

Sexing the Pheasant

Lydia Millet

When a bird landed on her foot the pop star was surprised. She had shot it, certainly, with her gun. Then it fell from the sky. But she had not expected the actual death thing. Its beak spurting blood. She'd never really noticed birds. Though one reviewer had compared her to a screeching harpy. That was back when she was starting. What an innocent child she was then. She'd actually gone and looked it up at the library. "One of several loathsome, voracious monsters. They have the head of a woman and the wings and claws of a bird."

She did not appreciate the term *pop star*. She had told this to Larry King. She preferred *performance artist*. She was high art and low commodity, and ironic about how perfectly the two fit. A blind man could see her irony. She was postmodern, if you wanted to know, pastiche. She embodied.

What, exactly?

If you had to ask, you just didn't get it.

The bird feebly flapped and made silent beak-openings. Where the hell was Guy when she needed him? The London tabloids still called him Mr. Madonna, even though she had tried to make clear on numerous occasions that he wore the testicles in the family. She wanted to yell at them: giant testicles, OK? Testicles! Huge! ("Large bollocks." Use frequently.) He was back there somewhere in the trees. Easy to get separated on a thousand acres. She was an English lady now; not to the manor born, but to the manor ascended. So she was the American ideal, which was the self-made person, and the English ideal too, which was snotty aristocrats. Not bad for a girl from Pontiac Michigan. These days she just said "the Midwest," which gave it more of a cornfed feeling. Wholesome. In that

Vogue thing she said Guy was “laddish” and she was “cheeky” and Midwestern. Later she learned “laddish” was pretty much an insult, actually. Well, eff ’em if they couldn’t take a joke.

She should step on its little head and crunch it. But the boots were Prada.

Should she shoot it again? No. She couldn’t stand to. Sorry. She would just wait for the rest of them; no point being out here all alone anyway. Shouldn’t have strutted off all righteous while they stood there drinking. If he wanted to be a frat boy, let him. Her own body was a hallowed temple. His was apparently more of a bordello/sewer type thing. He was acting out because he was pissed at her. (Self: “peevisish.” *Pissed* meant drunk here.) For the shrunken balls situation. No man wanted puny shriveled ones the size of Bing cherries. Still: not her fault. He had to step up himself. If he felt like the stay-at-home wife to her world-famous superstar, he had serious work to do. On himself. Not on her. She was not the one with the self-esteem issues.

Frankly she might as well be doing weights, if the alternative was standing around in the dried-out brown winter grass waiting for idiots. Waste of time. Hers was at a premium. And the abs were a perfect washboard, but in her personal opinion the quads could still use some hardening.

When the rest of the party got here he would take care of it for her. Drunk or sober, he would put it out of its misery. What were men good for if not to crush the last spark of life out of a small helpless creature?

OK. The rabbi had been hinting at this: it was better not to kill animals. For sport, anyway. Before, when she was learning to shoot, she never hit anything. Only the clay pigeons. It was fun and games then. The “bespoke” clothes were good, the whole “compleat” attitude. (Good thinking.) These knee breeches, for instance, were the sh-t. She bent over and stared at them. Flattering. She was “chuffed.” (Self! So good!) And guns, let’s face it: there was no better prop in the world. A woman with a gun was kind of a man in girl’s clothes, a transvestite with an external dildo. But guns had more finesse. A gun was basically a huge iron dildo designed by someone French and classy.

So, shooting: she had liked it till now. Guy looked good with his 12-bore. He was a nature boy. It was sexy on him, esp. with the faux-Cockney stylings. (“Mockney.” Use in moderation.) Basically if a man had a gun it was like a

double cock. A cock and a replica cock, which was also postmodern. One had the power of life, the other had the power of death. Ying-yang. *Sefirot*. Etc.

Back to the bird. She felt a wince in her throat. It was still struggling weakly and blubbing blood, trying to flap its way up a small rise in the ground. Not much time had passed. All this thinking made the minutes go by slowly. Had she kicked it away? She must just have stepped back. It wasn't on the tip of her boot anymore; it was a few inches off, dry leaves sticking to its bloody side as it wobbled forward and then did a face-plant. Must have a leg broken as well as a wing. Guess she had good aim these days, since she'd really hit it. Madonna: marksman. That worked. Evoked paintings from the Renaissance. ("Re-nay-since." Use frequently.) Gentle mother of God done in a Duccio style, or a soft Da Vinci: but then instead of holding the Christ child, sweetly cradling an AK-47.

