

Feathers and Talons: Clothing Peet in Wings of Grace

Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (2 Corinthians 5:2-5, NIV)

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My whole heart groans in eager anticipation for Artham to be revealed.

When I picked up Andrew's first book I did not expect it to signal the beginning of a journey not just for the characters, but for myself. Themes of brokenness and redemption beat in my own heart, so loudly sometimes that I can barely hear myself think, and I will always respond to such stories. But Peet—oh, Peet says so much to me. Glorious, broken, beautiful Peet.

Before the final Wingfeather book is released, I wanted to put down in writing some of the groanings I am still finding words to express.

What were we? What have we become? What are we becoming? What will it cost?

As Peet speaks to me, everything I encounter seems to speak Peetness to me as well. I find him everywhere: In a book of essays by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* film, which parallels Agamben's imagery. In Hutchmoot addresses on dehumanization and redemption. In George MacDonald's *The Princess and Curdie*. In C.S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. There are themes that arise in all of these, and all point back to the questions that Peet raises. Above all, I am haunted by the question of what full redemption looks like—to a pigeon person, and to people like us.

I have not yet begun to understand all that Peet says to me, but these questions are scorching my insides and I must ask them aloud. The questions are fraught with fear and hope because Peet speaks about *us*—his plight is our own, whether our sin manifests as feathers and talons or in more subtle ways.

The question of what we *were* is a heartbreaking one in light of what we now know: That we, and creation with us, are fallen and in deep need of redemption. But a theme of internal disunity, manifesting in madness and a dual animal-human nature, runs throughout Peet's story and the series as a whole. And if we are listening, we will realize that this same fragmentation runs throughout our own stories as well. Unless we face the deep divide between what we were and what we've become, we cannot return to wholeness.

So, what were we?

We're told throughout Scripture, beginning in Genesis, that we were created in God's image. Genesis also tells us that we were created good and without sin. We're told that death is the result of sin, that we were not meant to die but to live; that death is our enemy, not just a natural part of life. We are told that Adam and his wife were naked, but without shame. Innocence and goodness and likeness and immortality: These things defined us, before sin did its terrible work in our hearts and bodies.

Agamben's essay "Nudity" presents a stunning picture of innocent humanity: Naked, yet clothed in light. Agamben alternately calls this "clothing of grace" or "garments of glory" (Agamben, p. 57). Agamben, drawing heavily from theologian Erik Peterson, contrasts nature and grace, clothing and nudity. This clothing—light, glory, and grace, as well as justice, innocence, and immortality—is required to make us complete as humans (pp. 63-64). Without it, what have we become? Naked, and keenly aware of our nakedness. Alone, separated from our fellows and from God, and helpless to reform our identities. Stripped of the divine glory we were created to bear, we are less than human—but more than animal, else our nakedness would be no shame.

Listening to Travis Prinzi's "Tales of the Fall" (Hutchmoot 2012), I met again this idea of dehumanization. Classic monsters, he says, are all made of humans but are less than human. He goes on to say that we are both perpetrators and victims of our own dehumanization: We choose our sin, even as we are deceived and made captive.

Nakedness, isolation, fragmentation, dehumanization: Peet embodies all these catastrophes. His previously glorious physicality has been radically altered, and in his shame he seeks to cover himself. He has been alone for nine years, and even now among other humans, he is an outcast. The folks of Glipwood Township think him funny and meaningless, and the two who once knew him do not know him as he has become. The result is isolation, which Travis tells us is intimately tied to dehumanization. In his shame and isolation, Peet no longer thinks of himself as Artham—and when Nia calls him by his true name, it throws him into a white-hot panic. That name reminds him what he *was*, what he was *supposed to be*—brother, protector, warrior—and the knowledge that he has failed in each of those is more than his fractured psyche can stand. "*i left him!* His mind had screamed these words so many times over the years that they were burned into his core. ... Peet's deepest heart was rotten and dying from those three brutal words" (*North!*, p. 269).

Yet there is still some Artham in Peet. He longs for redemption, even as he despairs of ever receiving it. He still recognizes his family. Time and again, without thought to his own life, he throws himself into harm's way for his nephews and niece.

Heartbreakingly, Peet's sin manifests most noticeably in the very areas of his gifting and calling: The poet's words are disordered. The warrior is unable to hold a sword.

