

**Chapter proposal for *Mothers, Mothering, Land and Nature*. Editors: Jessie Carson, Dr Jodie Hawkes and Dr Pete Phillips. Demeter Press. 2025.**

***Raised by birds***

**(Or: *Flying with the bone mothers: the curious story of the girl with a bird in her mouth*)**

Katja Hilevaara and Emily Orley

In 1968, the skeleton of a young girl was excavated in a cave in Poland with the bones of a chaffinch in her mouth. Fifty years later, with the help of DNA sampling and historical research, archaeologist Małgorzata Kot traced the remains back to Finland. Not only were Finnish soldiers and their families deployed in that area in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, but Finnish folklore describes the concept of ‘soul birds’ being placed with the dead. The details surrounding the burial, however, remain elusive.<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 2023, Hilevaara travelled to Poland to meet Kot and learn more. She was able to see the girl’s bones (currently being held in two archival boxes at Warsaw University); and visit the site of her excavation, crawling on hands and knees inside the cliffs of the Ojkow National Park. She was able to see the barracks that most likely housed the girl’s family. In Krakow, she saw the skull of the finch that was found in the girl’s mouth, and another one that had been found a few centimetres away, on the dusty cave floor. The fragile cranial bones of the two adolescent finches replace the girl’s own head, which is now missing, probably swept away by a flood that destroyed much of the archive in the Eighties.

Inspired by this strange archaeological find and the mysteries that continue to surround it, Hilevaara and Orley propose a series of speculative fabulations (as defined by Donna Haraway<sup>2</sup>) as they try to make sense of it. Through a collaborative writing exercise they will experiment with a method of call-and-response to explore ideas to do with motherhood, raising girls, grief and biopolitical symbiosis. They will enact a practice of possibility: what if the bones discovered, human and bird, told a different story? One which revealed a different way of inhabiting the earth? A way which involved a much closer coexistence that we assume now? When to be bird, to be human, to sing, to fly, and to expire were experiences that were shared? A past Symbiocene<sup>3</sup>, that got lost?

Where did the birds come from? Who placed them there? What acts of care transpired? And whose acts were they? Those of a grieving parent, willing their daughter’s soul to be transported back to her homeland, or those of a charm of chaffinches? Who died first? What happens if we blur the role of the human and bird here, as we think about what it means to be a parent and lose a daughter? What happens when we think about caring for and letting go of our children afresh? What if the girl and the birds were not buried, but found somewhere to set their bodies aside as they learnt how to fly? What if parenting was about teaching your children to fly? About learning to fly? Did the girl ever have a human skull?

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<sup>1</sup> Wojenka, Michael, Elżbieta Jaskulska, Danijela Popović, Mateusz Baca, Frog, Rafał Fetner, Krzysztof Wertz, Karolina Rataj, Natalia Gryczewska, Tymoteusz Kosiński, Małgorzata Kot (2021). ‘The girl with finches: a unique post-medieval burial in Tunel Wielki Cave, southern Poland’. *Praehistorische Zeitschrift*. 96(1). pp.286–309.

<sup>2</sup> Haraway, Donna (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Albrecht, G. A. (2015). Exiting the Anthropocene and entering the Symbiocene. Accessed 9 September 2023: <https://glennaalbrecht.com/2015/12/17/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene/>. Other thinkers we plan to engage with in the chapter are Vinciane Despret (*Living as a Bird*, 2021), Alexis Pauline Gumbs (*Undrowned, Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, 2020) and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (*Matters of Care Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, 2017).

## **Biographies**

**Katja Hilevaara** is a collaborative artist, researcher and teacher who works in performance, installation and art-writing. Ideas around maintenance, care and enchantment are often foregrounded in her artwork. Recent works have drawn on (auto)biography and re-imagined histories, exploring ways to tell stories that question existing narratives, and which might deliberately mis-remember or otherwise creatively interpret events to shift their perspective and meaning. Katja is currently the Director of MA Performance Making at Goldsmiths University of London. [www.katjahilevaara.com](http://www.katjahilevaara.com)

**Emily Orley** is an artist, writer, researcher and educator, working with performance, video, installation and hybrid modes of writing. She is interested in exploring ideas around memory, maintenance and solidarity, as well as investigating ways to un-fix notions of time and place. She currently works at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, where she is the Programme Leader for the MA in Collaborative Performance Making and Research Lead for Production Arts. [www.emilyorley.com](http://www.emilyorley.com)