Consider for next album.

Madge, marksman. That worked too. When the British press gave you a nickname, that meant you were one of their own. Love you or hate you, that was irrelevant. What mattered was being one of them. In the gray steely ranks. The long-gone colonies. Once they ruled the world, now all they had was a better accent. They wore it well, though. An entire country that was basically quaint. Plus less of them were obese. In her closets there were hundreds of those tailor-made tweeds...but she could still wear the outfits, even if she stopped the killing. Right? You could pull off tweed without actually shooting. Couldn't you?

Esther, marksman...nah. Didn't work.

She was distracted; she could not focus, could not...she was cold, standing there shivering. If millions of screaming fans knew she was cold at this very instant, they would rush to her aid. They would bring her their coats. Take the coats off their backs. Yeah, whatever. One thing was for sure: their coats would suck. (Off-the-rack = "naff." Use frequently.)

It had to be dying soon. "Shite!" (Good work, self!) It was taking a while.

She had nothing against the poor thing, but then it rose out of the bushes and flew up and blam!—fell to earth, like Bowie in that seventies movie. (Sternly to self: "Film.") He was like Jesus in that. If Jesus was an alien. Which, let's face it, he probably was. There was no other explanation. Huh: what if Christians were basically the UFOlogists of ancient history? And the Jews were the

people who were the debunkers? They were like, “No, the messiah hasn’t come, and if he has, where’s the proof?” Whereas the Christians were the ones who said, “Seriously, the aliens came down, and we saw them. Man, you’ve got to believe us!” Except there was only one of these aliens, namely Jesus.

Christians were hopeful, which made them basically insane. They were hopeful about the past. I.e., Christ = son of God, etc. Hopeful about the future. I.e., paradise will be ours, etc. And then the clincher: they figured this particular hope made them legitimate. They hoped they personally would be saved and live happily ever after: and then they had the chutzpah to call that faith. So like, faith was thinking you were great and deserved to sit at the right hand of God. Selfish much?

Jews were more like, Come on. Be reasonable. Here we are on earth, now just try to be nice for five minutes, would you? Can we have five lousy minutes without a genocide? Sheesh.

Course Kabbalah was something else again. It wasn’t that you deserved to be saved, it was that God was in *you*. The power of the names of God, the seventy-two names inscribed in figures of light...what if the bird had tiny eggs in a nest somewhere? She had her own eggs, Lola and Rocco. This thing could be a mother too. Poor little thing. Birds were graceful. She wouldn’t look that good if someone shot her. Bad thought! Knock on wood. She reached out for a thin tree. Did a tree count as wood?

I mean yeah, she knew that, but for luck purposes?

Actually, if she was shot in the right place, then well-lit, she could look excellent. Kind of martyr concept. Consider. If not shot, crucified. Good one there.

Now the eggs would die in the abandoned nest, forgotten. But maybe not, if this bird was a man. Rooster, that is. When it came to pheasants they called them hens and roosters. (Good work, self.) Too bad she couldn’t tell. You couldn’t check between a bird’s legs like a dog or horse, nosirree. A male bird had nothing out there bobbing and dangling. Really no way to know. Unless you were like a bird penis specialist. Kidding, self. The poor birds had no dicks. Their sex was in the plumage. Any idiot knew that. Different colors, she guessed, but then there were the young ones, that all looked the same. Piece in the *Mirror* recently called her “an accomplished breeder of pheasant and partridge”—good. Good. In the sense of *manager*, she *managed* the breeding. She didn’t sex the things personally,

so what. She hired very good gamekeepers. Delegation was key.

She was chosen by God. That was what so many people seemed to completely overlook. What else explained her meteoric rise to stardom? Her continued success? For twenty years now she had basically been a megastar. Try, the most famous person in the world, basically. They said her name in the same breath with Elvis and Marilyn. What, because she was pretty? Just because she could dance, and once mastered a Casio? Kidding, self, just kidding!—she had talent, even brilliance, even exceptional brilliance (“Brill.” Use in moderation.), and nothing’s wrong with a Casio anyway. The eighties were the eighties.

But that alone would get you to the corner gas station. (“Petrol.” Good thinking.) True to her name, which was not even a fake one, she had been chosen. Chosen to embody.

