

Sing! O Bone: Essay — Julie Trimmingham

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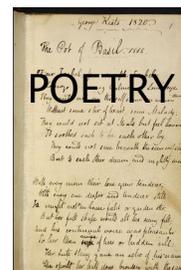
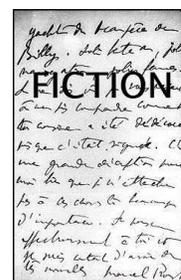
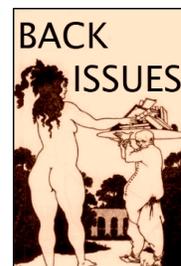
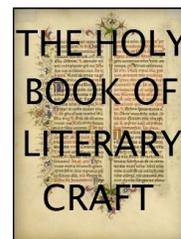
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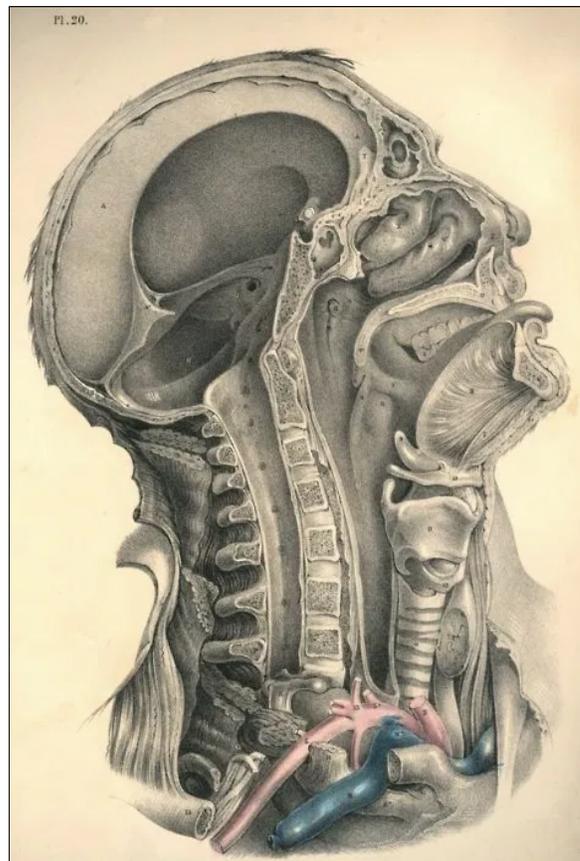
Six years old in Phoenix, Arizona, and I wanted to sing country. I'd walk to Squaw Peak Elementary by myself; my two sisters too young for school. There was a house on the corner with a desert yard, a looming saguaro instead of a tree. A low fence kept kids from kicking up the sand. In that sand was something shiny, a glinting by the base of the cactus tree. I'd eye it every day, and every day I wanted it more. Often, walking to school, singing under my breath, I'd practice my twang, the one I thought necessary for a singer. This aspirational twang is forever wed in memory to the shiny, forbidden object buried in the sand.

We are meant to sing. Words want to dive and swoop in the air. A considered tune wants words. I have wanted to sing for decades now, and I've sung to myself, quietly, or in closed spaces.

Too, I am drawn to things that need no metaphor. In looking for an invisible thing, my voice, I take singing lessons.

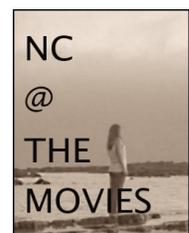
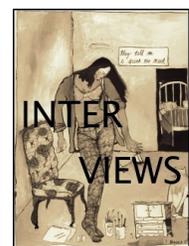
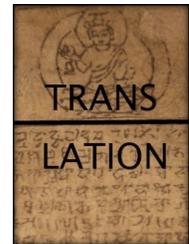
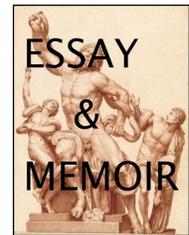


Your voice box sits atop your windpipe, which sits atop your bellowing lungs. Exhale through this apparatus while flexing your vocal cords, and you will make sound. Your head is a maze of boney caves. The notes you make will echo in the passageways and hollows of your body. You can pinpoint the thrum of each pitch. Middle C rings down at the collarbone, the C above by the eyes, High C springs from the top of your head.



