

# Lauren Roche

## Bird Man

She discovered him in the back corner of the plant shop, tall and silent and ghostly white. Head and shoulders, a long, straight nose, flat curls of ears with elongated lobes, a thin-lipped secret smile. At almost two metres, the statue was taller than Libby; she had to get on tiptoes to see the saucer-sized hole bored vertically through the top of his head.

‘Does that go all the way through?’ she asked the shop assistant.

‘Yes. Cast concrete is very heavy; impossible to shift without a hollow core. The shaft’s plasticised; he’ll be fine in all weathers.’

‘Perhaps I could get a couple—stack them with a pole through the middle—make a totem.’

‘You’d need a crane. Why not start with one? He’d be quite a feature.’

Libby imagined him, at the end of the deck, facing out across the paddocks, frowning at the neighbours. He’d be perfect. She’d gone in to buy flowering annuals for a memorial garden and bought him on impulse. She took out her credit card, gave the delivery details and waited for her purchases to arrive.

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He came with a card around his neck. They’d had the cheek to call him an Easter Island Man. Libby had studied anthropology and art history in London; written her thesis on the Rapa Nui people: this was no Moai. He was more heavy-set, his nose aquiline. He was concrete cast rather than carved from basalt or compressed volcanic ash. While he shared the secret smile of the Moai, her man was just a piece of garden statuary, nothing like a god, or treasured ancestor. He’d look lovely, standing steadfast on the grass near the corner of the deck, gazing through blank yet imperious eyes across the fields

to the ocean half a kilometre away.

Libby had the delivery men settle him onto her chosen spot and stood back, coffee steaming in her mug. When they'd gone, she grabbed a spade from the shed, some blood and bone, the annuals and a potted hibiscus she'd bought that morning. She dug all the way around the statue's base, making a narrow garden, careful not to undermine the ground he stood upon. Between him and the deck, she planted the hibiscus—blood red blooms to soften the line of his back—and at his feet, she placed baby's breath, alyssum, pinks, lobelia, sweet violets. Flowers for the baby they'd lost almost a year ago. They'd called her Joy.

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'You can live in my joy garden,' she said to the statue as she dug and fertilised and planted the small flowers, bedding him in. His secret smile looked down on her, kneeling at his base, and Libby got the sense that he liked to be worshipped, this totem. He really did. That smile—so like David's in the early days. David had nostrils to flare, and the new man didn't; David's ears were smaller, and he was not pierced through, top to tail. Her husband was warmer, too, usually.

'You'll look after me, mate. Won't you?' Libby asked her statue. He smiled mysteriously back at her.

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The Rapa Nui started carving their monolithic statues at around 1250 CE. The ancestor Moai stood, some part-buried, for hundreds more years, then they all toppled in the 1800s; perhaps in an act of war or proselytisation, or perhaps another kind of upheaval: a tempest or earthquake.

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It would soon be time to pick up the boys, one from daycare, the other from school. They were so clingy lately, sensing their parents' separate sorrows. The baby who'd died was always there, nudging them, wanting to be a part of their lives. David and Lib had decided not to try again. Their grief was a solid wall between them, it was just too hard. Libby was still on leave. Another fortnight and she'd have to decide whether to return to her job at the library. Her mother

was cautioning her to wait a bit. She didn't need the money; David earned enough, and she could always do some freelance work. Perhaps she could polish her thesis on the Moai, and try to get an article published. Meantime she spent her days pulling weeds and pruning trees with a viciousness that at times astonished her. The garden had been holding its breath, waiting for the next onslaught but today she'd met her concrete man—not a Moai—and decided to create instead.

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The Rapa Nui people crowned their Moai statues with topknots carved from red scoria to depict their chiefly status. The headwear weathered quickly to vermilion dust, so few examples still exist. They gave them eyes of white coral with scoria or obsidian pupils. Many hundreds of Moai stood on their platforms called ahu, most with their backs to the ocean: facing towards the community they protected, not away.

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'Wow,' said David when he came home that night. 'Hope that's not going to fall on the kids. Stay clear, boys.'

'What's his name?' asked the oldest.

'Thomas the Tank Engine,' whined his brother.

'I'll call him Willy,' said Libby.

'Like the old stoner?' David asked.

