

I Wanted to Vanish

Grief, Loss, and Disappearance in Helen MacDonald's
H is for Hawk

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In an essay about vanishing, Carmel Mikol performs a conjuring trick: she makes herself appear. Helen MacDonald's celebrated work of creative nonfiction, *H is for Hawk*, is about the global history of falconry, the life of the novelist T.H. White, a goshawk named Mabel, and MacDonald's debilitating grief at her father's sudden death. Somehow all these ingredients come together, although you wouldn't have bet on it. Mikol's essay has a similar virtuosity: it too balances the intellectual with the emotional, the historical with the personal, the general with the sensuous and specific. In the end, what you have in "I Wanted to Vanish" is an argument that is also a story, which is to say that it is rooted not just in ideas but in the inner life of an individual: the author, Carmel Mikol. This is a rare feat, and a truly inventive piece of writing.

—Dr. Alice Brittan

*Like when a mother is rushing
And a little girl clings to her clothes
Wants help wants arms
Won't let her walk
Like staring up at the tower of adulthood
Wanting to be light again
Wanting this whole problem of living to be lifted
And carried on a hip
(Alice Oswald, Memorial)*

I did it once. Parked my car on the side of the highway and walked into the woods. First, the sound of passing cars tethered me, a ribbon of sound sweeping east to

I WANTED TO VANISH

west at my back. But then, just trees. Tall old spruce bleeding lemony sap, red pines and firs shooting up young and bright around them, spreading across the sunlit spaces where I pushed through, bending the boughs backward behind me, each one a gateway opening to more forest.

In the summer of 2008, my father died of Leukemia. I watched it happen. One day he was going to work, returning in his old Jeep at suppertime, drinking Southern Comfort and milk in front of the television. The next he was dying. In a year, he was mostly bones, a quiet body in a palliative bed that I threw my arms across and wept until it turned cold and two men came and took it away. Just like that, my father vanished.

I imagined he disappeared into the trees – the trees he had spent his life planting and cutting, the scent and smudge of spruce gum a fixture on his hands. So I walked into the woods, thinking I might find him there. If not, maybe I could disappear like he did and feel the incredible lightness of being absent.

I was thinking about this while I read Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk*. Not because I have ever held a bird on my fist or watched one kill a rabbit. Not because I have ever wanted to. Simply because I remember clearly the smell of the spruce trees and the way they leaned in against the light that day when I too tried to disappear.

"Survival depends on the ability of the self to split off from what is happening," Kathlyn Conway writes in *Beyond Words – Illness and the Limits of Expression* (52).

CARMEL MIKOL

Disassociation is a well-documented response to trauma. Conway's analysis of illness narratives finds that suffering can "so threaten the coherence of the self that the sufferer absents himself or herself emotionally from the experience" (52). Clinically, this helps explain Helen MacDonald's reaction to her own father's sudden death – rejecting her daily routine and work responsibilities and retreating to a solitary life. In the introduction to her reading at Washington D.C.'s Politics and Prose bookshop in March 2016, MacDonald explains that she wanted to be "a creature that lived in an eternal present, that was solitary, that was self-possessed, that didn't have any human emotions." According to Conway, MacDonald's impulse toward withdrawal and aversion to emotion is not particularly surprising as a reaction to extreme grief. What is unique in MacDonald's narrative is not that she cuts herself off from her own emotions, but that she chooses a very unusual object of transference: she wants "to be a hawk" (Politics and Prose).

