

The Wings

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Sarah Harley

I am fallen;
Stardust envelops me.

— Virginia Woolf

My mother started making the wings about a year before she died. They were for my brother.

The wings were made of feathers she gathered here and there, strands of wool, pieces of parachute silk she found when she was small. She had saved them in her suitcase, always visible perched on top of the wardrobe.

With gossamer threads and silver light, and stinging nettles, the wings were woven together. The anatomy of the wings was such that they would be attached to my brother's shoulders.

My mother made them in secret. She gathered the nettles at the edge of the river at the end of the day when the light faded into the silver ribbon of the river. She gathered light there too, grasping it in handfuls against the dying of the day.

She wore a dark blue shawl when she went to pick them, although the plant's fine hollow hairs burned her hands and caused raised hives across the skin.

I can't remember what my mother was knitting. Was it a scarf? Perhaps it was a cardigan or even a blanket. The wool was a mohair blend which made her hands break out in red and painful blisters that spread over both hands and even up over her tiny wrists.

In anger, one night my father pulled the length of knitted wool from the wide plastic knitting needles, throwing it all to the floor with satisfaction. There. No more knitting. My mother cried softly in the brown threadbare chair. When he left the room, she picked up the unraveled wool and carefully wound it into a soft ball. She began to cast on again. In frustration, she scratched at the red rash rising to the surface of her hands. She always took things out on herself first.

It was a strange reversal of roles as it was normally my mother who lost her temper, throwing anything she could lift into the air, vaulting it upward or across the room: green wine bottles and wine glasses, small half-drunk brown bottles of pale ale, dinner plates, once an ice-cream cone my father gave her, and the glasses of pink Sanatogen meal-replacement to build up her strength and energy after the radiation and chemo treatment.

My mother knew that the wings would require modifications to my brother's skeletal structure. Time was needed but that was running out. His scapulae would need to extend outward and backward from the back. New muscles would need to attach themselves to the modified shoulder blades. Power and control would be needed for sustained flight. Feathers would cover the wings, attached through new follicles in the skin. The wings would require a network of nerves to transmit signals from my brother's brain to the muscles, allowing for coordinated movement and control during flight. The wings would need their own blood supply.

Through the kitchen window, my mother watched the starlings in the garden. She studied their small shoulders and the structure of their wings. As they foraged for food, with the blackbirds and the sparrows, she observed the elliptical shape of their wings, short, rounded, and tapered toward the tips. She noted the different types of feathers, some long and rigid, others softer and more compact, all covered in a blue-black iridescent sheen.

Down by the river, my mother gathered the stinging nettles that grew in the shade of the tall ash trees, carrying them in bunches under her arm.

But the day was dying on its own. Time was moving too quickly.

At night, she went down to the sea to search for threads, stronger than string and wool, that had washed up with the tides. She picked up parts of old fishing nets made by the fishermen down at the harbor. For a few moments, she watched them.

With a firm grip on the handline, the fishermen swung the nets before casting them into the sea. The nets opened in mid-air, forming an arc before falling into the water where they formed a circle over the sea, kept in place with weights along the edges.

The light from the fishing boats went out over the dark sea. She recited lines from a charm to slow down time as she went about her way. My mother needed the night to be long.

The cancer in her body had spread, invading surrounding tissues and blood cells, spreading from her breast through the lymphatic system, moving quickly through her body until reaching her brain. It was too late.

When you live on borrowed time, it's not clear whether you are borrowing against the past or the future. Would my mother borrow against a balance measured in hours and days? Perhaps the balance would be exacted in larger increments of weeks, months, perhaps even years. As the balance grew larger, time itself moved faster, like a conveyer belt that was moving too quickly. My mother ran through time, in a state of fear, afraid to ever stop and just look dead-straight ahead.

When your existence hinges on borrowed time, your life undergoes a wrenching transformation, torn from the past into a future that is unable to fully plan for you.