'No, like free Willy,' said Libby. 'I brought him back into the wide world. Gave him a reason to live.' Her laugh was hollow.

'What's for dinner?'

'I thought we'd get something delivered. I've been too busy to think.'

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Willy settled in his joyful garden, became a part of the landscape. Birds landed on his head, slugs and snails tattooed him in silver tracery. The hibiscus flowered and nestled behind him, and an array of small, bright annuals took their turn blooming around his base. Six months passed. Libby settled a terracotta pot of red geraniums on his head. She'd intended it to look like the scoria topknots on the

Moai of old, but it looked disrespectful—like a flowery bonnet on a prize bull—so she took it away.

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In the dark, after David and the boys went to bed she'd sit alone on the deck, near the man, sometimes cradling the pink porcelain urn of ashes that usually sat on the drawers in her bedroom. Her sister had painted the jar, glazed it, 'JOY' it said in gold script. It was cool in her hands, in the moonlight, in the shadow of the statue who seemed to be warming, even in the autumnal chill.

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One weekend, David and a mate, bored, tipsy and maybe a little high, painted the statue's lips red and drew blue irises on the cups of his eyes.

'How could you?' Libby raged. 'Have you no respect?' She spent the rest of the day furiously scrubbing the paint away. Still, deep in the smile was a line of crimson paint that would not be erased. The statue leered at her.

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The next summer was dreadfully dry. Great cracks appeared in the lawn and the water tanks were almost empty. Much of the garden withered and died; all the care in the world wouldn't have rescued it. Even the joy garden—which they saved the boys' bath water for—was limp, miserable. The earth at Willy's base had slumped and he began to lean a little, just slightly, away from the house. By the time David noticed, the lean was precarious.

'Jesus, Lib, that thing'll topple over one day, might crush one of the kids. I've never liked it. Give me a hand. I'll make it a stable platform.' Together they shuffled the statue forward across the lawn until they found a flat spot where it was safe to stand him. David went to the shed to fetch the spade and a stack of old pavers.

'Him, not it,' muttered Libby. She ran her hands over Willy's face. The surface was powdery as though he'd been pumiced. He felt slightly rough under her hands. She stroked the nose; long, strong, and the lips, so slyly smirking at her. She wrapped her arms around him, steadied by him. 'My rock,' she whispered into the whorl of his

concrete ear. ‘You’re my rock.’

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David smoothed the ground, laid pavers in the centre of the dying garden, used a spirit level to make sure he’d got it right. Together they shuffled Willy back towards the deck.

‘Can you hear that?’ David asked. ‘That rattling?’

There was a clatter coming from the bottom of her Moai. ‘Can you hold it? I think there’s something caught underneath.’

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David tipped the statue into Libby’s embrace, and out of the hole at the bottom fell two cat-sized skeletons. Possums by the look of their jaws and teeth. David shone his phone light up the shaft, there was nothing more there.

‘Poor wee things,’ said Libby. ‘I hate the thought that they climbed in for safety and couldn’t get out. We’ll have to block the hole somehow.’

She buried the possum bones beneath a tree she knew the animals loved; a loquat which dripped with golden fruits, while David crumpled chicken mesh into the top of the statue to prevent any more unnecessary deaths.

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Libby slept little, but when she did, she dreamed of her Rapa Nui man. He was alive, stocky, his muscular torso tattooed as his people were before visiting missionaries banned self-decoration. He lived on a treeless landscape, surrounded by ancestral Moai, but they looked sad, abandoned. He was eating a seabird he’d caught but was unable to cook as fuel was in short supply.

‘I’m starving,’ he told her in the dream. ‘My people and culture are dying. I cannot live on eggs and fish alone. Feed me.’

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Rapa Nui, originally named Te Pito o te Henua (the navel of the world), was once heavily forested. The earth was fertile and there were ample supplies of seabirds, fish, eggs and rats—a delicacy. The people grew sugar cane and bananas and roofed their houses with palm leaves. Cultural practices that prohibited fishing at certain

times and places preserved the sea life. In the 1700's Europeans 'discovered' this veritable Garden of Eden. One explorer claimed that three days' work on the land could feed the many inhabitants for a year.

