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# The Trash Birder's Guide

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THE TRASH BIRDER'S GUDIE

By

Ashely Adams

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

May 2016

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

THE TRASH BIRDER'S GUIDE

This thesis by Ashely Adams is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE TRASH BIRDER'S GUIDE

By

Ashely Adams

This collection of essays details the author's experience with birds and the bird watching sub-culture. The author grapples with obsession, exploration, and human-animal relationships. Essays include the search for peregrine falcons and 'u'aus, navigating "The Biggest Week in American Birding," and tending to owls and geese at a bird sanctuary. In addition, the essays seek to use the language and images of birding to create an interconnected narrative that not only illuminates the birding sub-culture, but also the world of a transient young birder.

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May 2016

## DEDICATION

To my family. To my friends. To the birds.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people I have to thank that a page hardly seems enough. First, I have to thank my family for the endless support, especially my parents. Thank you Mom and Dad for reading *The Foot Book* to me every night, for letting me play with snakes and toads, listening to my two rants about invasive species management, and all the countless things you've done to help me be the person I am today.

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This thesis follows the format described by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English

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## INTRODUCTION

My life has always been an obsessive life.

When I was barely older than a toddler, I snuck out of my bedroom and watched *Jurassic Park* behind the couch, unknown to my parents who were watching the movie (I later found out they very much knew I was there). My parents didn't want me to see it for fear that it would scare me. Instead, it awakened a fascination in dinosaurs that defined almost all of my childhood moments. I didn't know how to talk about anything but dinosaurs. There are still many who know me as the "weird dinosaur girl" in my hometown. I guess this isn't the worst legacy to leave behind.

The same thing happened for meteorology, astronomy, metal music as I got older. There was always something new to scratch out. I read books about string theory as a pre-teen. I learned all the names for different clouds. I refreshed eBay, looking for obscure Columbian metal bands.

I suppose it shouldn't be a surprise that I got into birding. Birds, after all, are the last living dinosaurs. I'd always liked them, but it wasn't until I fell into a group of birders during undergrad that I came to fully appreciate their diversity and behavior. On my first birding trip, I was overwhelmed by how many living creatures I could see in an evening. I still remember the thrill of the first bird I identified as a birder, an Eastern bluebird. It was perched on a stake, blue as the sky. The only reason I knew what I was looking at was because one of my professors did a species of the week presentation and a few weeks prior

that covered the species in question. Now, it's overwhelming to think of all the birds I've seen in all the places I have been in the handful of years I've been bird watching. I've seen over 300 species in places like Florida, Hawaii, and Ohio.

In many ways, these essays are a product of work that began when I started my graduate program. One of the first classes I took upon enrollment was Matt Bell's fiction workshop. The 30000 word end goal didn't intimidate me. It was my peers. I had spent four years working on a Bachelor's in fisheries and wildlife. I didn't know how to speak in anything but science terminology. I imagined them looking down at my work with disdain. When it came time for me to bring a sample of my novel-in-progress, I had stripped as much of "me" as possible from it. Still, my science sensibilities wormed their way in. Instead of shunning it, the readers asked for more. It didn't even matter that they didn't always understand what I was talking about. It made my world feel more complete.

At the encouragement of a later fiction professor, Jason Markle, I signed up for a set of creative nonfiction classes. I was initially skeptical. Most of my experiences with nonfiction had been limited to old man memoirs and textbooks. That's not even to say that those things are inherently bad, but they weren't the things I wanted to write.

What I found was a place where I could write about all the things that mattered to me. I could write about planets, Lake Superior, anything. I could explore my obsessions.

I first dipped my toes into writing about birding in Matt Frank's nonfiction workshop on an essay sharing the same title as this collection of essays. However, it was structured around birding lingo. As fun as birding language is, it didn't seem to do quite enough. I got comments about expanding this essay into something bigger. Perhaps it was

not one essay, but a series of essays. When it came time for thesis proposals, I thought about my essay and decided to repurpose it and expand.

During this project, I drew inspiration from many other writers. Structurally, I was inspired by *The Atlas of Remote Islands* by Judith Schalansky. In Schalansky's work, each page features a short essay and photo of different islands, which I used as a basis for how I organized the essays (themed around a different bird). I've also pulled a lot of structural inspiration from field guides. David Sibley's field guides in particular have been an invaluable reference source for information and language. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* has been a formative text for me not only as a writer, but as a naturalist.

While I was in the later stages of this project, I read a book that was an incredible salve to my anxiety, Margaret Lazarus Dean's *Leaving Orbit: Notes from the Last Days of American Spaceflight*. While Dean is chronicling a different subject matter than mine, the space shuttle mission and its final flights, it resonated with my experiences as a birder. Early morning drives across state lines, dealing with people who couldn't understand why your obsession was important, the bittersweetness of seeing the thing so hard worked for. Her work served as a sort of permission slip for me to just live in the obsession, that writing about birds and enjoying the language and experience was enough.

I have the luck of writing about a subject that I was constantly "researching." I try to bird every day. I keep binoculars and a camera with me most daytime hours. I don't even think that people could mistake me for some sort of window peeper. So synonymous are birds with my character that when colleagues tell me about the hawks and blue jays that find their way into their writing, they tell me they think of me, which is incredibly flattering. It should have been easy to write about something so close to my heart. In the

course of writing this thesis, though, I found that writing about my personal obsessions could be surprisingly hard.

The biggest challenge with this essay was letting myself appear on the page. I've never even kept a journal unless forced by a teacher. In elementary school, my teachers practically begged me to write about myself, not another paragraph on *Brachiosaurus* (I compromised by writing about *Velociraptors* instead). I simply don't view myself as an interesting subject from a writing or reading viewpoint. There were numerous edits where I fumbled with how to present myself. I must have rewrote the first essay a million times for fear of sounding like a whiny adolescent. Equally hard to put into words was the joy. It's hard to articulate the excitement I felt when seeing my first peregrine falcon or 'u'au without falling into clichés. But, I've always believed that we cannot grow as writers if we're not pushing ourselves to write things that we're uncomfortable with. Much like an artist drawing portraits, how will they ever get better if they only draw one pose?