The voice is an instrument made of bone, modulated by flesh. It is wind squeezed through a hole. A bone flute.

In Mozart's Magic Flute, the Queen of the Night sings a famously difficult, unreasonably high aria. She must hit the F more than two octaves up from middle C. Repeatedly. She must do so with trills – and the appearance of ease. She must launch her voice into the stratosphere.



Allegro assai. Die Königin der Nacht. Queen of Night

Der Hölle Ra - chekocht in mei - nem Her - zen,
The pangs of hell are ra - ging in my bo - som.

Tod und Ver - zweiflung, Tod und Ver - zweif - lung flam -
Death and des - truc - tion, death and des - truc - tion wild -

- men um mich her! Führt nicht durch dich Sa - ra - stro To - des -
In flame a - round! Go forth, and bear my ven - geance to Sa -

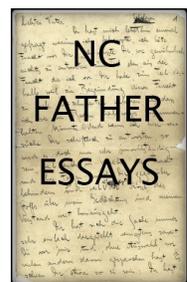
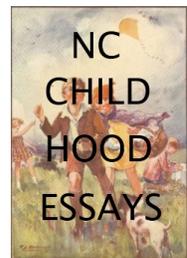
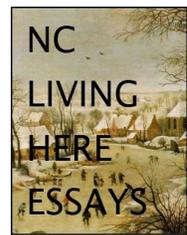
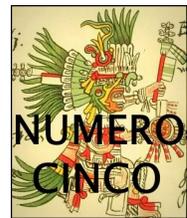
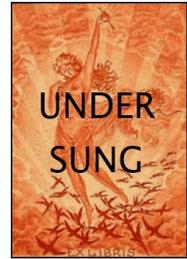
schmerzen. Sa - ra - stro To - des - schmerzen, so bist du mei - ne
ras - tro, my ven - geance to Sa - ra - stro. Se thou shalt be my

Toch - ter nim - mer mehr, so bist du mein', meine Toch - ter nim - mer
daugh - ter nev - er more, or thou shalt be my daugh - ter, ne - ver

Mozart's Magic Flute, Queen of the Night Aria

A recording of [Edda Moser](#) singing this aria is included in the collection of sounds from Earth on the Voyager 1 spacecraft. This is what the inhabitants of some future, faraway world will hear. This is what they will know of us.

Edda Moser - Der Hölle Rache - Mozart - Die Zauberflö

But since you are here, and now, listen also to [Diana Damrau's](#) rendition. Watch her mouth. The shape of the mouth shapes the sound.

Diana Damrau - Queen of the night aria



It's all about holes. Holes through which the world enters, and out of which come babies, words, blood, shit, song.

And it's about bones, the structure for our living mess.

Or. A bone in the hole. The bone thrust in a hole at the start of a soul. The baby grows amidst a confusion of metaphors and hypotheses and then, when that song has ended, the clatter of bones lowered into a hole.

People expire when they take their last breath.

Inspiration feels like talking to god, being filled with something beyond yourself.

Spirare, to breathe.

I can't breathe, I have thought before, in panicked states.

When I lived in the Canadian Rockies, work would sometimes have me driving at night through blizzards. Being tailgated by trucks. I was terrified. The only way I kept calm was by singing to myself. There is the song, with its own calmative force, and also the deep breathing it requires.

Singing lessons are mostly lessons in breathing.

When I was a girl, my father would bring home discarded x-rays from the hospital. My two sisters and I would cut out the bones and tape together skeletons. You would think I'd know what the inside of a body looks like; I thought the diaphragm was a vague thing shaped like a birth control device, wedged into the rib cage. It is, instead, as I learn in a singing

lesson, a huge, thin muscle stretched across the bottom of the rib cage like goat skin across a drum. When we breathe deeply, the diaphragm expands downward. I imagine it like a balloon, and our lungs like balloons-within-balloons.

A diaphragmatic breath is the singer's breath. You make yourself a loose and empty thing, a vessel. Air rushes in. The space between your gut and your sex expands. You are pregnant with song.

Sometimes I've wondered if aliens would see much difference between humans and nematodes, a basic worm type. We are both bilaterally symmetrical animals, sharing what is called a tube-within-a-tube body plan. We are tubes with holes at the beginning and at the end. Tubes for air and food. When we die, we are worm-food. Alive, worms are bird food.