The future did not include my mother. She was dead at 48, on a dreary day in June. I was 13.

Each evening, before she died, she returned to the threadbare brown chair to appear as a smaller version of herself. She picked up the needles, trying not to itch her hands.

She started with a slip-knot, creating a loop with the wool, crossing the working end over the tail end and then tightening it onto the needle. She inserted a needle, then caught the length of wool, pulled it through and created a stitch. She repeated the process until there were 21 stitches on the needles. The number represented the number of years my brother had been alive.

One night, my mother found an old fishing net, washed up on the rocks while the sea was out at high tide. She dragged it home. The larger items were hidden in the back of the garden shed; smaller ones inside the suitcase.

When we went to the moors on Sundays, with my father, my mother stole away. I watched her in the distance, her silhouette outlined against the grey sky, the harsh landscape pressed against her.

She crouched down to pick heather that she slipped inside the pockets of her coat. She didn't know that I was watching her.

Out on the moors, she also collected the feathers of the wild birds – skylarks and dippers, ravens and falcons – that flew across the wilderness. Moving with them as her guide, she trekked through yellow grasses, heather, and gorse. She remembered the vanishing of time and ran across rivers and streams, only slowing down to tread carefully over moss covered rocks. Wild swans flew overhead. She even found the stark white hairs from the manes of the wild horses that galloped by night over the desolate landscape.

Each night, she worked in secret to finish the wings, majestic and ornate, stitched with a mother's love for her only son. She must have known that it would be hard to protect him. He was, after all, also living on borrowed time.

The night before she died, my mother stood in her bedroom, in front of her dressing table, with the three mirrors. With great care, she lifted the great carcass of the wings. The frame was too heavy for her small and frail body. She balanced them awkwardly over her bony shoulders, turning this way and that. The wings carried the desolation of the moors, the darkness of the woods, and the aching call of the sea.

For a few moments, time stood still in the room, her reflection frozen in the mirror, a small smile forming across her face. The gravity of the wings altered her perception of time. All fears were softened for the time-being. The smell of her perfume hung suspended in the air; the second hand on the small clock next to the bed stopped ticking. With the wings over her shoulders, she was in the center of time. The rhythm of her heart slowed, her mind calmed, as she balanced weight and levity. These things followed in the wake of her acceptance of her own reflection in the mirror.

With anguish, she suddenly looked down to see that the tip of the right wing was unfinished. Never mind, she said to herself, taking a deep breath, I will finish them tomorrow.

The nettles were starting to wilt, petals were falling.

By the morning, she was gone. Her cheeks were cold when my father placed the back of his hand against them. She was so small she was almost lost in the bed.

By dusk, the sky above the house turned dark. Flocks of starlings left their roosts in the eaves of the roof to take flight, their wings forming dancing patterns, casting shadows in the wind.

Seven months later, my brother died suddenly. He was 22.

His body was found underneath a two-story window balcony from which he had fallen and broken his neck. He had gone out on a Friday night and had too much to drink. His body wasn't recovered until the following Tuesday. He lay there, in wind and rain, for four nights and four days.

There was no-one beside him when life disappeared from the body. Did my mother hold his soul in the palm of her small hand after he fell? Why didn't she push it back inside his lifeless body when she had the chance?

Did my brother see his past or was it his future that was laid out before him, the life he could have lived?

The wings remained unfinished, but my brother didn't need them anymore; he was dead before his time. No longer weighed down by his body, he found a lightness of being.



When you live on borrowed time, the entity you borrow against is your own state of being alive, your life mortgaged from death. Sometimes, you don't borrow against a balance of time at all. The journey is only ventured through the rooms of the mind.

Left to ourselves who have played our parts living on borrowed time, we break off, into the depths of the mind, to explore the what-ifs and the what-could-have-been. Sometimes we break under the weight of grief's heavy burden.

She was nothing but a mother; her angel's wings unfinished, falling into the sea.