I also think it's important to talk about my experiences because, in some ways, I have a unique perspective in this sub-culture. The birding demographic skews largely to older, white men living with disposable income. This has been the case for other outdoor recreational groups as well. While there is movement toward diversifying who has access to natural resources, it's still hard to find people who don't fit into the traditional naturalist narrative. I know that I don't speak for everyone's experiences, and I certainly don't intend to. I only hope that in my small way I can complicate the narrative a bit as a young woman in nature.

Ultimately, these essays aren't just about my experiences. They're about the people who brought me into the world of birding and helped me learn. It's about the places I go

to, how they change throughout the seasons, how they're so different and alike in many ways. They're about the birds: the warblers, falcons, petrels, ducks, hawks. These essays are a way to share how they have linked together all the stories I've lived and the beauty and joy they have brought to my life.

With that, I will leave you with the traditional birding sign-off.

Happy birding!

## The Peregrine Falcon

In second grade, I read *Frightful's Mountain*, the last book in Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain* series. In it, the titular peregrine falcon had to forge her way in the world, free of the young man who had tamed her. I hadn't read the previous two books and never felt that I lost anything from skipping them. The amateur falconer's backstory was a cumbersome distraction from Frightful's journey. I only wanted to live with Frightful—to fly, to hunt, to have nothing directing me but the slowly spinning constellations.

I checked the book out multiple times from the library. The checkout card inside read like tessellation of my name repeated over and over. Sometimes, I wouldn't even open the book, just admire the cover's artwork, a painting of Frightful.

Later, I tried to bring Frightful with me. I traced the cover illustration, bringing sloppy-beaked, scaley-wing imitations of the bird until her outline became like a reflex. I dragged pencil over primaries, coverts, keeled breast; spiral inward repeatedly in tighter circles to make her basalt-black eyes. Over and over I drew Frightful like a prayer whispered on the corner of folders and multiplication tables.

I never thought I'd get to see a peregrine falcon. They were creatures of the Arctic, of small caves sliced out by millennia of seafoam. I was a creature of Southwest Michigan. Berrien County was a place glacial-folded hills, peach trees, and oak scrubland. My home had no cliffs for peregrine falcons to make their home

I stood on a wooden platform, watching the waves of Lake Superior crash against the multihued sandstone cliffs. I was part of study away program about resource policy in the US-Canadian Great Lakes area. As part of our American leg of the trip, we stopped at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. The ranger meeting with us did his best to interest me in Jet Ski regulations, but I'm enraptured by the cliffs. Millions of years of ice and water and wind had carved out the Cambrian bedrock, creating un-Midwesternly seaside cliffs. Iron and copper-stained rock swept out over a hundred feet high. Far below, Lake Superior glimmered a clear blue-green, looking for all the world like a piece of the Caribbean Sea transplanted.

I leaned over the rail, wondering if I might see the shadows of fish in the water when the ranger said, "We have peregrine falcons nesting here."

"Falcons?" I interrupted, voice wavering. His confirmation was casual, but his words reach somewhere deep inside of me. Frightful, who had been sleeping for over a decade inside me, awakened again. Not only were peregrine falcons here, but they were something I could see at any minute.

The poor ranger did his best, and I really did try to look as if I was paying attention, but my eyes were constantly flicking to the sky, waiting. I hope I will know the falcon when I see it.

I spend the rest of the trip searching, nothing but constant vigilance on my quest to see a falcon. The trip ended with no sighting, but I won't give up. I studied the peregrine falcon's shape, its size, and its calls. I looked up places where they have been seen in Michigan. They didn't live in my hometown, not in my little piece of restructured wetlands, but in smokestacks and tall buildings. Theoretically, I didn't even have to make

the long trip back to the north to see the bird. The impossible was within my grasp if I just looked hard enough.

I took my cheap binoculars with me everywhere, but they never turned up my quarry. Yet, I saw other birds that capture my eye. Bluebirds, egrets, sparrows. Everywhere there was an unexpected world of diversity. These other animals were not quite as enticing as the peregrine falcon, but beautiful in their own way. Bit by bit I found myself in an expanding world of colors and behaviors—cornmeal goldfinches, wobbly woodcocks, the boundless tenacity of chickadees. The peregrine falcon unwittingly tugged me into the world of bird watching. If I'm looking, I might as well make the most of it.

Within the birding world there exists the concept of the nemesis bird. This is a bird that you haven't seen. But it's more than not seeing. There's a lot of birds you'll never see. Birds tucked away in cactus holes in the deepest deserts. Birds with populations of the maximum capacity of your local Burger King. No, the nemesis bird has got to be a bird that, given time and location, you *should* have seen, but manages to elude you at every turn. Like smooth-running cars and emotional fulfillment, everyone else has got it, but you're driving around in your emission-failing rust bucket with a feather-lined hole in your heart.

In the two years since I first put up my binoculars at those sandstone cliffs, I spread myself everywhere the peregrine falcon could be, taking on the life of the wanderer. I looked for it while working in Hawaii, chased leads at birding festivals with

hordes of twitchy birders, pulling the kernels I want from the morning chorus of human voices. Yet, for all the thousands of people and thousands of miles I covered looking for my nemesis bird, I turned up empty-handed again and again.

Somehow, the world and tires spun just the right way to bring me to Marquette, only an hour away from the cliffs that had started me out on my quest. It wasn't birds or policy lectures that had brought me back, but graduate school. After spending four years studying wildlife biology, I switched gears and decide to study English. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Better jobs? New climate? A chance to get my words out? Whatever it was, it couldn't be found wedged in a copy of Sibley's or Peterson's.

