

*"The Bird Woman" by Abigail St. John
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The Bird Woman

by Abigail St. John

There's a great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a big wide world, full of many odd things under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a little yellowed yard in the big wide world full of many odd things, under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's an old white house beside the little yellowed yard in the big wide world full of many odd things under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a sad eyed woman in the old white house beside the little yellowed yard in the big wide world full of many odd things under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

And the sad-eyed woman sees the old white house and the little yellowed yard and the big wide world full of many odd things and the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

And she waits.

Waits.

Waits.

She has forgotten what she is waiting for.

She has forgotten many things.

She doesn't like to be inside the house for too long. There's something about it that eats at the corners of her vision and makes her chest too hot, too tight. She has memorized the rooms. She knows every notch in the wall, every creak in the floor. There are spots along the railing that have been worn smooth by her hands. She can pick her way through the house in the filmy half-light that settles during the day when she draws the thin grey curtains shut to keep out the heat, or in the total darkness of the night. She has only ever known this one old house. Even so, it has never stopped feeling unfamiliar. There are aspects of it that she isn't able to name. Sometimes

she thinks that there are things in the corners, watching. Perhaps she's just been there too long. Perhaps.

The yard is no better. She goes out into the sweltering heat and squints against the sun. The grass is as high as her waist. It turned yellow a long time ago (or has it always been yellow? She can never remember). The horizon is flat and dark, a contrast to the rest of the sky- so blue it hurts to look at. The air is nothing but dust. She hates to look at the world like this. Everything out here is a reminder of rain and green grass and kinder skies, all the things she thinks she's seen before. She imagines a time when things were constantly moving. She thinks this place was like that, once. Now, the landscape never changes. She hates the sameness of it. It makes her want to scream, but she lost her voice long ago. She goes back inside.

She climbs the creaking stairs to the single room on the second floor. It is barren, save for the dresser in the corner and the old brass bed with a mattress that is mostly springs. She can tell by the sunlight that filters through the curtains that it is still day, but she doesn't care. She folds in on herself and tries to sleep. She always lies down facing the wall. That way, she doesn't have to look at the things in the corners. Even so, she can feel their presence. Or maybe there's nothing there at all.

There aren't any trees here. She thinks about trees sometimes, spots of shade, signs of life. She tried to plant trees once, but they never took. Their roots couldn't find anything to hold onto. She watered them every day, hoping, but nothing grows in the yard. Nothing ever has, except for the long-yellow grass, and she doesn't remember that growing, so much as appearing. Just being there one day, waving with the dust in the wind. She wonders if the cracked land beyond the yard would let things grow. She never steps passed the edge to find out.

Nothing grows, and that means no trees, and that means no birds. Cause and effect. No plant life, no animals. She thinks there used to be animals here. She remembers them, sometimes, on good days. On good days, there's a breeze. She doesn't know why the breeze matters, but it does; it carries all the things she has forgotten. On days when it stirs the yellow grass and makes her curtains flutter, she can remember a "before" where everything was different. On days with a breeze, she stands outside, closes her eyes, and remembers as much as she can. She soaks in the memories in pieces.

When the sun beats down with no relief and the world stagnates, there is no "before", only a present moment. She goes inside, lies down flat on her back, and melts. The things in the corners creep towards her, stifling, and she lets them. She hates those days the most.

The breeze carries pictures of animals, plants, and birds; birds of every size, shape, color. She loves birds. Their elegance lifts her. On the days when she can remember birds, she misses them. They are her phantom limbs. She feels like she was once home with them, and is no longer.

She sits outside on the porch, letting her toes scratch at the roots of the grass, and tilts her head back. Today, there is a breeze. She lets it whisper in her ear and tickle her neck. In return, it whispers of before.

She remembers stories. Stories with happy endings, and sad ones, stories beginning "once upon a time". She squeezes her eyes shut trying to remember more. There was one story, from

before, that she loved more than any other. There was a little girl who wanted to fly. She asked the birds for help. The woman has almost found the ending of story, when the breeze dies away, and the memories with it. She is left alone with the yard, the house, and the things lurking in the corners. Letting herself sit for one more minute, she makes a silent wish. She wishes to know if the girl in the story learned to fly. She goes back inside. In the yard, the grass sways and shivers with the sigh of the wind.