In *H is for Hawk*, MacDonald confesses her life-long fixation on hawks, relating that, as a girl, she accompanied groups of men who were practiced falconers out into the woods. She recalls the first time she observes a pair of goshawks vanish into the trees, refusing to return to their handlers' cuffs. It is as if they have "slipped out of our world entirely and moved into another" (22). Later she describes this as the hawks "slipping through a rent in the air into another world" (220). The notion that hawks have access to a world beyond the human realm has precedence

I WANTED TO VANISH

in both biology and myth. MacDonald writes that “history collapses when you hold a hawk” because, as an undomesticated species, hawks have not changed for millennia (116). As birds of prey, hawks etymologically originate from the word “raptor” (18), carrying a prehistoric, even immortal status (116). Far predating the history of falconry among Britain’s aristocracy, hawks appear in Celtic myth, Greek myth, and “ancient shamanic traditions right across Eurasia” in which hawks and similar species are messengers between worlds (226). So when MacDonald writes that she wants “to fly with the hawk to find [her] father; find him and bring him home,” she appeals to a long-standing tradition (220). She rejects human emotion and interaction because they are meaningless in her quest for access to this other world, the world beyond human capacity. Being human is not enough.

I think of the day I walked into the woods and I know MacDonald is right. I stood amongst the trees, far enough from the highway to be immersed in earth sounds, moss sounds, moving leaf sounds. I waited, listened. But quickly I realized I was entirely alone. All that life in the air and the trees was far beyond me. I needed some medium to facilitate disappearance into that other world.

Hawks have a special relationship with disappearance. In a very literal sense, their power of flight provides them autonomy. They can disappear from sight or choose not to return to their handlers at will, fly out of the range of retrieval or perch high in a treetop. But hawks also have a

CARMEL MIKOL

symbolic connection to disappearance. As mentioned, the origin of bird of prey is “raptor” which shares a root meaning with the word “bereavement:” they both come from Latin and Old English roots that mean to “take away, seize, rob” (*H is for Hawk* 13). From MacDonald’s perspective, flailing at the sudden death of her father (she was robbed of him), hawks appear to have mastery over everything that is causing her pain. They embody both death and immortality, which humans can only be victims of or wonder at. Hawks disappear at will but, as hunters, they also take the life of other creatures. They have a pragmatic connection to death and a seemingly untameable will of their own that denotes vivid aliveness. Plus, hawks can disappear “into nothing” (19). Nothingness is all too attractive to someone experiencing severe, inescapable grief.

The reactionary connection between experiencing loss and a desire to disappear is not new. MacDonald recounts early 20th century writer and hawk-trainer T.H. White’s “desire to escape to the wild” as a reaction to feelings of disillusionment, alienation, and grief (38). White connects wildness, or a “feral state,” with “freedom” and the opportunity to restore “elements of himself he’d pushed away” (45). Exploring these restorative powers of the wild, MacDonald cites the 13th century poem *Sir Orfeo*, the tale of a Celtic king who, “stricken with grief” when his wife is taken to the Otherworld by a Fairy King, “runs to the forest” (225). *Sir Orfeo* is a retelling of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but with a key difference:

I WANTED TO VANISH

Orpheus's story is a tragedy in which his wife dies because of his own error. But *Sir Orfeo* is a "narrative of loss balanced by restoration" in which Heurodis (Eurydice) does not die, but is "taken" and then recovered (Black 275). In the tradition of Celtic myth, the Otherworld is accessible and Orfeo reaches it by becoming a "wild man of the wood" (276). MacDonald references a similar second example, a tale penned by 12th century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth, in which a medieval Welsh King, also grief-stricken, flees to the woods to hide and heal, to be "found by no one" and forget himself (226). The act of disappearing from a former life serves a purpose in these narratives, one of reclaiming or recovering something. But this grief-disappearance connection exists outside myth as well, in more recent accounts.

Léa Vuong, in his study of French writer Pascal Quignard, traces a "a personal relation to disappearance" among an entire generation of French writers born during or just after World War II (3). Vuong quotes Dominique Rabaté who explains that "the motif of disappearance is linked to a great source of anguish" (3). The horrors of the World Wars, persisting in memory and lingering in physical evidence of carnage throughout Europe, is felt like a personal trauma even by the following generation. This provides a fascinating context for MacDonald's disappearing act, suggesting that, although her mourning is entirely personal, it may also be "anchored in larger historical events" (Vuong 3).