While I had ditched the world of academic science, I still volunteered in wildlife activities. In the fall, I joined a group of undergrads doing duck surveys of the area. The morning of November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016 was much like the other survey mornings. I stood on duty, taking count of every mallard or merganser that paddled through an old harbor, moving like ghosts of the iron ore ships that once populated the city's waterways. Even considering our location forty-six degrees north of the equator, it was unseasonably cold. Each stroke with pen to paper was stiff, forcing hypothermic fingertips to mark down data.

Suddenly, something streaked across my peripheral. The ducks scattered in a flurry of quacks. It was a bird, shooting across the watery gray sky, feather-composite comet, wings sharp and narrow like cobra teeth. I watched as it cut over the harbor, landing in a nearby tree. It was so quick and my brain was so slow that it took me several

seconds to process what had happened. Some birding reflex in me cataloged the shape and movement and colors, spitting out a report I could hardly believe.

Pseudo-sentences rolled off my tongue, “What? Is that? Is that?” I chased after the bird, bulky camo coat *swish-swishing* with every step. I stood on the edge of the street, toes hanging over the concrete curb. I pulled up my binoculars, could barely keep my hands steady enough to confirm what I was seeing.

The peregrine falcon’s breast and belly were speckle-striped like light filtering through ash tree stands. It grasped the branch with its lemon-candied talons and I was struck by their dexterity, able to balance on frail autumnal branches and crush pigeon skulls. It held out its wings slightly, the color of storm clouds, ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. I willed it to stay just a moment, just a lifetime longer.

For the briefest moment our eyes locked. It was just like I remembered from my drawings, corona ring around a black hole, an entrance to a world I would never really begin to know.

I could only imagine what it saw when it looked at me. Its eyes were a hundred times stronger than mine. Did it make a note of every loose polyester strand in my clothing? Every freckle across my nose? Maybe, in its own way, it was storing away a picture of the frayed, red-headed girl standing below it. I’d spent so much time watching the birds, it would be a bit odd to think they couldn’t watch back.

Crows in the area roused, cawing amongst each other. The falcon took flight before the mob could form, quickly escaping my sight. The moment, somehow lasting forever and a few seconds, hardly seemed real. It had been so long coming, something I had literally dreamed about. Doubt clung to the edges of the newly formed memory. I

could count on my hands (and a few toes) the number of times I had squinted at a merlin or kestrel, trying to turn it into my nemesis bird.

Yet, I remembered Frightful, her outline burned into the back of my mind even after all these years. Even with the falcon gone, I saw Frightful's ghost, balanced on the branches against the November morning sky.

## The Redpoll

I arrived at Northern Michigan University half-awake, curled up under my jacket. I didn't remember much of the twelve hour ride up. A few snatches of Milwaukee, a dream-like wander outside of Lambeau Field, the sudden rockiness of the Upper Peninsula border, the incessant cold of cracked windows. My great-uncle maneuvered his truck through Marquette's streets, squeezed tight by brick buildings thrown up during the city's mining heyday. I thought my hometown in Southwest Michigan was older, but buildings from our golden time were knocked down decades ago and abandoned longer still.

Campus was buried under three feet of snow, many of the parking lots barely maneuverable. The sky above was gray and already starting to go dark even though it was only three in the afternoon. I didn't get a much warmer reception inside. When I checked into my housing unit, a non-traditional dorm for older students, the receptionist was confused when I told her I was moving in. It took her a few minutes to find all my information, long since out of practice checking people in. I supposed people didn't move into Marquette that much. I was confused myself. After rejecting me during MFA applications, the university sent me an email almost six months later asking me if I wanted to join the MA program. I said yes because how could I say no?

The receptionist handed me my key and forms to sign. I rubbed the key as I signed an “asbestos release.” The text on the page assured me there was nothing to worry about as long as I didn’t disturb any of the ceiling tiles.

*“The cuckoo is said by some to be a hawk transformed, because at the time of the cuckoo's coming, the hawk, which it resembles, is never seen; and indeed it is only for a few days that you will see hawks about when the cuckoo's note sounds early in the season.”* –Aristotle, *The History of Animals*

Aristotle believed that many bird species underwent a metamorphosis over the seasons. The redstart mask falls off to reveal the robin inside. The garden warbler put away their song and puts on the hat of the blackcap. The cuckoo children who invaded the warbler’s nests in the spring find only an empty cup of branches and winter silence.

The day after moving in, I walked to Presque Isle, a birding hotspot I found online. I’d been to the Upper Peninsula a handful of times and always uncovered a bounty. As I walked to the park, owls and grosbeaks took flight in my mind. I imagined crossbills worrying pine cones as I tried to navigate unfamiliar sidewalks. Shrikes perched on powerlines just behind my eyelids as I clambered over unexpected snow walls. The sun was out, but without the clouds any heat seemed to ricochet back out into space. The path I was on took me next to Lake Superior. I was excited to see the rolling sea plains, but only found ice, ice, ice.

Presque Isle was barely an island, a small hunk of land split from the mainland by the Dead River. It wasn't long before I realized my error. Almost all of the activity I found online dated back to the fall. By January, all the bird hideaways were buried under snow drifts. There were a few goldeneyes in a warming pond at the coal plant, some crows soaring around. Not even ravens, just crows. And where were the “*peter-peter-peter*” of the titmouse and the sci-fi “*pew*” of the cardinal? Instead of more, my new home had less.

The walk back was quiet and birdless; my only companion the lurching mass of Lake Superior settling under the thickening ice, miniature glaciers clacking against each other like malformed wind chimes.

*“A great number of birds also go into hiding; they do not all migrate, as is generally supposed, to warmer countries. Thus, certain birds (as the kite and the swallow) when they are not far off from places of this kind, in which they have their permanent abode, betake themselves thither; others, that are at a distance from such places, decline the trouble of migration and simply hide themselves where they are.”* – Aristotle, *The History of Animals*

Aristotle also believed that swallows did not migrate, but hibernated. They landed on the riverbanks they had floated above in the summer. With tiny beaks and claws, they burrowed into the mud, passing between snapping turtles and wood frogs half-frozen until they are safe from winter's grasp. In their muddy holes, the swallows dozed. As the

temperature dropped, their hearts slow until they fall into the rhythm of the waves, slowing in the cold until it's hard to tell if anything is alive at all.