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Willy stood tall on his ahu at the edge of the deck, gazing with shuttered eyes past the neighbours and out to sea. One day, spurred perhaps by her dream of his hunger, Libby pushed the mesh aside and placed the body of a small finch down into the centre of the Moai. The bird had flown into a window, breaking its neck, and the statue seemed the right place for it. The blind-eyed man, the lifeless bird, gazing together across the grass to the freedom of the ocean and sky. That was the first of dozens of bodies she fed him. When birds flew into the windows or were mauled by the cat, she tenderly placed their remains into the statue, gifting them an eternal vista across the garden, past the bush and out to the islands that sailed far in the distance. The statue housed the remains of birds, mice, baby rabbits, some rats, and a ferret. Occasionally she'd place ceremonial leaves on top of them; she'd wrap a tiny wax-eye in pūriri or shade a dead mouse with puka. The statue—now ossuary—was packed with bodies, slowly dissolving to bones.

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Libby's counsellor said she was still not ready for work, and David, working longer hours than ever, agreed.

'You're not well,' her husband told her, his face flinty.

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The people of Rapa Nui stopped making their Moai around 1500. When they ceased carving their statues, the people turned their creative energies into Tangata Manu—the depiction and worship of the Birdman. Half bird, half human, they carved him into rock faces and the backs of Moai: petroglyphs for those who followed. The islanders held annual competitions to find the human personification of their new god. Young men gathered on a high ridge then climbed down precarious rock faces, leapt into the sea and swam to nearby Moto Nui Island to gather the first seabird egg of the season. The

winner's sponsor was crowned Birdman and feted like a god.

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It soon became clear to Libby that her statue craved offerings of feathered beasts, not scuttling, creeping ones. Now she binned the mice, rats, and rabbits that the cat brought in, and fed the Moai only birds. Willy absorbed the life that had existed in each small carcass and slowly his white shell became suffused with warmth, slowly the lids that shuttered his eye sockets began to crack and flake. Slowly the soul things laid to rest in the heart of the stone began to flutter little wings, scurry tiny taloned feet, and open and close hungry beaks.

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Both boys were now at school, and every day Libby toiled on the property. Sometimes she took a break, sitting by her joy garden, nestling the porcelain vessel of ashes amongst the flowers. The garden was more beautiful than ever. Last summer's drought had passed, and now long days of light rain softened the earth and reanimated the trees.

Slugs and snails came back, leaving their mercurial drawings.

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Willy had weathered, a scurf of green lichen grew on his cheek, a few flakes of concrete fell from the back of his neck and shoulders dandruffing the glorious hibiscus that was almost as tall as him. The texture of his face felt as David's chin used to, when he snuggled behind her each morning, grazing the nape of her neck, his stubble like sandpaper.

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Within a century of the first European visitation Rapa Nui was barren, the population decimated, the remaining people hungry. Was this the result of a civilisation that mismanaged their resources? An ecocide? When the first Jesuits arrived in 1864, they found a civilisation in its death throes. Destroyed by the incursions of European slavers, the diseases that landed with them and the destruction of their traditional practices, the people were ripe for conversion.

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Libby binned the medicine the psychiatrists gave her. They thought she was mad, but no, she was full of tears and rage and disappointment, and she channelled those energies into the garden, into reading and dreaming. The kids and David were fed, the cleaner came to do the housework, nothing was falling apart.

‘You can’t go on like this, dear,’ said her mother. Her voice was tinny and echoed down the line. ‘Why don’t I pop over for a visit? Give you a break.’

‘No, Mum,’ she replied, knowing her mother would notice too much and would drive David mad. ‘I’ve got it all under control.’ And she did, in the daytime at least. At night she wandered barefoot, silent through the house, leaving her stony-faced husband in bed. She sat on the wooden deck, sideways to her Moai, her knowing statue, her love. How he glowed in the moonlight, how his smile curled, his look haughty, assertive yet somehow warm.

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*‘I am blind,’* he said to her in dreams. *‘Make me some eyes.’* The dream man gazed at her, and she saw he had deep brown eyes, the darkness drowning his pupils. The whites were clear, the lenses bright, moist. She bought some modelling clay, there being a dearth of coral and obsidian in the back blocks. The eyes she created fit into the blank recesses in his face, and he looked more alive. Despite the number of birds she’d fed to him, there was no smell. It seemed any odour was absorbed, muffled by his concrete innards. Every day she tended him, impatient for the boys and David to leave so she could have her time alone with her created man, the love of her life, the strong and silent statue.