Songbirds can produce two notes at once. Some can imitate chainsaws, barking dogs, and crying babies. Swooping through the air, they echo the world around them.

Why are angels never described as bird people? They sing and they fly.

My ex-husband believed that some singers were angels and that's why they were always crashing in planes. It seems to me that angels should stay aloft.

Plague doctors were another form of bird people. Convinced that pleasant aroma would prevent the inhalation of miasma, the foul breath blamed for plague, the men wore bird masks, and would burn sweet herbs in the beak.

The ancient Greeks feared bird women. They knew they were helpless when they heard the sirens sing. Sappho was described as a nightingale with misshapen wings.

Hypothesis: Angel minus person does not equal bird.



Aviary. Loggerhead Shrike by Sara Angelucci

When you sing, you can't hear yourself accurately, the echo chamber in your head distorts your sound. You must learn to feel where the sounds are in your body, how to perceive the sympathetic vibrations. You must imagine that you are opening spaces you didn't know were there, spaces you thought of as secret. You are a tube of air, a tube with holes that, when closed or opened, makes notes. A wind instrument.

A warm-up exercise has me singing a scale of "kee" sounds. Keys, I think. I might unlock something. The hard k sound requires breathing into the lower belly and is a voiceless velar plosive. Explosive.

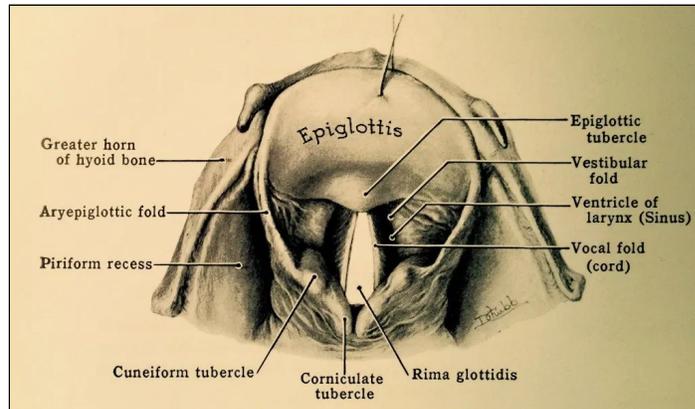
My husband, in his sixties, compares peri-menopausal women to volcanoes. Sappho lived on a volcanic island. I am in my forties, and just learning to sing.

The voice resonates in the chest, in the head, and somewhere in between. There are two breaks in the female voice, one between the chest and the middle voice, and another between the middle and the head voice. A break is where the voice can crack. A break is also known as a *passaggio*. How you navigate these passages affects the song. I can't help but think of periods, monthly punctuation. Starting to bleed and stopping are the two passages of the female body. How do you navigate these passages? I was a hot mess of a teen.

Anybody could be in the high school choir, but jazz choir was for the elite. I could read music, sing in tune, and follow directions. I auditioned. The

choirmaster rejected me on grounds that I shouldn't be allowed to have everything I wanted, citing my good grades as proof that I was spoiled. I was a diligent, quiet girl; he was a soft-bodied man in beige slacks the same color as his skin. He wanted to hang out with the cool kids; jazz choir swelled with cheerleaders. I started throwing up. I am not saying that the choirmaster, that unwitting prick, caused my bulimia, but I am saying that if you have a song inside you, it will find its way out, it will erupt. It may no longer be a song, and it may not be beautiful.

The song will find its way out, a distortion. Or you will silence it, an erasure. For a while, as a teen, I went quiet, I stopped eating. I thought spirit and bone were all that mattered. That flesh, my womanly flesh, was dangerous.



Epiglottis

Ancient Greeks thought the womb wandered around the body, causing a variety of female problems, another way of saying that being female was the problem. Foul odors repelled the womb; pleasant aromas attracted it. And so, a suffering woman would have garlic stuffed into her mouth, sweet herbs up her crotch. The womb could thus be held fast by smells. The wandering womb was described as an animal inside an animal.

The voice is an instrument inside the body, a living thing of and within us. An animal inside an animal.