Eventually, I got a car, a '96 Jeep off Craigslist. The fabric on the roof was kept on with a ring of tacks and the doors wouldn't unlock once locked, but it was mine. More importantly, my birding destinations widened. A slow day of birding now only lost me an hour or two instead of most of my day. Even so, I couldn't do much more than circle around the city between the brick-walled streets and frozen lake like a wayward duck trying to find its flock, long since landed.

During my first two years in Marquette, something was broken in the weather. Everywhere else in the world, it was too warm, making the jet stream wobbles and spill the cold of the Arctic all over the Midwest. It regularly dipped down to negative forty in the wind. When I talked to my friend in England about the cold, I realized Celsius and Fahrenheit have a common point at that degree. That type of cold was an international word.

There are a few birds that birders only see in the winter. There are birds who spend the summers in the high tundra, summers even briefer than the ones in Marquette. These hardy animals don't need to fly all the way to the Caribbean to find a warmer place. Even the boreal cup of the Midwest is warmer. Their movements, however, are sporadic. You can't trust reports from the previous year. A year of good berries and pinecones means they won't come to the feeder. Or maybe a park will be bursting forth with birds when it had always been silent before.

The redpolls proved to be fairly reliable. Three years in Marquette and the little finches had yet to let me down. They were the perfect manifestation of winter, gray-black and white streaked like snow-cloaked forest. In the middle of their forehead was a red spot, startling amongst the winter greyscale despite its smallness. The birds grouped together for warmth and protection, popping out from the spruce to eat thistle seeds until some wind spooks them. Then, back into the trees where their striped bodies disappeared into the branches.

*“Shriek of cranes down from heaven  
who flee the winter and the terrible rains  
and fly off to the world's end  
bringing death and doom to the Pygmy-men  
as they open fierce battle at dawn.”-Homer, Iliad*

The ancient Greeks knew that some birds migrated. They watched the cranes alight every year across the Mediterranean. But the cranes didn't go south to shake frost from their wings. They flew to the end of the world to wage war against the pygmies.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to be a pygmy, a person meant to fear the sight of birds. Hammers frozen as a bugling builds in the distance. Dwarf faces poked out from their caves, watching as the sun is blotted out by wings, tail feathers waving behind like banners. Shields and claws clashed. For three months it's keratin versus iron. The pygmies only survived because they eat the eggs and chicks, taking shell fragments to

reinforce their defenses. Winter for the pygmies was blood, gold, and an endless river of cranes.

In my second year at Marquette, the city received over one hundred inches of snow, most of which stuck around the whole season. Driving through town, I could tell which home was a summer home by the lack of pathways cut around the house. These were the warm-weather nests of the snowbirds—retirees who move back and forth from here and Florida, North Carolina, Georgia. I was envious of their ability to move as they pleased.

I'd always been a bit of an insomniac, but that winter exacerbated this condition to near unbearable levels. I stayed up all night. All long, fifteen hours of it. It was too hard to sleep, even when my eyes itched from staring at computer screens and textbooks. Since I was usually up right before the sunrise, I often went out to catch the birds at their most active. I scraped the ice off my car and let it rumble into warmth. It was so cold it was nearly impossible to breathe through my nose. Maybe it was all the moisture inside me gone solid or the air itself had frozen, too thick to be sucked in. Either way the morning chill was better than stagnation on a worn box-spring mattress.

When the car was ready, I picked up some fast food and went to a bird feeder at a local nature center. Popping hash browns into my mouth, I watched the redpolls flick seed shells onto the ground. Sometimes, the clouds parted enough for the sun to break through during sunrise, yolk spilling from the shell of Lake Superior. Mostly, it was cloudy, and all I could see was the black of night melting into the gray of day.

The redpolls I watched were as diverse as people. Some were streaked so heavily I could hardly find the white of their belly. Some poofed out all their feathers to keep warm while others pull themselves up stiff and alert. There were redpolls with red contained in a tight forehead dot while others had red dripping down them like spilled wine. Some redpolls scattered at the slightest breeze; some stayed even when jays bully everything else away. Like snowflakes, every one different, even if the naked eye couldn't see it.

A flock of redpolls will always cause a birder to pause. Inside a flock of aptly named common redpolls may be one of the grails of birding, the hoary redpoll. Birders will travel across state borders to sight this bird. The perfect hoary is slightly bigger than its common cousin, tiny-beaked, with streaks reduced to ghost scars on their body. There are birders that would cut a sliver from their soul to see a hoary, but it was nothing unexpected in Marquette. We got enough redpolls that a hoary one was just bound to happen. A hoary caused me to pause on my breakfast sandwich, snap a quick picture, but I saw no need to rush a report. I would do it after sleep finally overtook me and I dozed away the few sunlight hours.

Recent genetic research states that hoary redpolls are unlikely to be their own species. All the mileage burned reduced to nothing more than a charming variation. For now, the birding authorities have not compressed the species, so the hunt is still on. Birders will still be picking through morning finches for the foreseeable future.

Someone asked me if birders stopped in the winter. I told him that no, we never really stop. We abandoned old haunts and worked our way out to the woods, chasing list-serv reports with handfuls millet and gas station cheese puffs, looking for the birds trying to scrape food out of fall leftovers. Starving people looking for starving things.

By February every year, I'm squinting Aristotle-style at my redpolls, looking for thrushes, vultures, my first-of-year warbler. During the night when I'm forced inside, I check the ice cover of the Great Lakes online, hoping to see the shell cracking, the redpolls taking off their winter coats and becoming something else.