Now and then someone asked her, usually a crazed psycho, “Are you the Second Coming?” Because that was what it looked like, if you were literal-minded. Like maybe she was the Mother of God, Mark II. She wouldn’t go that far, of course. There was a reason they called them psychos. But the kind of luck she’d had couldn’t really be called luck anymore. Luck was catching a bus, maybe winning a raffle. Luck was a good parking spot.

You had to keep this kind of knowledge under wraps, though, as a celebrity. You had to keep it a secret between yourself and yourself or you would end up a Tom Cruise. Believing the sun shone out of your sphincter, beaming with the smugness of an All-Knowing Colon.

When all you were, at the end of the day, was a highly paid face.

But she got him basically, the Scientology thing. Not her “cup of tea” (good work, self!) but what the media didn’t get, when they made fun of her and Guy for Kabbalah, or Gere for his Dalai Lama or Cruise for his pyramid scheme or whatever the *Dianetics* thing was anyway, was *you* needed to worship too. The fans worshipped you because they needed something: well, what were *you* supposed to do? Well, prostrate yourself before the Infinite. Clearly.

OK, granted, sometimes the mirror suggested it: not your fault if your reflection reminded you of all that was sacred, all that was divine and holy. The world would do it to you. At that point you were the victim. Brainwashing,

like with anorexics. Too many magazine covers. But she resisted. She was actually very humble. And of course, it was not wrong to see God in yourself. Anyone could do it. That was where the intellectual part came in. She read the holy books, she read old plays and that...it helped her, as an artist, to be extremely intelligent. Besides being a savvy businesswoman—she got that a lot, and rightly—even a genius at the marketing level, she was a seeker. A seeker never gives up.

She was pretty sure she remembered there was some kind of bird that would sit on another bird's eggs, hatch them and feed them like they were its own. The Mia Farrow of nature. Maybe one of those little mamabirds would come rescue the eggs of the dying one. She hoped so. Other day she saw that pigeon she told *Vogue* was the reincarnation of Cecil Beaton...the best fags were all English fags. Englishmen were the Ur-faggots, pretty much. All other fags in the world were pale imitations of real English fags. This was the land of homos; even the straight men were fags here. One reason she liked it so much. In the U.S. guys were basically rapists; here they seemed uptight and formal with their great accents and not showing any emotion, but all the time they were basically daydreaming about nancy boys in sailor suits. Not all of them, of course, I mean what would a sex goddess like herself do without at least a few of the poor "sods" (pat to self) being genuine heteros, but you know, the default position. ("Benders, bum bandits, ginger beer." Use in moderation.)

Guy was not gay, of course. But he had an edge of anger to him. The ones that weren't gay were often angry about it.

It was a tradeoff, more or less.

OK. The bird was finally chilling out. Lying there. Effin' dead.

"Oi. Bag one then?"

She jumped. He'd snuck up right behind her. It was the red-faced "bloke" from "down the pub," Guy's new pet "lager lout." (*Self! Excellent!*) Pig, as far as she knew. Gave her the creeps. What Guy saw in these losers from the King John with their saggy beer tits...come to think of it, she liked this one even less when he was carrying a gun. A gun was like a cigarette that way: if you already looked good it made you look better; if you looked crap to begin with it made you look even worse. This particular "lager

boy” had a chip on his shoulder about women with power. It hung on him like a stink. Made him actually dangerous.

Best not to challenge him. Alone here in the middle of the woods.

“I guess, you know—actually, I feel pretty bad. You know? I mean it was really suffering.”

“Brain the size of a peanut, yeah? How much suffering could there be?”

He was openly contemptuous. Thing about these lager boys of Guy’s was, they gave her a reality check. Like, what would it be like to be a regular person again? They had zero respect for her, for her megastar stature. At this point in her career most people she met either had to resist an urge to genuflect or got completely tongue-tied. Often their mouths hung open like Down’s Syndrome kids. (Which was sad. The real retards, that is. Come to think of it, retards were among the few that still acted normal.) Once she had cheek-kissed a journalist—one, two, in the English manner—and he fainted and soiled himself all over the place. And that was a guy who was used to famous people, they were his total job. You learned to spot in a second which ones were going to freak out. Point was, the lager louts would have been refreshing if they weren’t such assholes. She was sorry for their wives and girlfriends.

He leaned down to pick it up.

“No! No,” she said, and put out her hand. “Just—thanks, but you can leave it. I want to just leave it there.”

“Defeats the purpose, dunnit.”