A wild boar lays waste to a kingdom; two brothers set out to kill it. The cowardly brother goes to a bar and gets drunk. The brave brother is given a magic spear, and with it, kills the boar. Jealous, Drunk kills Brave. Drunk claims the prize, the king's daughter. One of Brave's bones is found and made into a flute. The bone sings out the story of what really happened. The king hears the song, hears the truth, and orders Drunk's death. The princess is freed from the boar, and the brave hero, though dead, triumphs, thanks to his singing bone.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the Queen of the Night Aria from Mozart's opera The Magic Flute. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in G major and 3/8 time. The lyrics are in German and English. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'f', 'p', 'cresc.', and 'Tutti'. The tempo is marked 'more'. The score is arranged in five systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

Mozart's Magic Flute, Queen of the Night Aria

The Queen of the Night gives Mozart's hero a magic flute, somewhat smaller than a spear, but perhaps size doesn't matter. She wants him to save her daughter. The flute in Mozart's opera can change men's hearts, that's why it's magic. A skin flute, a meat flute. The hero triumphs, thanks to his melodious pecker.

I could sing about bones.

I could sing about the feeling of quickening desire, of a cock crowing, of a bone bonering against my back as I lie between sheets, embraced.

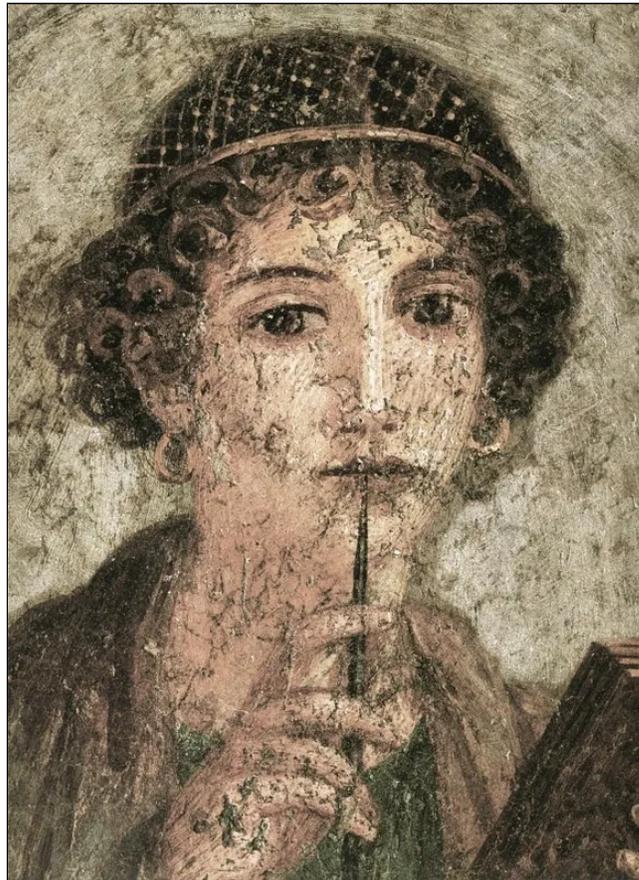
I would sing of domesticity and the marriage bed.

The echo chamber in our head distorts our sound, we can't hear our own songs truly. We need each other to be heard.

When I was going through divorce, I listened to Keith Jarrett moaning above his piano notes and Glenn Gould above his. These raw and moaning men.

When I was going through divorce, I made a film about a singer. The singer loses her marriage, her faith and her voice, in no particular order. She can't tell the difference between falling and flight, her voice cracks on the high notes. My favorite poem at the time was an ancient lament with many translations. The last line: what was never one is easily split: our song together.

I went to Newfoundland. I'd had dreams about humpbacks, the singing whales, and the high cliffs diving into sharp water. My heart was broken in several directions. I am a bad guitar player, but I needed to sing, and so I did, shut away in a little rented room. The song was another presence, it made me feel less alone. One day, my landlady and I went out in a skiff, we were looking for whales. Two soon found us, they swam under and beside us for over an hour. I was over the moon. Blissed out, as in my singing whale dreams. One of the pair lifted its monstrous tail in dripping goodbye as he dove down and away. My landlady said, You're looking for a whale in the shape of a man. I think what I was looking for was a song together.