When it's too cold outside I thought about the redpolls huddled under pine boughs. Were they warm? Did their feathers warm them in a way a human couldn't know? Or did they just accept the chill? Perhaps they simply didn't know anything but the broken jet stream and endless snow.

## The Canada Goose

The workers at the bird sanctuary call her Hugs. She's had other names. Some I know. Some I don't.

The casual guests call her a Canadian goose. This is technically wrong, but so common I don't bother correcting it, even though there are plenty of signs around with the correct name. The birders make sure to call her by her proper "common name" and are more than happy to correct others. "It's Canada goose, not Canadian goose." They draw out the silence after Canada until the weight of its passive-aggressiveness stifles the group with its weight. Otherwise, the birders don't pay much attention to Hugs. When they come on the third Wednesday of the month for the "Birds and Coffee" walks, they pass by Hugs, even as she runs to them, shuffling woodchips around underfoot. Nobody is hurting for the sight of a Canada goose. The DNR biologists don't pay attention to her either, only paying attention to geese when they get into their duck traps. They speak in a poetry of quotas and bird banding codes. CAGO. WODU. MALL.

None of them believe me when I tell them that the goose was once in danger of extinction. Not even the biologists, who seem like they should be keepers of the bird's history. W.K. Kellogg, one of the founding brothers of the Kellogg Company, set up the sanctuary as a refuge for waterfowl, rebuilding the goose population while doubling as a vacation spot for those with pre-Depression wealth. In the auditorium where we host talks and birthday parties, pro-geese propaganda adorn the walls. There's one poster with a

painting of a goose and passenger pigeon taking flight together. I read the print underneath, “Don’t let the Canada goose the same way as the passenger pigeon!” Above me, mounted trumpeter swans follow my movement with beaded eyes.

I try to imagine a world without the Canada goose, where I don’t see their Vs cutting through autumn skies, the lakes without their bodies. It’s like picturing a world without oak trees, tiger swallowtails. I know there are people who would be happy to be rid of the birds, look at Hugs and her kind as pests, but I love them—their sociability, the hum of their wings, even their honks with all the melody of faraway dogs.

Hugs lives in a lagoon closed off by black chain-link. She throws herself against the fence, not to escape, but for food and company. The whole time she calls, a low honk that gets caught somewhere in her throat, clipping off the harsh consonant at the end.

*Hun! Hun!* Even the goose has a Midwestern accent.

She bangs against the fence with such force that it rattles the sign zip tied to the side, a display discussing angel wing, a veneer name for a condition in which the last joint of the wing twists. This presents itself visually through feathers sprouting sideways from wings. The feathers fall apart at the slightest touch, shafts stripped naked. She can’t fly. She never has and she never will.

I don’t know what the people responsible for her condition called her, the people who took her in and raised her before she came to the sanctuary. Something fond and pitying. Orphan. Rescue. Victim. She was taken from her nest, “abandoned”. I see the hands cupping her fledgling body, the only time she leaves the ground. I hope she was lucky enough to grow up with a yard and a pond. Not some small room with easy-to-

clean tiles, a dog carrier full of newspaper shavings for shelter. A place where fresh air is a memory.

I'm never told the details of Hugs' background, just the bare bones. But her body tells some of her story. Wherever she was, the people who watch her offer her all the bread she could want and applaud themselves for their good work. How could it be wrong when she seemed so happy, even when her bones slipped out of place? Even when she was taken away by officials, body desperate for nutrients. They asked if they could see her after she was removed from the house. The officials said no.

Maybe her parents named her something. Not her human ones, but her goose ones. Scientists say parrots name their babies, giving each a distinct string of clucks and whistles. Why shouldn't the Canada goose be the same? They're notorious for their nurturing instincts, chasing intruders right off their land. They're as social as any parrot. Perhaps Hugs' muffled double honk is some leftover of a mother that nudged Hugs free of her egg, a ghost of a figure disappearing behind reeds, the imprint of sun against eyelids.

I call her Hugs, coo it without shame when I do my feeding runs throughout the sanctuary. I greet all the birds, but Hugs is a welcome change from the owls hissing and black swans trying to bite my fingers. Due to her upbringing, she sits somewhere closer to human than goose. I always toss a half scoop of feed at her while the swans and mallards scabble around the feeders.

Three months into my time at the sanctuary she tears up her leg, likely from catching it on the fence she throws herself against. I call her "honey" or "baby" when I hold her down to give her injections of muscle relaxer. To give her shots, I squat over,

pressing my legs against her sides as I search for the meat of her breast. She wiggles, rubbing broken feathers against bleach-stained jeans. “Shh, sweetie,” I whisper. “I know. I know.”

Once her leg has healed some, I spend my evening hours with her. After smashing bags of frozen mice open and throwing out pheasant eggs, her company is a comfort. I live in an apartment above the room where she is recovering, the research building, though nobody’s done research here in decades. There’s only dusty microscopes and scattered instructions for fecal inspection left from those days. Now, it’s a warehouse for frozen rodents, duck feeds, buckets, and cages for birds that hold birds on the mend. I let her wander outside of her pen. She stands a few feet away from me, preening, taking care to align every feather, healthy or not. Sometimes when I’m working, she nibbles on my laptop keyboard or on the crook of my hip. I try to reach out my hand to brush her black collar, but she ducks away. This is okay.

When I get up to retrieve something, she follows after me, webbed feet slapping concrete. I take a few steps up a stairs out of sight and she cries out at the bottom. I run back down. I’ve never heard her make that noise. I’ve never heard any bird make that noise. It unnerves me more than the hissing, the screaming. I expect to see her injured, but she falls silent, goes back to preening once she’s certain I am back. Who knew pain could be named in the loneliness of a goose?

There are other names I give her. Ones I don’t say, ones that feel silly to tell others, but they exist all the same. Mended. Whole. Friend.