History of the World Wars permeates *H is for Hawk*. The book opens with MacDonald's trip to the Brecklands, a region northeast of London that hosts both a British and American Airforce base. The history of this unique piece of British landscape ranges from the "flint industry in Neolithic times" (6) to the creation of sand dunes by a "strong south-westerly wind" in the 17th century, to a pine forest planted in the 1920's to provide "timber for future wars" (7) to the Lakenheath pond, made from a bomb crater "dropped by a German bomber" (6). MacDonald also references the pastoral craze that took hold in the 1930's as a reaction to the trauma of the First World War (104). And there is MacDonald's own father, who as a boy, runs "feral across London bombsites" collecting shrapnel (267), and is caught by guards and reprimanded for taking photographs and recording the movements of British planes during the Cold War (216). Throughout the book, war, memory, and trauma interlace to form landscapes with "complicated histories" (264). But it is important to note that these landscapes are also shared by the hawks, and even more so that MacDonald believes landscapes with a "history of industry, forestry, disaster, commerce and work" are the "perfect place" to find hawks (7). How is it that the same landscapes that hold a history of trauma for humans are somehow perfectly hospitable for hawks?

First, hawks see differently - more broadly and in more detail than humans. They see 2-8 times better and have a range of vision up to a mile. They see more colours, even into the ultraviolet spectrum. Through small movements of

I WANTED TO VANISH

the head, they can triangulate an object's location ("Keen Vision"). Astonishingly, they can also apply all these highly-tuned functions of the eye while in break-speed flight. This precision is matched by their ability to fly to unencumbered vantage points. MacDonald writes that she has a "very old longing [...] to possess the hawk's eye" (189).

Despite how symbolically useful the hawk's view may be for MacDonald's desire to escape the world, there are physical limits to her ability to adopt the hawk's eye, no matter how closely attuned she is with its hunting practices. In fact, when she gets too involved or too close to the hawk's prey, she is injured. She darts into the path of a pursued pheasant and the hawk gashes her forehead with her talons (212). MacDonald is cut and bleeding in the location of the "sixth chakra," the region that, in ancient Ayurvedic tradition, is associated with "awareness, wisdom, clear sight... and seeing that which is not physical" (Swigard 47). Injury or pain in this region is believed to indicate mental "imbalance," emotional "distrust" of the self, and spiritual disconnectedness (47). It is fair to assume that in her process of grieving, MacDonald experiences several forms of mental, emotional, and spiritual imbalance, and that at least one of these leads her to choose a dangerous predator as her sole companion. But her desire to see as the hawk sees is problematic in a second way.

MacDonald cites Rane Willerslev's study of Siberian Yukaghir hunters who donned the appearance and

behaviour of animals as part of their traditional hunting practices. Central to the Yukaghir belief system is the idea that, while humans and animals share “souls” that are “formally identical,” they see differently because sight “depends on the body” (630). Neither human or animal can ever “know for certain what the world is like from the viewpoint of another being” because it would “entail the impossibility of [...] literally being the Other’s body” (647). The Yukaghirs do believe it is possible to take on the body of another species but warn that it should only be done for a very short period because it can result in the “loss of one’s own original species identity” (634).

MacDonald risks her identity when she hunts with her hawk: she experiences “splitting” as she becomes “so invested in the hawk and the pheasant’s relative positions” that her own consciousness “cuts loose entirely” (183). Here MacDonald’s self-medication via hawk encounters an error. What begins as a quest to “fly with a hawk to find [her] father” (220) morphs into “loss of control” that equates with drug use, alcohol, or gambling (177). She admits: “we lose ourselves when powerless from hurt and grief” (177). She stays too long in the costume of the animal. The hawk’s role as messenger between worlds is displaced by MacDonald’s obsessive mimicry and immersion in the hawk’s habits. Out of desperation to escape her own grief, MacDonald does not just disappear, she disappears into the hawk. These are two very different kinds of vanishing.