“I just want to leave it in peace. I don’t want to desecrate the corpse.”

He snorted.

“You seen the others? Guy? Was he with you?”

“Nah. Went off on me own.” He was turning away.

“Wait! Can you tell me something?”

“Mmm?”

“Is it a hen? Or—”

“Rooster! Blimey.”

What a relief. No eggs.

He stumped back down the hill, head shaking. Good riddance. She knelt down beside the small body, modest hump of brown and red feathers. It was still beautiful. She put her hand on the feathers. You could feel the slight warm frame beneath them. It was light: almost nothing in there. Birds were like air.

It had been more beautiful when it wasn’t dead, though. Before it was shot. Which wasn’t true of everyone.

Take JFK, even John Lennon. Assassination had matured them like a fine Pinot. If you died of old age, besides not leaving a good-looking corpse, all you died for in the end was living. But if you got shot you were an instant symbol. You must have died *for* something.

She was always completely new; that was her secret, albeit an open one. Sure it was obvious, but no one did it like she did. None of them could touch her, when it came to transformation. That was the secret to her longevity. She wasn't one megastar; she was a new one constantly. Novelty was what people lived for. Skin-deep, maybe, but so what? Skin was the biggest organ.

She should envy the bird, actually. Guy said in the wild they died of starvation. Shooting them was a mercy killing. I mean come on, fly, eat worms, fly, lay eggs, fly, starve to death. "Bob's your uncle." (You go girl.) Life was not equal for everyone. That was another reason she liked it better in England. They didn't stand for that Thomas Paine bullsh-t here, all men were created equal etc. What a crock. One drive through Alabama was all you needed to take the bloom off that rose. One ride in the subway. (Self: "Tube." Easy.) Back home, the second you stepped out of a major city you were surrounded by the remnants of Early Man. Here there were some of those too, but you had to go down the pub to find them. And at least they didn't run the country.

All history was the history of class struggle, right? Lenin said that, and he had style. He had a very sharp look. Good tailoring. When the statues came down, she for one was sorry. She always wanted to meet him.

Maybe if she said a prayer. Yes. It felt right.

She touched the red string and squatted beside the bird. She would think holy thoughts about it; she would utter a name of God. She closed her eyes with her fingers resting on the feathers.

This was a problem she had: when she wasn't already tired it was sometimes hard to speed-meditate. Mind kept working, working. A powerful machine. Difficult to rein in. The bird once ate the worms, now worms would eat the bird...every word filled with light. That was how it should be. Desire to Receive. Which name? The name to reduce negativity?

What would help her and Guy, she saw, besides going to the Centre together on a more regular basis, was if Guy understood her more on a spiritual level. If he could just see her interior the way she saw it herself, he would not

worry about the shrinking mini-Bings. He would see she was a little girl, secretly. She was a Shirley Temple. She was very pure, despite her sophistication. She believed in the ten luminous emanations. The ladder of awareness. She cherished in the core of herself the beingness of being.

Immortality for the bird, for all things of beauty. That was what the lager louts could just never capiche. It was right, so right to know your own beauty and see it was God's own beauty too. One day the body would be a giving vessel, not just a receiving. Life could go on forever. They might not be able to understand, the lager louts, what she was, what all of them could be if they gave themselves over to the light instead of, say, the Guinness, but that did not mean there was not room in God for them too. The house of God had many rooms. And through the great windows of these rooms the golden beams of the divine streamed in.

Not as many rooms as Ashcombe, possibly. Joke! Joke to self. The house of God was neverending.

The word for healing...?

But you couldn't heal dead.

She rose, still looking down at the bird. It was peaceful at last. She had killed it, but she was also sorry. In the end, that was all that mattered. Do not have violence in your heart.

"I love you now," she said.

She heard voices and turned. The hunting party stood at the edge of the trees, too far away to distinguish. But she thought she saw Guy there, with them. Nearby stood the dogs, tails wagging. The men's faces were small white blurs. She saw hands raise. First she thought they were raised in greeting, hailing her from afar. She raised her own right arm and waved back. But then she caught flashes of silver in the sun. Flasks raised to their faces. One of them stepped back from the group, staggering and falling. They had apparently not ceased to drink the whole time. Their laughter was carrying.

She felt annoyed, but then a surge of forgiving. She could not blame them for their alcoholism. They were so small! All of them. Pity warmed her, a generous blossoming. It was so hard to be small.