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Over time, as Willy absorbed the warm bodies of birds, Libby noticed he was softer to touch, and there were knobs forming on his back where his shoulder blades should be. They were hidden by the bright hibiscus, but Libby could feel them when she embraced him, little nubs like the heels of her boys when they’d been small enough to carry in a front pack; those insistent little heels, that she’d felt first from inside her, kicking and drumming on her taut belly. The Moai



was warm, even though it was now midwinter. Warming and almost darkening a little, as though he was tanning or flushing or coming alive.

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‘Don’t be mad,’ she told herself, but on sleepless nights she would pad silently out to the deck and sit there, her hand on the statue, and feel him thrum beneath her palm. One bright-lit night she took down the porcelain container of Joy’s ashes and sat cradling it on the deck. She sang a little, softly so as not to wake David or the boys, a lullaby she hadn’t sung for years. Her statue smiled down at her: her warm, loving statue. She put the porcelain jar carefully on the earth and ran her hands along his cheeks. They felt powdery and slightly gritty, a snail had slid alongside his straight nose, and its trail shone, for all the world, like a tear track in the moonlight. Libby shivered. She stroked him again and felt the need that leached from him.

‘He’s still hungry,’ she thought. ‘He hungers.’ There’d been no bird strike that week, the cat was well fed, and she knew, instinctively that Willy wanted feather and bone, blood and beak. And ash. He hungered for ash.

‘No,’ said Libby, looking at her jar of ashes. ‘I don’t love you that much.’ She held the porcelain container to her chest and turned away from the statue, who was never satisfied.

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The next day she dug blood and bone into the earth at his base and felt him vibrate under her hand as he delighted in it. *‘Blood and bone and ash and feather,’* she felt him think. *‘Blood and bone and ash and beak. Blood and bone and ash and wing.’*

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With few Rapa Nui elders surviving, the oral histories were no longer told. Forced by the Jesuits into a distant village, cut off from their ancestral lands, teachings and iconography, the genocide of the Rapa Nui was underway. It was complete when they were given new stories. ‘No,’ the missionaries told them. ‘Your people were too primitive to have raised those statues. You must have found them there when you landed, accidentally, on the islands.’ The people’s

new stories were told to them and repeated and soon the complex civilisation and learnings of the Rapa Nui people, their system of writing, the meanings of their symbols were lost—whitewashed out of history.

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The Moai felt wings begin to press outwards from his shoulders, unfolding feathers tickling his concrete carapace. At night when Libby was finally sleeping, he'd push them a little more, test their strength. In the daytime, a few flakes of concrete at the base of the statue were all that showed he'd been gathering energy, building strength, preparing to flee. He was not quite ready to let Libby see how much life was in him, but he knew she felt his yearning for freedom. At night his cloudy eyes could see, open towards the horizon where the silver moon poured her healing energy into those who took the time to watch her truly. And watch, he did. Mother Moon: so bright on his ancestral islands, casting long shadows across the empty land before her.

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On the last night Libby brought a large glass of wine out to the deck. She carried the small porcelain jar.

The moon white-washed the landscape like a magnesium flare. Libby heard rustlings from the garden, as though a thousand feathered creatures were stirring: a susurrantion and creaking of great wings. The joy garden looked dug over. Her Moai had grown legs and was squatting like a great eagle upon the disturbed ground. Talons raked the earth, gripping the broken flowers, and his powerful thighs were ready to launch. His nose had turned under and was a cruel-looking beak and his amber eyes gleamed. He looked at her with love. His folded wings were enormous.

'You know what I need, Libby,' he croaked. She uncapped the urn and sprinkled a small measure of ash into the hole at the top of his head.

'More.'

Libby upended the porcelain jar into the hole in the Moai. With a crack like that of a vast sail, he opened his wings. He preened the

feathers, rubbing his beak along each one until it shone.

‘Climb aboard,’ he said. ‘Let’s be free of all this.’

Libby’s nose was filled with the scent of crushed violets. She finished her wine, gently placed the emptied jar on the deck and climbed onto the Birdman’s back.

‘Hold tight around my neck,’ he said, then sprang from the grass and up into the jewel-bright sky.