I WANTED TO VANISH

Is there any safe disappearance, one that invites a healing reconstruction of the self rather than a dangerous dissolution of it? I have already looked at the mythological retreat to the woods where reconciliation and recovery is made possible. But in reality, retreat into uninhabited landscapes is rarely practical and usually dangerous, especially for women. In myth, women are often abducted when they venture into the wilderness alone, as opposed to male characters who are given hero status for rescuing the women or are at least allowed a productive self-discovery journey. As an alternative, Pascal Quignard proposes a kind of disappearance that is less physically dangerous than those found in mythology or in MacDonald's precarious relationship with her hawk. Quignard calls it "the Jadis," a French word meaning "erstwhile" or "long ago" that signifies an obscure, unreachable site of origin toward which all text, art, time, and memory extend (Vuong 3).

On the day I pulled to the side of the highway and walked into the woods, I was looking for a place like Quignard's Jadis. I was seeking my father where I imagined his essence, the origin of his identity. It was utterly irrational that I would find him there, two weeks after he had died, knowing that his ashes were in a box in the backseat of the car I had abandoned on the highway. I had picked them up from the funeral home that day. Still, I went looking, willing to lose myself in the search.

MacDonald is seeking a similar point of origin when she buys the hawk shortly after her father's death. She is

reconnecting with her childhood obsession with falconry while also reliving the outdoor excursions she took with her father when he taught her birdwatching. Faced with an unimaginable loss, both MacDonald and I seek a realignment of our worlds, a shift in perspective that makes the grief bearable by changing its relative position. Alice Oswald describes this desperate desire for relief in this single, beautiful image: “wanting this whole problem of living to be lifted / And carried on a hip” (15). The childlike desire for comfort and the desperate attraction to disappearance coincide in the *Jadis*. To understand the *Jadis*, it is useful first to analyze the concept of the vanishing point.

In two-dimensional representations and in actual visual space, the vanishing point is “the point in which receding parallel lines, if continued, appear to meet” (OED). This point occurs at the horizon and establishes perspective – a road in a painting appears to trail off into the distance and disappear. The exact point at which disappearance occurs (the vanishing point) changes based on the vantage point, or the perspective, of the observer because the location of the horizon line changes depending on where it is viewed from. For example, the position of the horizon line and accompanying vanishing point are very different for MacDonald, standing in a field, than they are for her hawk, perched atop a tall tree. But each of them see a point at which all things vanish into space at the limit of the visible range.

I WANTED TO VANISH

The Jadis points perpetually toward a metaphorical vanishing point, a place where the “spatial and temporal merge” in complete, unreachable obscurity (61). Like the “prehistoric cave” or the “womb,” the Jadis is an inaccessible “point of origin,” a space existing only in the past (61). But because the Jadis can never be reached, it is not synonymous with the past. Instead, it is an anti-historical realm. Vuong writes that the Jadis is “not about recapturing or bringing back the past,” but about preserving the obscurity of the past in utter darkness (63). While, the past must be “infiltrated in order to approach the Jadis,” it works through a continuous backward motion, sabotaging efforts to define and “grasp past events ... consciously” (62). The Jadis is non-rational, favouring obscurity over knowledge and an unknowable origin over recorded history. The past is “not an aim but a means” (62). Quignard modifies representations of the past through the Jadis to “escape from the conditions imposed by the past” (67). Congruent with this re-visioning of time and history is deconstruction of the authorial self and a desire to disappear, both as a literary device and as a way of life. In 1994 Quignard resigned from several prestigious positions and removed himself from public life, preferring to work in relative obscurity.

In many ways, Quignard gets disappearance right. He vanishes willfully but does not become subsumed into another identity, as MacDonald does with the hawk. The Jadis retains some optimism about both the past and the future. It is not a regression into the past, it is not a place to

wallow in tragedy, and it is not a place to bury or conceal human emotion. In reaching toward an origin, the Jadis points home, a place that, albeit unreachable, is still hopeful and restorative.