## The European Starling

*Physical Description: Chunky-bodied passerine. Wings triangular in shape, diagnostic feature. Plumage varies by age and season. Juveniles an overall drab brown. Winter plumage is broken up by white speckling. Breeding plumage similar to blackbirds, noticeable iridescence in sunlight.*

“Got our first bird!” I shout down the stairs, making a note of species, location, and time. We have almost left my friend Danielle’s apartment for a weeklong birding trip, so I’m counting the goldfinch at her millet feeders on our official trip list. The list is a few pages at the end of a notebook where I write short stories, snippets of novels, names of locations I want to remember for later. I think I have enough room offset for listing, but I’m okay with letting the birds live above my axe-wielding fighters, magical tree burls, and Baffin Bay.

A few minutes later, we’re in Danielle’s SUV and I add a kestrel to the list, resting on a powerline we drive past. Later, I add turkeys, vultures, and blue jays. I vibrate in the passenger seat through all the drive from Lansing, Michigan to Magee Marsh, Ohio. I’ve never been to this spot and part of me is still skeptical that Ohio could host “The Biggest Week in American Birding” Festival, but Danielle’s been there before and I trust her judgement. As we drive and tremble with excitement, we gossip about other birders we know. One man sold most of his possession, took up a backpack to

watch endangered sandpipers in China. We make hypothetical plans to do the same, but we're too broke or rooted to do such a thing. We make do on this fraction of an adventure. I tell Danielle, "We should have gotten walkie-talkies to call into the other van." There are six of us spread out between other cars, and the radio would be the quickest way to contact each other. Mostly, I like the idea of using a radio to report sightings more than its practicality. Everything feels more official and important on a walkie-talkie.

Our party arrives at the campground where we will spend the week. It's a combo RV-tent campground built at the edge of a small woods. We're the only group that is staying in a tent. The rest of the occupants stay in luxury motor homes, generators humming in rhythm with the cicadas. This is the first sign of the monetary disparity I will experience. That said, we have the best in tenting equipment to make up for it, a massive nine-sleeper, tall enough for Rob, my six-foot-tall friend, to almost stand up. It even has sections that can be separated from the others by a zip-up flap. The tent has more rooms than my dorm back on campus did, probably more room too.

I try to help, push down spikes to keep the tent tied to the ground, hooking straps to poles, but I'm too impatient to keep on task. It doesn't help that my energy is sapped by the heat. It's mid-May and I've only been away from Marquette for a few days where snow is still on the ground. The ice had only just started to break up, making Lake Superior look like a cracked riverbed, changed not by drought but by sunlight and spring warmth. Here it's eighty degrees. Cauliflower clouds gather in the distance, the precursors of thunderstorms. It's strange to think of both of those places as being part of the same region.

In the oaks above me, grackles make their creaking-door calls. I think of the long way the birds travel and wonder how they tolerate the journey from Caribbean to the north in a few weeks' time.

*Sound: Possesses an incredible aptitude for vocalization. Sounds produced include—chirps, whistles, rattles, trills, warbles and rattles. Singing is observed in both sexes. Can imitate numerous species not limited to—Northern bobwhite, blue jay, killdeer, and meadowlarks.*

We're lucky to find parking at Magee Marsh. It's the afternoon by the time we get there, well past the morning chorus, but if there's been any drop in activity I can't tell. Most of the cars are nicer than anything than I have owned. There are license plates from Kansas, California, Colorado, even Quebec. A not insignificant portion of plates have bird banding codes and puns: BRDRGRL, BIRDLUV, MODO27. I point out each one and laugh. Not because it's especially funny, but because I'm overwhelmed by the intensity of it all. Never before have I been surrounded by so many birders.

At the end of the parking lot, we walk past a truck with a giant radar dish on the back, just like the ones in storm chaser documentaries. Group after group walk past, each one asking the operators of the truck to explain the radar's purpose. The men always say, "We use it to listen to the baseball game."

I don't know why they have to be so coy. I know on clear nights you can see the migration on radar. All the birds moving so that their bodies bounce back radar signals so

that they look like small rain clouds. That has to be what they're doing. Why can't they just say so? What's the point of lying?

The marsh itself is nothing especially unique with the exception of its location. The smell of decaying matter overtakes exhaust and garbage, only rivaled by the fishy odor of nearby Lake Erie. The plants have only just started to come into bloom. Much of the marsh is still bare. All around orange halves are speared on sticks around the perimeter, citric sacrifices for orioles.

Our team heads to the west entrance. There are technically two entrances, but the dozens of people milling around in front of the west one clearly signals where we're truly supposed to begin. Nearby, a man sits on top of a ladder, a whiteboard leaning against it with species spotted. It turns out the man will sit on top of the ladder for the rest of the week, raising money for one of the organizations in the area.

There is no rest for me. I fall in step behind Danielle. She's bigger than me and has an easier time pushing her way through. There's barely room for me to slip under the banner welcoming birders into the marsh. If the radar were turned on, we would look like a human cloud.

I duck down under camera lenses the length of a man's arm. My binoculars are pulled up to my chin. I'm ready to pull them up to my eyes, but finding it hard to even get room for that. There are birds flitting about in the undergrowth and willow branches, but I can't focus on anything with everyone shouting and whipping their cameras around like observatory telescopes on fast forward. A Blackburnian warbler lands near me and I pause to take it in. It's so close I could brush it with my hands, fingers against its stained glass fractals of black, orange, yellow, and white. I'm pushed forward, unable to linger. I

can only go where the crowd wants me and am only freed hundreds of yards from the entrance at the observation platform. My team goes up the flight of steps. It's crowded here, but a comparative breath of fresh air compared to the rush twenty feet below. Looking down, I'm reminded of the time ants got into my house as a kid. I'd found them encasing a cheese cracker, unshakeable. The warblers must have felt much like the cheese cracker.