There are skeins of yarn in the cellar. She found them a long time ago, but she never had a use for them, so she let them be. Now though, she wonders. Perhaps she can call the birds back, she thinks, if they have a place to stay. She sits in the bedroom and weaves nests from the yarn, using every color she can think of. When she finishes one, she puts it out in the yard. It is a patch of rainbow in the dull landscape. She looks out at the sky, letting herself feel one sliver of hope. But the sky stays empty, and the nest gathers dust. She builds more. She makes one every day, putting them in the yard, on the porch, on the window sills. They all start in many colors, then grow dull with time, but she builds more.

She decides to whisper a hope into each nest. Her voice rasps horribly through her throat, creaking worse than the floors with misuse, but she suffers through to place the words in the nests. She wonders what will happen when she runs out of yarn, or runs out of words. She wonders which will happen first. What will she fill the time with then? She puts down the blue nest she has been weaving and looks out the window. There's nothing there. That shouldn't be as shocking as it is. The breeze pushes at her face, and she closes her eyes and lets herself think about the little girl and the birds.

That night, she locks the doors and latches the shutters. The wind beats at them like it's trying to get in. This is not the day time breeze. She curls up on her bed and covers her ears, telling herself over and over that it's just the wind, just the wind, just the wind. It beats at her windows and doors like a creature. The winds frighten her. She dreams that she is outside, and that something is chasing her. The long yellow grass wraps around her legs and causes her to fall, she looks up to face the thing, and she wakes up. She imagines the monster of her nightmares lives in the wind. The things in the corners stretch out and envelope the house in silence. It keeps the monsters out, and it keeps her in. She thinks that is a fair trade.

The things in the corners are good at silence. It's what they're made of. She never speaks, save for whispers, in their presence. She's not sure she can. She thinks she used to try, but they sit so heavy that the sound won't come when they're around, and they're always around. So, she keeps all her noise inside.

Sometimes the silence is too much for her, and she feels like she is going to lose her mind. She wants to scream then, to break the air in two with her voice, but the things in the corners watch her, and she holds her tongue. She whispers into her nests and places them on the roof, on the porch, in the yard. They are overcrowded now, everything spilling with bright colored thread, made dingy by the dust. She doesn't place them beyond the yard. She never leaves the yard.

She builds her nests. She goes outside, then inside. She ignores the things in the corners of her eyes. And above all she waits. Waits for something that she can't name. She has forgotten

what it is that she's waiting for, but on days with a breeze it sits on the tip of her tongue, enticing. She hopes it will be worth it.

Night comes, and the night is wild. The wind (please, let it be the wind) beats at the windows until she is sure they will break. They hold, but she isn't sure how. She walks around the house in the morning, and sees that the paint had been stripped from the windows. The wood is marred with deep grooves. She tries not to think about it. It was just the wind. Just the wind. She goes up to the edge of the yard, where the yellow grass ends in a jagged line, and looks out at the cracked, barren ground and the blue sky beyond. There's nothing there. The breeze rustles her hair, and she hears the beating of wings. She almost takes a step out of the yard to follow the sound. Then, she turns her back on the jagged edge and goes back inside, picking her way through the grass to get there. She builds another nest.

She has run out of hopes to whisper in the nest. It is hard to think of them, when nothing ever changes. She weaves a large grey one, and into it, she spills a fear in quiet, rasping whispers. She whispers her fear of the edge of the yard, and what lies beyond it. Then, she builds more nests and whispers more fears. It seems she will not run out of fears so easily.