Sappho

Sappho was described as a whorish woman, love-crazy, who sang about her own licentiousness. Looking for a song together, I fell in love like crazy, always with writers. I can see myself in scraps of their poems, their stories. A muse's mirror.

I have settled on an island now, in sight of a volcano. I am married again and we have a boy. I write myself. And, I am learning to sing.

Hypothesis: Volcanoes are to love as sex is to singing.

It is discombobulating and also thrilling to learn that I might be a soprano. In high school choir, I was shoved to the back row of altos, and have thought of myself as alto ever since. My would-be soprano is faltering, fledging. Aspirational. Paper airplane rather than rocket.

To jump, one must push against the ground, against gravity. The deeper the knees bend, the harder you push, the higher you go. Same deal with

voice. To sing the high notes, I press down, inside my self, down through my cunt. Giving birth. At the same time, the high notes feel like flying. I feel them in my head, above my eyes.

The Greeks made much of the mouth/cunt connection, had the same word for them. When I search the words “vagina” and “mouth” in an effort to learn more about Classical theories of same, Urban Dictionary tells me that “vagina mouth” refers to somebody who’s always talking about vaginas, or a person always down on their knees, open-mouthed and ready.

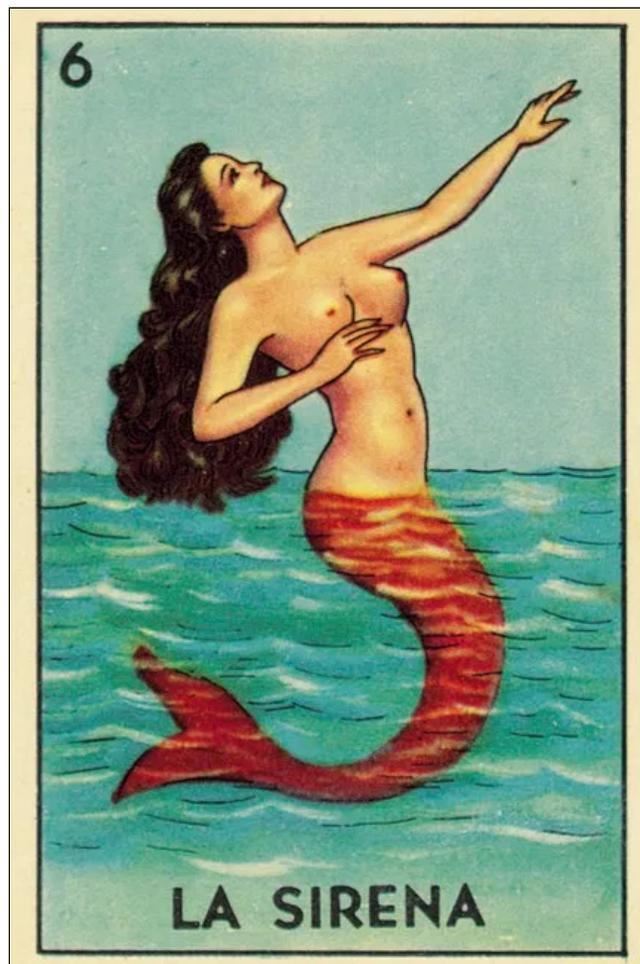
Classical virgins were open, ready for penetration. When a parthenos finally had sex, she was forever transformed by the man’s sperm and spirit. All her words were an echo of the masculine presence now inside her, her songs were his.

The Oracle of Delphi, a virgin priestess open to Apollo, would sit astride a crack in the earth, a crack from which hallucinogenic fumes, the breath of god, spewed. She breathed these vapors in through her cunnus, her cunning, her cunt, and out from her mouth came the word of god. Some say she raved, some say she spoke in poetic meter. Maybe she sang her advice?

The epithet for Echo, a nymph who was nothing but voice, was the girl with no door on her mouth. She never shut up, and in her conjugal relations with Pan, she had sex with all of nature. No door, indeed. And no words of her own, poor thing. Poor thing.

How to love, and yet be essence as well as vessel, meaning as well as mouth?

Sappho stayed open, she stayed her self, she sang her own words. It didn’t matter whom she fucked.



La Sirena

The ancient Greeks feared sirens.

