nodded. Of course the moment he took off, he jumped on a train. He had to. Through the glass he saw himself looking. He had never seen *that* before.

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