

Openwork Mag

“Birds in a yard, men on horseback”

Ann Kathryn Kelly



My mother announces on a mild June afternoon, a Sunday, that she wants her birdbath moved. It's concrete, the surface pitted and encrusted with lichen. It belonged to my grandmother, my father's mother. He remembered seeing it in the yard as a boy, which dates this birdbath to sometime in the early 1930s. When my grandmother died in the 1980s, my father's sister, Aunt Gloria, took the birdbath to her house after selling my grandparents' home. Gram and Pop Pop, every November for decades, had taken the basin off the pedestal and turned it upside down on the ground. They understood what water that turns to ice, sitting in a basin, does to cement and clay products. My Aunt Gloria, it seems, did not. She left the basin on its

pedestal through the winter after Gram's death, and with spring's arrival saw the crack. Hairline, but deep enough to ensure that it would never again hold water. Aunt Gloria later admitted she wondered how long it would take the birds to figure out she was luring them with a broken promise. That spring, Aunt Gloria phoned my mother from her home in Pennsylvania and asked Mom if she'd like the birdbath. Her husband Harry, a carpenter, had planned a month-long trip to Vermont to help my parents renovate a kitchen in the antique Cape Cod they'd bought. Aunt Gloria said she'd have Harry load the birdbath into his truck and Mom jumped at the offer, loving anything old and with a story; an appreciation she passed down to me. The birdbath basin was wrapped in a towel, placed next to the pedestal that was turned on its side and anchored with a bungee cord in Uncle Harry's truck bed, and driven 400 miles north where it quietly reigned in a back corner of my mother's yard for the next thirty-odd years. Gray, unadorned, stately despite its simple column. From a distance, the crack was indistinguishable.

My mother announces that Sunday in June, standing at the kitchen door looking out to the yard, that she's worried the birdbath basin may tip off the pedestal. My brother, Sean, had been by the day before with his college-aged son to help us move patio furniture out of storage. Sean, Nick, and I lined up all-weather wicker chairs, large clay pots, shepherd hooks, solar lights, garden statues, a bag of potting soil, along the patio's perimeter. Mom would get to work the following day, potting plants, while I rearranged furniture and hung solar lights. Summer is my mother's season. Now eighty-five, she moved in with me in my Victorian in southern New Hampshire eight years ago. Dad had died four years prior, in 2008. She sold her home in Vermont and pulled into my driveway three hours south in her sapphire blue Volkswagen Beetle convertible. The moving truck arrived at my house within the hour. Among her belongings: the lichen-encrusted birdbath. Eight summers later, she worries about it toppling in a shaded corner under a maple tree where my brother and nephew, running late for an appointment, picked a spot and planted it. In their rush, Mom feels they didn't level it properly.

My mother calls Sean later that day. Asks him if he would mind stopping in again one day during the week—he doesn't need to do it right away, and he doesn't need Nick this time—but could he adjust the birdbath basin and maybe move the pedestal a bit further up the hill? When he has free time? The ground under the maple tree has a slope, she reminds Sean, and pitches toward a bank of trees. If he can reset the pedestal, she'd feel better. She'd hate to see it topple, especially with the crack, a clear weak spot. It's a beautiful piece, she says. It has a history. She reminds my brother, on the phone, that he'll need to take the bird statue out of the basin before moving it.

My mother, three or four summers ago, found a garden statue of two birds in our local HomeGoods store. She took an immediate liking to it. One bird sits lower, crouched and looking up. The second bird hovers above, looking down. Their beaks touch, as if exchanging a worm. Avian lovers' kiss? Mom bought it, telling me she had just the place for it. She would sit the statue in the basin to make the birdbath look like an ornate fountain. It might work, I nodded. I lifted the birds into our cart. For its size, it was heavy. Concrete, like the birdbath, but brighter white. Back home again we agreed, after I hoisted the statue into place, that it upscaled the birdbath. Since real birds cannot bathe in it, her statue brings a sort of realism to it once again. I congratulated Mom on her designer's eye.

My mother stands beside me at the kitchen door as we look across the yard. I agree with her it's possible the birdbath could topple. I imagine it happening before Sean can get back here, and how that would upset her. I think about the countless toppling statues making headlines on nightly news programs, three weeks past George Floyd's murder. George Washington and Christopher Columbus, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Ropes lassoed around necks. Bodies cast from bronze and stone slamming to pavement, breaking in two. People gathering round monument bases, looking up, wanting them down. Protests over Teddy Roosevelt, sitting tall on a horse, a Black man and a Native American man beneath him, on foot. A nation arguing over ... Honest Abe? Half wanting this debated icon for emancipation taken down, the other half barricading the likeness of our former President behind a fence. For safekeeping.

Birds in a yard. Men on horseback. A tumbling society, clashing toward middle ground, trying to remain upright despite the fissures in our foundation. Cracks centuries in the making, capable of shattering us until we find ways to seal it and find strength in our broken places.

Ann Kathryn Kelly writes from New Hampshire's Seacoast region. She's an editor with *Barren Magazine*, a columnist with *WOW! Women on Writing*, and she works in the technology sector. Ann leads writing workshops for a nonprofit that offers therapeutic arts programming to people living with brain injury. Her essays have appeared in a number of literary journals. <https://annkelly.com/>