

Watching

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The blinds were drawn and the light in the room had a greenish cast, the room now a cave, and Helen had unplugged the phone and instructed her friends not to come around. In the freezer were dead rabbits, mice, and small birds—hawk food. She had bought the young hawk, Mabel, from a breeder in Scotland and had begun the process of “manning” the creature; the taming process called “watching” by falconers in days of old. This bird, a goshawk, was notoriously wild and difficult to train. In this manning process, the trainer keeps the bird awake for days on end, until the bird tolerates the trainer’s presence and feeds. She says of it, “I was waiting for the moment from which all else follows: the hawk lowering her head and beginning to feed. That was all I wanted. That was all there was. Waiting. Watching. Sitting with the hawk felt as if I were holding my breath for hours with no effort.”¹

Outside the world went by as usual, with its bustle and chaos, but inside this quiet and darkened room the young mother hovered over her first infant. She found it difficult to tell if the baby was getting enough to eat. How was one supposed to know? The baby spoke an urgent language, but she made the same sound for all of her needs. Was it possible that the infant was under-fed, and she would miss the signs? Yes. Poorly fed infants often give up crying in their frustration. At the pediatrician’s, she had been told this sad truth, and it had lodged in her mind, pinching her to attention whenever she relaxed. The infant, who suddenly mattered more to her than her own life, might wither before her eyes, so she steeled herself to watch carefully for clues. If this young mother had been a bird, it may have been easier.

“Hawks have a flying weight, just as boxers have a fighting weight. A hawk that’s too fat, or high, has little interest in flying, and won’t return to the falconer’s call. Hawks too low are awful

¹ Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2015), 69. Hereafter, all citations are made parenthetically in the text.

things: spare, unhappy, lacking the energy to fly with fire and style” (121). Modern falconers rely extensively on a set of scales, sometimes weighing smaller birds three times a day, with an eighth of an ounce making a difference to how the bird performs. To bring a hawk into “condition” means to judge their perfect flying weight; this “was a matter of exquisite assessment which could only be judged by the austringer...whose subconscious mind was in minutely [sic] contact with the subconscious mind of the bird” (121). Antiquarian austringers judged flying condition by feeling the breastbone and muscles, keenly observing the bird’s cues, watching for agitation or calm alertness. “It is almost impossible for the novice falconer to grasp the subtleties involved in bringing a hawk into flying condition” (122).

When the nerves of the young couple were jangled and electrified, they called for help. The help came in the form of a mother-in-law who had fed four offspring. Despite the relief of having her there, the young couple found that they still couldn't quite relax. She seemed cheery, almost cavalier, about the baby's condition, making it hard to trust her even though they wanted reassurance very badly. One couldn't help but be reminded of those musicians who kept playing as the Titanic sank, deliberately disregarding the seriousness of the situation. The baby's father spoke to his mother and asked that she comport herself with a bit more care in the situation.

If a Hawk is not at the optimal flying weight, a matter of ounces, the bird will ignore the handler, turning their backs on them when they are called, or fly reluctantly, badly, or not at all (136). Mabel was distressing Helen by appearing desperate to fly to her, but shunning the glove at the last moment with a terrified upward avoidance. Bewildered and anxious, she turned to her mentor, Stuart, a seasoned falconer. With his experienced eye, he discerned that her diet of chicks was too rich for her at that stage, claiming with total confidence that, “She’ll be fine, she’s nearly there. Just feed her rabbit. It won’t hurt her, but it’ll stop this problem” (136). As Helen submits herself to Stuart’s assessment that Mabel’s weight is too high, she is consumed with worry that she is starving Mabel. For his part, Stuart radiates exuberance while handling Mabel saying, “Bloody Hell, she’s calm, Helen.... I can feel her heartbeat. She’s not bothered at all” (144). His reassurances are not reassuring, because Helen is so convinced that *she* is the source of the problem. Inside Helen is a churning volcano of anxiety, and she simply cannot believe Stuart, “It can’t just be the food. I have done something bad...something terrible” (137).

Helen continued to have trouble flying the young Goshawk. Her obsessiveness turned the relationship into a scientist's field study. "I flew her later in the day. I flew her earlier. I fed her rabbit with fur and rabbit without. I fed her chicks that I'd gutted and skinned and rinsed in water. I reduced her weight. I raised it. I reduced it again. I wore different clothes. I tried everything to fix the problem, certain that the problem couldn't be fixed because the problem was me" (140). And all of these data she noted precisely in her diary every evening.

The young mother is a proper scientist. She is trained to notice patterns, create hypotheses, and respond to data. She has an app for tracking everything to do with her baby: sleeping, feeding, wet diapers, dirty diapers. But the baby's data resemble a scatter-shot pattern, resisting attempts to draw conclusive theories.

Helen managed to transcend her British intellectual stoicism and tell Stuart that she was not dealing with things very well "at the moment" (151). In the wake of the tragic death of her father, Helen had undertaken to train a goshawk as a form of therapy. "You've lost your father, And you're doing OK with the gos, he added. You might not see it, but you are. She'll be flying free, soon. She's nearly there, Helen. Don't be so hard on yourself" (151). The depression had almost swamped her at this point. She was impossibly tired. That afternoon Stuart noticed a change in Mabel, and he brought it to Helen's attention, "Look at her", he said. "She's a different hawk today." And as if written for a short story, that afternoon Mabel flew perfectly. "The hawk flew to me as if I were home" (152).

The young mother is as sleep deprived as a prisoner of war, and pale from anemia, complications from the birth. Responsibility had descended on her like a lead apron. And there was a type of color-blindness which had also emerged which was distorting the image of the baby's robustness. The infant was in her mother's lap now and had grown extremely still, mouth slightly open, breathing steadily, with her eyes transfixed by her mother's face. And then it happened, the tiny infant smiled.