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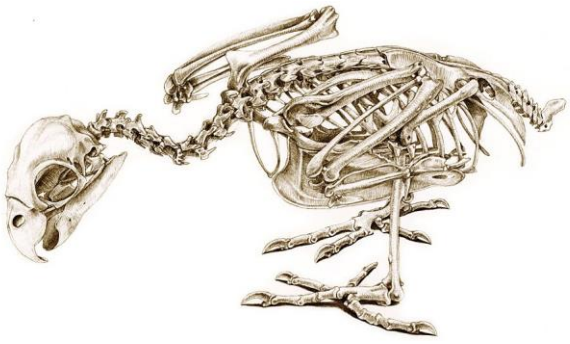
The Unfeathered Bird

Katrina van Grouw's Picked Bones, Plucked Hens, Plumed Skeletons

By Edward F. Mooney

Review of ***The Unfeathered Bird*** by Katrina van Grouw (Princeton University Press, 2013).

I have always pictured birds in flight, singly or in flocks, or tending eggs; regal swans, slowly drifting, or birds swooping down for a fish or a mouse. But elegant drawings of birds *undressed*—bones picked dry, neither dead nor alive? I've never seen the likes of these—inhabitants of a nether land, comically stripped, shamelessly exposed. Katrina van Grouw's expert drawings give us specimens from all over the world. She's a former curator of the ornithological wing of the London Museum of Natural History, the author of a book on the history of birds in art, and an accomplished artist. This is a coffee table book of impressive scope and accomplishment. Most of all it gives an irresistible and disturbing parade of birds, not attired in an infinite variety of ways, but



defrocked in ways one could never imagine. They're birds stripped of feathers and often of flesh, yet still avian beauties. Their boney structures are distressing to observe, but just *try* to avert your eyes! No single frame catches the show. It's not just an anatomy lesson, not just a coroner's exhibit, not just a fashion runway of the half dead and sometimes grotesque. It is certainly not a desecration of majesty. It's a celebration of plumed majesty.

The effect of van Grouw's drawings is to restore life—to give even a pile of bleached bones some measure of enchanted integrity. These birds are new creatures, born-again wonders of vibrant engineering and unmistakable soul, as alluring as any soaring hawk, or as any hectic hummingbird stopped a foot from my nose.

Penciled in sepia, here are four odd shaped skulls, skulls with a protruding bump on top. The first displays the bare architecture of a beak, tenuously hung on the skull. I cannot recall which colored feathers belong back of the beak. I give the caption a furtive look. It's not the Polish Fowl, whose would-be adornment I can almost imagine. It's the Helmeted Curassow—Greek to me. I read that these four heads belong to the family "skulls with crests."

Here on the next page is a rounded basket weave of slender bones, most likely a tumbled-down ribcage. It's labeled "Ostrich." But it needs serious visual unscrambling. If that's a ribcage, where is the rest of this long-legged ostrich? Rechecking the caption, I learn that the legs are removed. In a flash, the eye of imagination provides phantom limbs, joined *right there* to a pelvis.

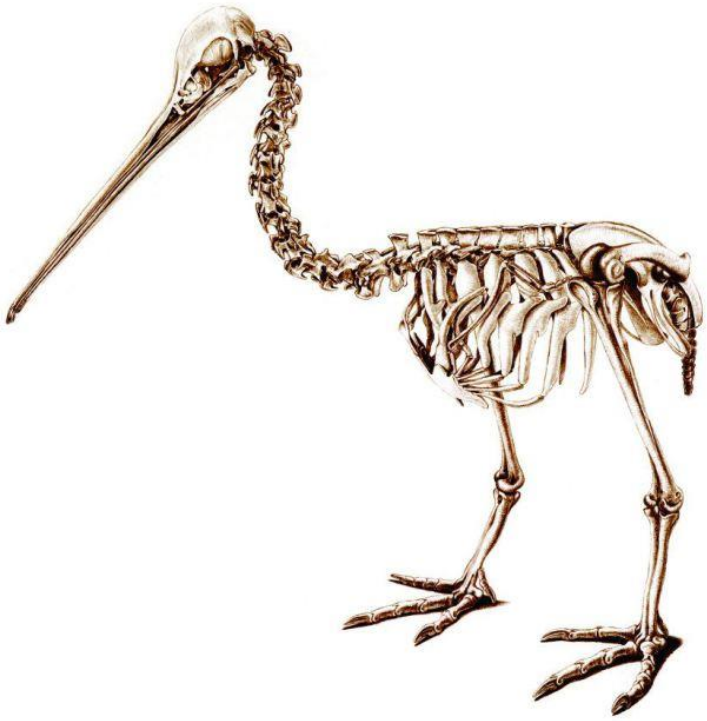
Here is a kiwi, a dodo, a swan. The illustrator steps aside to write charming introductions. Even the overall narrative has a sense of enchantment. The individual drawings show a quirky inquisitiveness and storytelling inventiveness, and the full narrative has a quirky arch as well. At the very end, after the index come two familiar figures: a stripped-down robin, on its back, quite dead, and a waddling mallard, quite alive. Death and resurrection?

For most readers and lookers, Robin and Mallard are as familiar as Bert and Ernie. Images can have a cultural saturation. Robin, feet stretched up, bones thoroughly picked—many of us have seen this as kids in the back yard. But why is it placed *just here* in the story? It cannot be deader than the rest of these pages of assembled bones—but it seems so. Other skeletons are poised for life and action. Lest I read too much angst or morbidity into this

next-to-last drawing, consider the ambling mallard bones, given the last word. Having grown up around Boston I cannot help but think of *Make Way for Ducklings*, a family of such birds, of happiness and regeneration.