The winds come again that night, more violent than before. She covers her ears and shuts her eyes. The shutters rattle so hard the old house shakes. She wishes she remembered how to scream. The winds disappear with the sunrise, and she ventures outside to check the windows. On the doorstep, settled above a layer of dust, is a brown feather. She stops. Slowly, almost fearing it will startle away if she moves too fast, she bends and scoops it up into her hand. The feather is long and narrow. It curves slightly. Its spine is a translucent grey, and it glints vermilion in the sun. She looks around the yard, and realizes some of the nests are gone. She walks to the spots where they were. In the place of each, there is a single brown feather. She gathers them into her arms, tucks the first feather behind her ear, and goes inside to make more nests. At the door, she feels something pushing her back. The things in the house don't want the feathers coming inside. She brings them in anyway.

She curls up against the winds at night. In the mornings, she goes outside, counts the nests, takes stock of which ones are gone, and collects the feathers left in their place. She doesn't pay any mind to the endless land stretching all around her. She ignores the things in the corners of the house, although they push and tug at the corners of her eyes. She weaves her nests, and whispers to them. After a while, she runs out of fears, so she starts to whisper hopes again. She finds she has more of those these days. Slowly, she collects more feathers. Some are long and sleek, some are small and downy. Some are wide, some thin; some are broken, some whole. Their colors are as varied as the colors of the nests.

Her fingers have become blistered and sore from weaving all day, but she pushes onward. Her movements have grown fevered. She *must* build more. They are disappearing almost faster than she can make them, and in the place of each one is a feather. Sometimes, she makes her way to the edge of the yard and squints at the sky to see if she can see any birds. She used to expect nothing, but now there is disappointment when she looks and sees nothing. Still, she hopes. She inches closer and closer to the jagged edge of the yard, until her toes are touching it, but never going beyond. She wonders what she would find, if she stepped over the edge. She never used to wonder that. She continues to build the nests.

She builds and builds, until the bedroom is full of feathers in every hue and size. She goes to the cellar to get more yarn, and finds only a spool of golden thread and a needle. She doesn't worry about what she'll do now that the yarn is gone. She sets to work.

Slowly, carefully, she gathers the feathers and threads her needle. The things in the corners tug at her, make her heart beat fast. Painstakingly, she runs the thread through the spines of the feathers, or knots it around their base. She works through the night, and the winds rap gently at the shutters. The house itself seems to be leaning in around her, telling her to stop, but she keeps going. She works through the next day as well. By the third day, her work is complete. Sitting before her two multicolored wings, she thinks of the little girl in the story. She whispers a wish to the wings sitting, then pulls them onto her shoulders and steps into the yard. She closes her eyes, takes a flying leap. The breeze blows, and she pictures birds. She crashes to the ground, breathing in the dust. She coughs until her sides hurt, then she stands up and tries again. All day, she runs through the yard, straining her arms extending them outward and upward. Her wings become crumpled as she falls over and over into the dust and the yellow grass. The things in the house laugh at her silently. The sun begins to set. The breeze tugs at her, pulling her forward until she is at the edge of the property. On the horizon, what looks like a storm cloud is gathering. She looks closer, and realizes the cloud is comprised of hundreds of beating wings. The breeze swirls, and she wonders if there was ever a reason not to leave the yard. She doesn't think there was. Suddenly, she knows what she has to do. The things in the house are scared now. They claw at her back, telling her to stop, to wait. She raises her foot deliberately and places it on the other side of the jagged line of yellow grass. The things in the house shudder in agony. She ignores them. Her other foot follows. She walks away from the yard with her head held high, and she doesn't look back when the old house caves in with a creak and a moan. She doesn't watch as the shadows leak out of the fallen house into the earth. She's thinking about stories, and the breeze, and the birds.

She isn't surprised when her feet leave the ground.

There's a great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a big wide world, full of many odd things under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a green patch of grass in the big wide world full of many odd things, under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a tumbled down house beside the green patch of grass in the big wide world full of many odd things under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

There's a patchwork bird flying above the tumbled down house beside the green patch of grass in the big wide world full of many odd things under the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

And the patchwork bird sees the tumbled down house and the green patch of grass and the big wide world full of many odd things and the great blue sky that stretches for endless days.

And she shrieks,

And she laughs,

And she howls,

And she sings.

Sings to the house and the people in the world and the clear blue sky.

She sings to stop the waiting.