I knew there were many birders in the world, but it was hard to perceive all that I was seeing. My loose network of birders at Michigan State University barely contained double digit amounts consisting mostly of people in my classes. With the exception of the occasional parent-child pairing, we were easily the youngest unit here. The observation tower felt like my ship aloft on a sea of white bodies, white hair. There are centuries worth of birding experience here.

I know the warblers around me, but they are too fast and too many for me to pin names to bodies. I point one out, call it a Cape May before realizing that I've made a mistake, meant Chestnut-sided. A man echoes me, mistake and all and I realize a couple has taken up observing next to me. They both clutch Ken Kaufman guides and seem to have given up struggling through the pages in favor of overhearing what others are saying. The bird expert's guide is everywhere, heavily advertised since he is the guest of honor. I can't help but feel a little flush of pride that someone would listen to me over a man who so dedicated his life to birds he hitchhiked across the country, sleeping in garages and eating cat food.

*Behavior: Ground foragers. Often associate with other species like American crows and pigeons. Known for extreme aggression against other species during nesting period. Have been reported chasing birds up in size to small ducks. Famous for their murmurations in which thousands of birds fly in unisons looking for places to roost during the evenings.*

The next day at Magee Marsh is easier. I know what to expect and know to work my way to the observation tower for a breather. There, two old women in matching white sun hats clasp each other as they watch us watch a Northern waterthrush.

“It’s so good to see young people outside in nature,” one says to the other. I huff as the waterthrush is lost in the brush, replaced by a pair of dueling yellow warblers. I focus on the birds bouncing on each other so not to say something smart.

But they are harmless compared to others.

Another day, we are navigating the levees surrounding the marsh. I spot movement in a patch of drained pond. I shout for the car to stop. The car slows rapidly; nobody scolds me for my loudness or abrupt command. There’s no place for societal expectations, and sometimes traffic laws, when a potential rarity is on the line. We’re able to pull over, making cursory glances at the mudflat. Instantly we make out the shape of ducks and shorebirds picking through the soil. As we get ready to make a more complete investigation, a car pulls up next to us. This is not unusual in it of itself. Any birder would pause seeing a bunch of other birders scrambling out of a car. What I didn’t expect was the man to poke his head out and ask, “What are you doing?”

The traditional birder greeting is “Whatcha got there?” but we give him a pass, explain the ducks and sandpipers just behind his head. He turns, giving the flat a look that lasts all of five seconds before saying, “I don’t see anything.”

“Well, I think I see some birds in there. Maybe teal and dunlin,” I said, hoping my specificity will defend my claim.

He smiles and it’s not quite right, too big. “You know there are warblers here, right?”

We all look at each other, thinking the same thing. Did he just say that? Even if you hadn’t laid eyes on a bird before, you would have been assaulted with warbler paintings, earrings, signs, stickers, posters, every piece of Parulidae merchandise capitalism could come up with. At least two of us were wearing Biggest Birding Week shirts festooned with four different warbler species.

Before we can respond, he wishes us luck and drives away, leaving us with the nonexistent sanderlings.

Condescension, in many ways, is not the worst thing. At least your work means something, even if it’s to serve as an object of ridicule. If nothing else, it serves as a joke for the team. Apathy is worse. Nobody is excited about the ruddy turnstones we find on the marsh beach. The birds are red and black speckled like the lake stones they flip through in search of food. Their orange feet carry them just beyond, though they’re ultimately non-committal in their attempts to escape. We’ve never seen turnstones before, though everyone wants to see their beauty. Instead, the two boys we send out to deliver the message report back shrugs. So we keep the birds to ourselves. Watch their tracks get lost in the waves.

Our solitude is broken when an Amish man and his son approach. There's many Amish birders here, but they largely stay to themselves. These two, however, approach us, asking us what we're looking at. It's a surprise to see their faces light up. We direct their binoculars to the turnstones and stand together, Amish, college students, and turnstones on the shore of Lake Erie.

*Life History: Males almost exclusively build nest in hollows. Both sexes incubate. Incubation lasts thirteen days. The fledging process lasts three weeks. A pair can raise up to three broods in one year.*

Danielle is the trip mom, or at least the trip older sister or aunt. She knows most of the stops and tricks of the area. Anything she doesn't know she supplements with her Twitter feed. Festival volunteers update with rarities and their location. Most of the attendees don't seem to be using Twitter so we're usually the first ones on the scene.

When we're not chasing tweets, we spend most of our time at the marsh. After a few days, the bodies of the birders that overwhelmed me when I first got here fade into the background. There are advantages to being five feet tall and being able to slip through crowds is one of them. There are also disadvantages. Mostly that the crowd blocks my view.

I wish I could say that I'm a gracious and patient person. Instead, I whine and whine when I can't see something until Danielle grabs me, pulling me up onto the wooden railing of the boardwalk. We sit together watching flycatchers above the visors and bald heads. If I still can't see she will grab my head and point me the right way.

Meredith, another girl I only know vaguely through our extended bird network stares at me, not sure if this is okay. I tell her it's fine, though I admit that it's strange it doesn't bother me. I've never been one for physical contact. I could happily go months without another human's touch. I even side-hugged my own parents. But the old rules fall in the birding world.

Our second morning, Danielle and I get up hours before the sun. We sneak off to McDonalds, serenaded by house sparrows. We talk about birds we expect, birds we hope to see but probably won't.

"Do you think the people in town think the birders are weird?" Danielle asks as two men with binoculars order after us.

I shrug, "They got banners up for the festival. Can't hate us too much. Though I imagine driving behind us can't be much fun."

Not us, of course. We don't come to brake-shattering stops. Not like the fellow in Northern Michigan we know of who threw himself out of a moving car to see a gyrfalcon. Though, I suppose, if you had to jump out of a car a gyrfalcon would be one to do it for.

