A HELD BREATH
Marama Hambly

When I was eight, my grandmother taught me how to hold a dead bird.

“Gently,” she said, folding my fingers around the still body of a waxeye. “They’re lighter than you think. You could crush one just by wanting to hold it too much.”

I remember the way its head lolled sideways in my palm, like it was listening. How soft it was. Like breath.

I don’t remember what happened after.

The museum is quieter on weekdays, especially just after opening. I pay with coins from my blazer pocket. The ticket lady asks if I’m visiting on a school trip. I lie, and say yes, then duck past before she can ask which school.

In the bird room, the air smells like varnish and dust. It’s always cold here. Cold like the walk from the car to her house last winter, with the memories of that one argument we don’t talk about. The one mum calls *the thing with your grandmother*, like it was some biblical event that swallowed us whole.

She’s already there, standing beside the glass case of flightless birds. The tīeke, the hihi, the heavy-footed kākāpō with its mothball eyes. She’s wearing the same navy cardigan she always wore in the garden. Back then, she’d push up her sleeves to prune the roses, her wrists looking too narrow to hold up a body. Now they just look older.

Her hair is plaited down her back in a silver rope. She’s holding a clipboard and talking to a young couple, smiling politely, explaining why the huia is extinct.

I mouth the words. I know this one. She used to say it every time we passed the taxidermy case in Te Papa.

“The last confirmed sighting was in 1907. But the bush still sings as if it remembers them.”

I sit on the bench near the pūkeko display. The birds are faded, colours gone to dust and glare, but I remember them better than most people. Funny, what your brain keeps when everything else slips away.

She used to point at each one and say their names in Māori and English, testing me.

“Kererū.”

“Shining cuckoo.”

“Godwit.”

I’d repeat them with the seriousness of a spelling bee contestant. I wanted her to say I was clever. I wanted her to say I belonged here.

She said I had “bird hands” once. I thought she meant fragile. But I think now she meant built for flight.

She doesn’t look at me. Of course she doesn’t. Why would she?

I look at the birds. They’re easier.

There's a tūī near the front of the glass, frozen mid-swoop, wings back and beak slightly open. They've posed it like it's singing, but you can tell from the legs that it died still.

Tūī always made her stop and listen. She said their voices sounded "split," like someone singing a harmony with themselves. I liked that idea. A body that could carry more than one voice at once.

I wonder if she ever thought of me like that. Like a thing made of two notes, hard to separate.

A girl walks into the room with her dad. She's maybe ten. Still young enough to hold his hand.

He shows her the moa bones, points to the kiwi, and whispers something I can't hear.

The girl turns to my grandmother. "Do you know the names of all the birds?"

She smiles. "Most. Not all."

The girl frowns, betrayed. "But you work here."

"I do," she says. "But names change. The world changes. And birds don't always wait for you to catch up."

The girl nods. "That's okay. I make up my own names sometimes."

My grandmother's smile deepens. "That's the best kind."

I used to have a name she gave me. One only she used. I can't say it out loud anymore without flinching.

After the thing, I tried to keep her voice in my head the way you might press flowers, carefully, flattened between pages.

It didn't work. I open the book now, and all the petals are gone.

She walks to the back of the room. It's the same walk she used when she brought tea into the lounge, slow, but not uncertain.

Her knees must ache now. I wonder if she still grinds paracetamol into her cereal, like she used to.

She stops at the new exhibit: a glass dome full of small birds. Finches, sparrows, a single piwakawaka perched mid-flick.

She frowns. One of the labels is off-centre. She peels it back, realigns it, and smooths it down.

I watch her hands. They're older, but I'd know them anywhere. One thumb crooked at the top joint. A pink crescent scar on her ring finger.

Her hands are weather maps: veined, permanent, deeply remembered.

They were the first hands to hold me.

I used to think that meant something unbreakable.

She steps back from the glass. Turns toward me.

Her eyes scan the room. Then stop.

Just for a moment, her lips part slightly. A breath, almost a name.

Then her gaze slides on.

She didn't see me. Or she did. And let me go.

I don't know which is worse.

At 11:52, she folds up her clipboard and writes something at the desk. I recognise her handwriting from here, all right angles and upward slants.

She hangs her lanyard on the hook. Wraps her cardigan tighter. And walks out.

She doesn't look back.

I wait five minutes, then stand. My legs tingle. My hands are cold with pins-and-needles.

On the way out, I pause at the tūī case.

My reflection hovers beside the bird, glass between us. It's hard to see myself clearly. My tie is crooked. My socks don't match.

My eyes are hers, a little. So is my stubborn mouth.

The tūī looks still, but if you know how to see it, the shape of flight is there, caught in muscle, frozen in feather.

Some things don't need more to prove they were going somewhere.

Outside, the wind slices along the museum steps. The clouds are stretched thin across the sky like pulled cotton.

I tuck my hands into my blazer pockets and start walking. It's too early to go home. I don't know where else to go.

I pass a tree I don't know the name of. The leaves are shaking like something nervous.

A tūī flits through the branches. I hear it before I see it, that same warped double-throated song.

It lands. Looks at me sideways.

Sings once, a fractured note, like memory.

Then it's gone.

And I'm still standing there, hands in my pockets, full of things I never said.