



THE KINDNESS OF BIRDS

Merlinda Bobis

An oriole sings to a dying father. A bleeding-heart dove saves the day. A crow wakes a woman's resolve. Owls help a boy endure isolation. Cockatoos attend the laying of the dead. Always there are birds in these linked stories that pay homage to kindness amidst loss, grief, discord and displacement, from Australia to the Philippines, across cultures and species. When we encounter that snag in the breath, that shadow of a wing, we hope to remember kindness.

Kindness cannot self-isolate. It moves both ways and all ways, like breath.

About the author

Award-winning writer **Merlinda Bobis** has had four novels, six poetry books, and a collection of short stories published, and ten dramatic works performed. Her novel *Locust Girl, A Lovesong* received the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Philippine National Book Award. Her poetry collection *Accidents of Composition* was Highly Commended for the ACT Book of the Year Award. For her, writing is homecoming: a return to roots, a retrieval through memory, and a reckoning with loss hopefully with care and grace. She lives and writes on Ngunnawal land (Canberra). merlindabobis.com.au

MAY 2021

ISBN 9781925950304

Paperback

220 pages | 226 x 154mm

AU \$26.95 | NZ \$33.95

US \$24.95 | CAN \$33.95

UK £14.95

Fiction



Books by Merlinda Bobis

Accidents of Composition (2017)

Locust Girl: A Lovesong (2015)

Fish-Hair Woman (2012)

The Solemn Lantern Maker (2008, 2009)

Banana Heart Summer (2005, 2008)

Pag-uli, Pag-uwi, Homecoming (2004)

White Turtle (1999, 2013)

Summer Was a Fast Train without Terminals (1998)

Cantata of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon / Kantada ng Babing Mandirigma Daragang Magayon (1993, 1997)

Ang Lipad ay Awit sa Apat na Hangin / Flight is Song on Four Wings (1990)

Rituals (1990)

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The 14 linked short stories

1. 'O Beautiful Co-Spirit.' At a Belconnen funeral parlour, Filipina-Australian Pilar and Malaysian-Australian Farah dress Farah's deceased lover Lucia, an Italian-Australian, while trying to make peace after a fight over noisy cockatoos. As they lay the dead, both remember rituals from their respective Catholic and Islamic traditions, and their shared belief in kindness for all who pass.
2. 'When the Crow Turns White.' During the 2020 hailstorm in Canberra, in the Parliament House courtyard, a crow is injured. The elemental develops into a magical story about grace and kindness that overturn politics and spin, and domestic violence. This event changes the life of Corazon, a Filipina-Australian who cleans the chamber of the House of Representatives with her friend Orla, an Irish-Australian.
3. 'The Kindness of Birds.' After the death of her parents, Filipina-Australian Nenita and her Latvian-Australian husband Arvis walk along Lake Burley Griffin comforted by a host of birds real and remembered between Legazpi (Philippines) and Canberra (Australia), especially the orioles who sang to her father as he was dying. This comfort inspires her to believe that 'She'll be apples, she'll be birds.'
4. 'The Air of the Times.' In a Manila hotel, poet Remy and sister Belen, a revolutionary, reconnect. Their touchstone is a bottle of Nina Ricci perfume L'Air Du Temps ("The Air of the Times") with a cap of intertwined doves: a gift from Remy's friend, 86-year old Werner who just died in Sydney. The German Jew lost his family in the Holocaust. Between his and the sisters' story of loss and war in the Philippines and Germany, the air of time flows with the hope for peace.
5. 'Candido's Revolution.' In 1800s Broome, indentured 'Manilamen' pearl divers, Candido and Francisco, win the lottery and donate their winnings towards buying a printing press that assists the Philippine revolution against colonial Spain. They turn revolutionaries and are executed by the Spanish in 1897. With these historical facts, in 2019 Remy researches Candido's story in Broome and conjures a love story set in 1893 between Candido and Mary, a Noongar woman. It's Remy's way of coming to terms with the assassination of her sister Belen in Manila in 1996. Birds from these different periods hover around the layered storytelling.
6. 'My Tender Tender.' At The Roey's bar in Broome, Nenita and Arvis meet 91-year old Aboriginal Uncle Freddy, a Filipino-Japanese-Yawuru who's one of the last remaining hard-hat pearl divers of Broome and Darwin. The meeting reveals kinships in story and grief: Nenita's father has just died at 91.
7. 'My Father's Australia.' It's the wake of Nenita's father in Legazpi. In the coffin, he's dressed in a blue suit that she bought from DJs years ago, so he could fly "looking nice" when he visits her in Australia. The visit never happened. In this story of loss and broken family ties woven across Legazpi, Canberra and Charles de Gaulle airport, Nenita is sustained by remembering kindness, notwithstanding the lack of it.
8. 'Naming the Flowers.' After her mother's funeral, Nenita cleans up the family house in Legazpi. She finds a poem written in her mother's longhand and the photos of the flowers in her mother's garden, and those that friends in Canberra gave her after her father died. Between the memory of naming the flowers with her mother in this house and with her friends in Canberra, she tries to name her grief. In her chest, a bird tries to fly out.
9. 'The Sleep of Apples.' As the bushfires rage in New South Wales and Victoria, friends Nenita and Ella drive around Tasmania after not seeing each other for more than ten years. Amidst ripening apple orchards and Tassie's irrepresible birds, they remember Robert, Ella's ex-husband and Nenita's friend, who hanged himself in early 2000. This unresolved loss threads other losses across the Philippines, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and the US with a restorative idyll in Penang.
10. 'My Love, My Nerūsē.' COVID-19 lockdown. Nenita and Arvis affirm "kindness both ways" in relation to their histories of loss and the ongoing grieving around the world, as weebills visit the cedars outside their apartment. Nerūsē: "does not rust", like love from Latvia to Australia, the Philippines and around the world.
11. 'Singing Back.' Filipino international student Andres, an indigenous Agta from Bikol, is doing a PhD on *Avian-Human Kinship* at the Australian National University. He's a casual cleaner at a Canberra hotel where he meets receptionist Sinéad, an Environmental Science student at University of Canberra. Both just lost their jobs (COVID lay-offs) when Andres learns that grandmother in the Philippines is sick with COVID. As they have their last lunch together in Haig Park, Andres' family history on the slopes of Mayon Volcano is revealed as intertwined with his PhD on birds. The revelations weave with their "almost love story".
12. 'Grandma Owl.' Filipina-Australian Luningning and her six-year old grandson Victor are self-isolating in Wollongong after returning from the Philippines on a flight with a COVID case. They survive the quarantine with the help of Matilda, their Chilean-Australian neighbour, and a collection of owls. But Luningning is trying to survive something deeper: her unresolved grief over the death of Victor's father.
13. 'Angels.' COVID time. Nenita is diagnosed with cancer. This is her cancer journey amidst the kindness of nurses, doctors, carers, and birds — angels all!
14. 'Ode to Joy.' Nenita re-traces her vexed life in Wollongong in the 90s that leads to her breakdown and aborted suicide. Her memories are threaded by the constancy of water, birds, and kindred souls from different places and cultures — all that kept her alive and returned her to joy.