In college, my roommates and I had our gimlet eyes fixed upon a lacrosse player, a frat boy with Greek letters on his jacket. There was a rumor that he'd done it in the bushes outside our dorm, and ever after, my roommates and I would tease each other with an ironic slam, well, you do it in the bushes with X. We were virgins; the thought of sex was terrifying and hilarious. One day, one of us did do it with X. According to the post-coital report, he emitted high-pitched squeaks as he came.

The sounds we make in sex are often honest, spontaneous, and I have always loved these sounds almost as much as I have loved the sound of an unencumbered laugh.

The ancient Greeks, those old vagina-mouths, also had a word for a female scream of intense pleasure or pain. *Ololyga* is described as disorderly and/or divine.

I once heard a story of a woman who'd lost her voice in the range where she would scream. As I remember it, she'd been raped, had screamed, and hadn't been heard. She wasn't saved. Ever after, her screams were silent.

An old man steals the Queen of the Night's daughter. The queen finds her girl, and gives her a knife. The Queen, in her famously high aria, commands her daughter to stab the old lech to death. The name of this fancy, super-femme song is *Hell's Vengeance Boils in My Heart*.

The Queen of the Night gives the hero a magic flute, but she gives her daughter a knife.

My singing teacher teaches screaming. She also works with bel canto. I practice breathing. I practice shaping my mouth. I practice, practice, practice. What we want, after all, is ease. Beauty. The wedding of order to chaos, light to dark, reason to rhyme. The voice made true, the word made flesh.

We are nothing if not memory. We are nothing if not together. We can't hear our own songs truly.

Singing is a sympathetic resonance of souls across time, across space. We echo each other, with variations.



Aviary. Curlew by Sara Angelucci

The world needs more songbirds, more sirens, more humpback whales. We are meant to sing.

In the beginning, there were three muses. Memory, Practice, and Song.

Then, six more were added, I don't know why. Nine total.

Sappho was called the Tenth Muse. The Mortal Muse. Her music clings to time-worn fragments like spirit to the bone.

What happens when a muse serves not as inspiration for someone else,
but sings her own song?

Hypothesis: She cannot be erased.

—Julie Trimmingham

NOTES & SOURCES:

There are, of course, many interpretations of *The Magic Flute* / *Die Zauberflöte*. It is a complex work. Mozart was a Freemason. It is not original to note that the flute is a penis, a creative force; some readings posit the flute as the penis of Osiris, the Egyptian god who looms weirdly large in Masonic culture and in the opera.

Wulf and Eadwacer is an Old English poem, the only copy of which was found in the Exeter Book. It, like the Queen of the Night's aria, is famously difficult. The narrator is presumed a woman; *Wulf and Eadwacer* might be husbands, lovers, sons, one might even be a dog. You can find a million interpretations. The woman is on an island, and she is speaking for herself. The line quoted above, about our song together, is hers.

Etymologies: Ancient Greeks used *stoma* to refer to the mouth that eats and speaks and also for the mouth of the uterus. *Cunnus* is another Latin word for vulva, and has a few possible sources, including Indo-European roots meaning woman, cover, and wedge. *Cunning* comes from the knowing root that gave us *ken* and *canny*. *Cunt* has tangled and uncertain etymologies, but seems unrelated to the Latin. Germanic in origin, *cunt* likely comes from a root meaning hollow space.

I construe marriage bed loosely. I like the sound of it, and it means, to me, a bed in which two people who truly love each other fuck, sleep, talk, and hold each other. I am glad to live in a place where gay marriage is legal.

Laughter is the daughter of uncontained sound: *Iambe*, offspring of chatty *Echo* and wild *Pan*, was the Greek Goddess of Jokes. We get the prosodic term *iambic* from her, too.

Lyric poetry was meant to be accompanied by a lyre. These words were lyrics, words for a song. *Sappho* was a lyric poet; she sang.



Aviary. Female Passenger Pigeon by Sara Angelucci

Artist [Sara Angelucci](#) has created a provocative series of human/bird hybrid photographs, *Aviary*. *Loggerhead Shrike*, *Female Passenger Pigeon*, and *Curlew* are featured in this essay.

In *A Mourning Chorus*, women make beautiful birdlike sounds and songs in an elegy for disappearing songbirds.

In the video of the [Art Gallery of Ontario performance](#), Fides Krucker and other bird women keen for vanishing species.