Yet even here we see hope: Peet may not be able to hold a sword, but he is not left defenseless or unable to defend. The very talons that cause shame to rise up in him serve as weapons. It is curious that our Fall and Peet's do not result in utter destruction of what we were. We are marred but remain. Artham has lost his gift, but he has retained his calling. His calling feels like a curse at times—it would be easier to die than to continually show himself to his family, to risk his life for children who have never been told of him, to spend himself in their defense even as his attempts earn him harsh words and a bloodied lip from the children's bitter grandfather. All his efforts to protect the jewels can never undo his failure. Yet this much of himself remains: The mantle of Throne Warden. His failure does not disqualify him from that title, and he is not left without the ability to protect those he was made to protect.

Peet is caught between need and rejection, ability and inability, shame and longing. His nobility in the face of all this is one of the things I love best about him. The more broken a person is, the better I love them.

I think God feels the same way about us. He has not left us alone in our shame, but seeks us out. He is a redeemer, a hope-maker, a glory-bestower. "Gnag bends things for breaking, and the Maker makes a flourish! Evil digs a pit, and the Maker makes a well! That is his way" (*Monster*, p. 58). Gifting, calling, and identity all may seem wrapped up together, but the Maker has made divisions between them, divisions furrowed by grace.

If redemption is the Maker's way, and our Maker's as well, we can have hope that all is not lost, that He intends to redeem us. And indeed, He says as

much throughout His Scriptures. He promises us “a crown of beauty for ashes, oil of gladness for mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isaiah 61:3).

A garment of praise! Though our naked corporeality has been revealed through our own fault, God clothes us. “For He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10). Grace, which to Agamben acts as clothing, was given to us in Christ before we to whom He was given yet existed (Augustine, cited in Agamben, p. 63). Indeed, throughout Scripture clothing is used to picture both shame and grace. The prophets speak of unrepentant idolaters having their skirts lifted and their nakedness exposed. In Revelation, saints are given white robes of righteousness to wear. We are to be clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14). The dead will be “raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53). The passages that speak of putting off one garment or putting on another, being denuded or clothed, are too numerous to list here, but the common factor is sin and restoration. We have become less than human and our nakedness has been exposed, but through Christ we are rehumanized, clothed in righteousness, in Christ Himself, in immortality.

Although we have this hope, we yet live in the in-between. And this thought—what are we becoming?—is tantalizing in its very mystery. Of the many things that speak Peetness to me, one in particular set my imagination on fire a few months ago. In Jennifer Trafton’s Hutchmoot talk “Tales of New Creation,” she contrasted Edenic innocence with redeemed, New Creation innocence. Instantly, thoughts about the ramifications of our sins, the original use of the making stones, and what we might become in glory scrolled past my mind like Artham’s poems. Jennifer said, “All that is good here on earth will be what it was always meant to be; all that has been twisted and bent will be restored and remade.” We all long for innocence, for a “soul washed clean,” and Peet longs for that, too—although his despair tells him that the closest he can come to innocence is annihilation. And indeed, we cannot regain Edenic innocence. Restoration is both possible and promised—but it will not be a return to childhood.

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of being born again, Nicodemus, trying to wrap his brain around such a concept, asked what sense it made—Can a man enter into his mother’s womb a second time to be born? Jesus’ response was that one who has been born of the flesh must also be born of the Spirit, that being born again does not mean starting over as if nothing has happened (John 3:1-8). Paul, too, says that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, and if that is so, then it is clear that we will be remade (1 Corinthians 15:50-58). It seems that Jennifer stands on good authority to draw such a distinction.