The quest for the Jadis is an alternative model for MacDonald's disappearance, one that does not threaten her connection to humanity. The Jadis allows MacDonald to reject history and time, both of which she has "no use for" (MacDonald 117). Without time or history, she can truly become "invisible" (128). She can fully inhabit the "*terra incognita*," that place just beyond what is known (258). And this disappearance can be accomplished through a shift in philosophical viewpoint. It does not require her to push the physical boundaries of her selfhood or endanger her body in the landscape of another species.

MacDonald's account of T.H. White's final epiphany has striking similarity to Quignard's quest for the Jadis: on the "shortest, darkest day of the year from which the earth rolls back from Spring," White digs a grave-like hole in the ground and lays in it (247). From there, he achieves "invisibility" and experiences "dissolution" of his former self (247). The legendary character of Merlyn, written into legend as we know it today in *The Sword and the Stone*, emerges out of White's experience in this dark hole, on the darkest day of the year. White writes that Merlyn "lives backwards" and thus has the power of future prediction. White's unraveling of the self, indulgence in darkness, and backward journey through time all follow the path of the Jadis, but rely heavily on imagination.

I WANTED TO VANISH

MacDonald writes that “in the imagination, everything can be restored, everything mended, wounds healed, stories ended” (248). The imagination is not so different from the Jadis in that it reaches non-spatially and non-temporally toward an unknowable point. The hawk is a perfect vehicle for the imagination because it connects to the prehistoric and provides mythical access to other worlds. As MacDonald demonstrates through extensive analysis of the history of falconry, hawks have long captured the human imagination. From this perspective, MacDonald and her father share a similar fascination: the airplanes are to MacDonald’s father what the hawks are to MacDonald herself. “In watching the planes, you fly with them and escape,” MacDonald writes, reconsidering her father’s childhood habits at the end of the book (267). Here she understands that her father’s notes, photographs, and love of airplanes are not simply a way of stopping time or recording history. Instead, they are aids to his imaginative escape from the instability and uncertainty of war-era London, freedom from the limitations and fears of wartime. He could watch the airplanes take flight, knowing they would “cross borders” he would not be able to “except in [his] imagination” (267). The airplanes perform a similar function to the hawk. MacDonald and her father are really “watching the same thing” (190).

Both the hawk and the airplane pilot share the same vantage point. Poetically, and with analogous wording to Oswald’s poem, MacDonald describes their position as being “lifted free from the messy realities of human life to

a prospect of height and power from which one can observe the world below" (188). This is the privileged view of the air pilot, the hawk on the treetop, and the child lifted to the hip of her mother. All three find safety in being above and looking down. This downward gaze, similar to the backward gaze of the Jadis, is a kind of removal of the self from the structures of the day-to-day, a distance from which to observe and consider. As watchers from a height, they are "invulnerable, detached, complete" (189).

But privileging this view erases an important set of facts: the hawk surveys from above in order to spot and chase its prey; the pilot flies overhead to drop deadly bombs onto the earth below; and MacDonald envies both those positions because she wishes to obliterate her unbearable pain. Even Oswald's child, asking to be picked up out of anxiety and fear, acts out of pure self-preservation with little regard for the resulting burden (the weight on the mother's hip). And I, on the day I made an unplanned and unprepared-for journey into the woods, flirted dangerously with disaster. In a vital pragmatism, MacDonald confesses: "the narcissism of the bereaved is very great" (152).

Kathlyn Conway concludes that navigating trauma is about "confronting limits, acknowledging chaos, and, within that chaos, trying to make sense of what is happening" (137). This process requires complex negotiations between various ways of seeing, and ultimately, each person makes a choice: to be present or to disappear. I stopped walking that day, found my way back

I WANTED TO VANISH

to the car and drove off toward my mother, my siblings, and the great unknown of new, terrifying loss. MacDonald eventually seeks medical help for what turns out to be severe depression, and her desire to vanish dissipates. In the end, she realizes that “things might still be real, and right, and beautiful” (151). And she makes this discovery, not from the elevated viewpoint of the hawk, but from the ground, standing on her feet in a field at sunset, watching a million baby spiders float on gossamer threads into the open air, into that great, wide, unknown horizon.

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CARMEL MIKOL

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