T*he Unfeathered Bird* offers pleasing aesthetics, piques our scientific interests, and poses philosophical questions. Think of insides and outsides of bodies, or the outside of body and the inside of spirit or soul. And think of the anxieties that arise when I hold something living that I value, and dare to move from its outside to its inside.

Removing and disposing of the rind of a grapefruit, I happily prepare for the feast within. Pealing the bark from a tree, I feel more ambivalent, and matters get worse if I try to get to the inside of a whale by peeling its rind. Might I distract myself, like the crew of the Pequod, throwing myself into the raucous athleticism of skinning?



What is it to peel the feathered rind from a bird–or from bird after bird, of every shape and size, from Coot to Green Woodpecker to Dodo? I can't help asking this, leafing through van Grouw's book. Nevertheless, by now I'm completely assured that this book on my lap is a visual, tactile, and encyclopedic masterpiece. The chances seem meager that in one person we would find the knowledge of an expert ornithologist, the drafting skill of a great illustrator, the writing skill of an essayist, and imagination to bring these gifts together. The book beckons to more lands and skies than I could ever explore. As I turn from page to page it seems to always sense the greater whole even as it bathes in the detail of *this* skull, *this* foot and wing tip, *this* incredibly long

snaking wind-pipe (within an average-sized singer)—*this* curve of neck vertebrae, one by one, the innards of just *this* curve-throated crane. A universe is no more interesting than its assembled and disassembled particulars.

Questions proliferate. If I see spirit, bones, flesh, or feathers, do I see them serially or simultaneously? Do I see them directly or does imagination quickly fill in what's missing? How do I see absent flesh and feather, or the bird alive when all I really have is an assemblage of bone? How do I remain ignorant of beauty beneath skin, flesh and feathers, the beauty of cleaned bones and the beauty of their mechanics? I have no interest in the innards of my iPhone, beautiful as they may be to the geek. But I'm stopped dead in my tracks at a glimpse of these innards.

The unseen world is as lively and animated as the world at large: a ribcage, a ligament tying hip to foot, the architecture of a fisher's bill, the cross-stitching of a hen's ribcage, tunnels opening down into stomachs and up into breath! Aristotle says knowledge begins in wonder. And wonder can defy gravity; it can just float, neither seeking nor needing culmination in earthy knowledge.

Specialists in avian anatomy who have "been there, done that" might turn a blind eye to these renderings of the hidden. But I look and look away. There are threatening undercurrents. I remember sixth grade when I resisted dissecting the frog. I don't feel that comfortable looking at Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, either: fully clothed students peering at a professor peeling a corpse. Among first-year med students, I'm told, it's not uncommon for several to pass out during their first dissection.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein announces that the body is the best picture we have of the soul. He doesn't investigate whether a corpse has a soul. Are the bodies displayed here alive or dead? If alive, do they picture a soul? A bird's body, its voice box, can sound a soul. Mozart wept at the death of his nightingale. In the eye of a sparrow, Kant saw heaven. It takes a soul to call on a soul.

The Unfeathered Bird can take philosophical wonder in yet a further direction, for it asks: What, after all, is a body? If it's bodies I see on these pages, how do they emerge from unfeathered bones? And if what I'm looking at is feather-deprived, has it been stripped of the best of its body? I think of expressive bodies not ice cold on the coroner's slab but performing—speaking, moving, gesturing, leaping, and dressed for the part. An un-fleshed

human body must be something like the colored skeletal charts in a doctor's office showing various body systems. Van Grouw's bodies don't look at all like doctor's office posters. Her bodies look alive. They are not inexpressive, soulless, mechanical parts. Some skeletons perch on a limb, resting for the moment, or plummet down from the sky for a watery dive. How does she convince us that bones alone, if only they are assembled, oriented, and drawn appropriately, picture life?

I know a romantic can make a religious sensibility lie under each rock and reef, but I can't help thinking Katrina van Grouw gives us a sensibility that is proto-religious, and in a way that disturbs and also exults. She leads us to layered realities that never travel far from spirit. Think of Thoreau's sensibility, here in a lyrical evocation from *Walden*:

> The night-hawk circled overhead in the sunny afternoons . . . like a mote in the eye, or in heaven's eye, falling from time to time with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent, torn at last to very rags and tatters, ... The hawk is aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and surveys, those his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the elemental unfledged pinions [wings] of the sea. Or sometimes I watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts.

Looking at van Grouw's drawings of birds, featherless and seldom in flight, and often verging on disenchanted cold and mechanical materiality, I find them nevertheless morphing into astonishing carriers of intimate thoughts, angels or tiny gods in disguise. Consider their animated evocations of flight, breath and cry, not to mention their being also "torn at last to very rags and tatters." These birds are earthbound, as far from aerial wizardry as imaginable. Yet though they fail to sail over waves or swoop from the heavens, they nevertheless bespeak "the elemental unfledged pinions of the sea." Or so it seems.

Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Syracuse University, Ed Mooney is the author, inter alia, of Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell *and* Postcards Dropped in Flight*, a set of lyrical meditations on birds, water, and the soul.*

Drawings are from Katrina van Grouw, The Unfeathered Bird.