What this tells me is that God is glorified in our redemption, not only in general, but in specifics. We who have been broken, who are being mended, who will one day be remade, bear the marks of our sin in very specific ways. My sin is not your sin, and even if we struggle with similar impulses, the context of our failures mark us differently. When we are restored to right relationship with Him, we become witnesses of His grace in our lives, and eyewitnesses must tell exactly what they have seen and experienced. It does no good to tell another’s story; we cannot even properly know another’s story (cf. *The Horse and His Boy*). So while the Fall marks each of us in the very place of our strength, our gifting and calling and identity, redemption does not stop at restoring that strength or undoing the wound. Instead, it restores glory to the very place of our wounding. Here in the in-between, we can face our guilt without shame, giving glory to the One who restores, calling others to reconciliation as well, and speaking into the lives of other guilty victims of the Fall, who bear their sin in ways just as specific as ours and thus need specific hope. General hope is no hope. A lack of specificity when talking about redemption invariably leaves the hearer feeling, *this isn’t for me. It’s fine for others, but i will be left out*. But as ministers of reconciliation, as ambassadors of a God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, who desires that none should perish but that all should be saved, who recklessly gave up His glory to be made weak like us—to be made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God—we must glorify Him in the specifics of our salvation, so that others may hope and not despair.

What does this mean for Peet? For us? What will we become in the New Creation?

As Artham’s mind and soul are fractured because of his guilt, an expiation of that guilt will restore him to sanity. We have already seen the first-fruits of that: “Artham felt lighter and stronger, and for the first time in nine years, his mind was clear and sure. The words to a hundred of his own poems scrolled across his memory; he saw faces of old friends, battles he had fought, and even the most terrible moments of his life—and yet he remained himself” (*North!*, p. 293). He is not fully restored; as Janner notes later, Peet the Sock Man is still inside him (*Monster*, p. 73). The guilt of failing his brother yet remains, and he cannot say his brother’s name without descending back into darkness. “i fear i shall never be healed,” he says. There is still work to be done—but the work that has already been done tells us what more is coming. Full sanity. Disordered words reordering themselves into poetry.

What of Artham’s fractured body? Part man, part hawk, his partial restoration not only left the hawk with him but brought it more into being. Artham is now, in a way, *more* bird than before, even as he is more man. He is now able to use his talons like hands; his eyesight is now as keen as any bird of prey’s; and, in a stunning picture of grace, he has been clothed with wings. Is there yet work to be done here? And if there is, does the work that has already been done tell us what more is coming?

As Travis and George MacDonald remind us, humans are not meant to be beasts. We are image-bearers; animals are not. Fusing a human and an animal always results in something inhuman, not more than human. In MacDonald’s *The Princess and Curdie*, Curdie is given a gift of sensing when someone is becoming a beast. He can feel it in their hands, even when their appearance has not changed. The old princess Irene tells him, “A beast does not know that he is a beast, and the nearer a man gets to being a beast the less he knows it. . . . He cannot endure [the truth], not because he is growing a beast, but because he is ceasing to be a man” (p. 64). Curdie says, “It’s so awful to think of going down, down, down like that!” Her response is a terrible question: “Even when it’s with his own will?” (p. 66)

It is true that we have chosen our curse. We are victims of the Fall, but guilty as well. And while we are not left without hope, the nature of that hope is still a little obscure. Much has been said about our resurrection bodies; theologians and philosophers have discussed at length whether we will still need to eat and whether our hair and fingernails will grow, whether travel will be quicker or even instantaneous. Agamben, in his essay “The Glorified Body,” asks fascinatingly obscure questions about how a redeemed cannibal and his redeemed victim will be restored—in which body will the cells of one, consumed by the other, be resurrected? Likewise, as sinful humans are not, in our world, made into literal beasts, the fate of those humans in books who *do* bear their guilt in animal flesh is opaque.

What Andrew has chosen to do with Artham’s wings is yet to be seen. I know that Peet must die; i suspect that Artham must, too. In my mind i see him clear-minded, clean-souled, and gloriously winged as he meets his Maker, by whose “good pleasure” he received those wings as a garment of praise.

And for us? In the New Creation, will we revert to what we would have been had we not fallen, all traces of our sin wiped clean? Or will our redemption mark us as particularly as did our sin? Will we remember what we have done, but be released from shame to revel in the joy of our redemption? Will the places of our deep wounding become strength and glory, from which we can proclaim: “Look at what the Lord has done for me!” Of the many-splendored glories of our great God and His many fathomless majesties, His ability to turn pain and horror into beauty is perhaps the most glorious, the most majestic. As nothing is wasted here in this life, i suspect that in eternity, He will jealously, gladly take everything we give Him—faith and ugliness alike—and turn it to beauty. Nothing wasted.

But these speculations are not answers. They are only fuel on the fire of the question itself: What will we become when we sing for love and all is made new?

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:2)

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