Once we finish breakfast, we drive back to the campground. The Midwest's flat land rarely gets love, but the sunrises are some of the most beautiful I've seen. This morning, the sun spills from the horizon, magnified by my brain trying to make sense of the distance. The light scatters off the cropland dust, painting the sky orange and red. My great aunt would say the sunrises and sunsets out on the plains of the Midwest looked like the end of the world. This used to terrify me as a kid. I didn't want to see the end of the world and would shut my eyes against it.

This time, I keep my eyes open. In a drainage ditch, hooded mergansers toss back their heads, flashing their impressive crests. They're the only hooded mergansers I see on the trip.

*Human Interactions: IUCN classification of least concern. Native to Eurasia. Introduced to North America in 1890 by Eugene Schieffelin as part of a project to bring every bird mentioned in Shakespeare's works to New York City. 35 pairs turned into 150 million. Populations declining in native range. Classified as an invasive species in the United States.*

Birding has a small but vibrant dialect. Twitch. Dipped. Pish. And just like any language, there are dirty words. Nobody wants to be a stringer, someone with a dubious sighting record. There's words that birder's won't ever say. The trash bird is a bird so ubiquitous that it is tossed aside, skipped over by seekers and their cameras. Nobody will say there's a trash bird, but nobody would throw themselves out of a car for house sparrows, pigeons, robins, or starlings.

"What's your target bird?" we ask each other. Many of us want to see one bird more than any others. Rob wants to see a prothonotary warbler, an active bird of the tree tops. I want to see a peregrine falcon. I complain the whole trip about my lack of falcon sightings. I never see one on the trip. The lady we meet while crisscrossing farmland wants to see Lapland longspurs, which she reminds us of every few minutes with dramatic sighs. We spend almost an hour trying to find the sparrow-like birds, hopping

amongst the broken corn stalks. We have to help her after the man who found them abandoned her in his frenzy to get as many sightings as possible before sunset. We got there just as he left, calling a friend on the phone, telling them he hadn't eaten anything but bagged tuna for the past two days. We never get a sighting of the longspurs for the women, but we try.

There is one bird all of us want to see. The Kirtland's warbler is one of the rarest birds in the world. Only breeding in young jack pine stands, they number in the thousands. They breed almost exclusively in the thumb of Michigan. It's possible to catch them near Lake Erie as they migrate. I've seen photos of hundreds of birders trying to catch sight of the bird. I don't look forward to my odds of seeing it over that crowd.

By the end of the week I come to know the distance of the marsh trail well. It's approximately a mile long. With all the people and birding stops, it's easy to spend two, three, even more hours walking through. It's easy to become intimate with the black muck, the different embraces of vine and trees, but it's hard to put this into words. All around me I hear things like, "The vireo is in the branch next to the log. No, the *other* log." Perhaps there are only so many words to describe a tree.

That same mile can be cleared in twenty minutes when taken at a brisk pace. Like when Danielle's phone buzzes with a possible Kirtland warbler at the end of the marsh. We walk quick, speak low, try to look as nonchalant as possible so as not to tip off anyone around us and start a stampede. This is harder for me than the others because my legs are too short to walk, forcing me to jog along instead.

When we get to the spot, we scan the trees, not seeing anything. I only take my binoculars down to catch movement. Suddenly, there is a bird, dark on top, yellow on the

bottom, spotty streaks on its side. It's quick, so I only get a glimpse. I wait for it to emerge, thinking of the cars in the parking lot with the Kirtland warbler banding codes adorning their bumpers as magnets and stickers. I will become one of the illustrious observes of the KWVA.

The bird reappears. This time, it's clear something is wrong. The yellow isn't right, the back too dark, streaking too thick. It's a juvenile Magnolia Warbler, a bird as common as the cattails of the marsh. We reconvene, move on. So much for the Twitter expertise.

The day we leave it's cold and rainy. Most of the birds have tucked themselves away, only giving a few half-hearted chords of their songs. Maybe it's for the best. It's tempting to linger. Just another five minutes. Then twenty, an hour. I have to catch a train back home. Back to babysitting and another Great Lake. I tell Danielle we'll do this again next year, but I think we both know that probably won't happen. As we drive, I read off our list, calling our lifers trash birds because I think it's funny. I say we should call ourselves the trash birders because I think that's also funny, but also, I have to have respect for those that flourish even when unwanted.

Every spring after that, I can't help but think that this migration will be just like Magee Marsh. I'm not sure why I hold the hope years after, and I always come to realize I don't really want to see such a bounty somewhere else. It may be an annual event, but there will only ever be one week like that for me. It can't be repeated. You can't cherish the starling and its repetition.

## The Owl

At the bird sanctuary, we have four owls who all seem to live in various states of displeasure. One of them is named Virginia, a nod to the species scientific name, *Bubo virginianus*. She spends all day in her box house, staring out at passersby. She doesn't do much else during the day except try to make her body fade away, but her natural camouflage doesn't do much against the green wood.

I always make sure to announce my presence when I enter her cage, "Hey, Virg! How are you?" I like to call Virginia by a nickname so it feels like we have some sort of rapport, that she will see that she is completely safe with me. I move around the edges of her exhibit, slow and deliberate. Sometimes, she hisses, but that doesn't disturb me. Instead, I watch her eyes, making sure she is not figuring out an escape route. If she feels I'm getting too close to the box she will jump onto her favorite stump, which is also her favorite spot to throw up, pass pellets, and leave half-eaten rats. I've been trained not to get too close to the raptors if it's not critical, so if she gets in my way, all I can do is pick up a few consolation pellets—balls of hair, bones, and all the other parts that the owl couldn't digest—and I have to leave the rest for the next day. In a job where new tasks constantly emerge, I hate leaving the routine for tomorrow.

There are a lot of things I don't like in life, which I like to think is normal, though I suspect my list is higher than the average person.

I don't like steak and mashed potatoes. This is a fun thing to tell people if I feel like causing a ruckus.

Sleet is by far the worst precipitation. I think most people agree, but I've heard a few dissenters.

I hate that I can only begin to acknowledge myself as a writer now that I've been published though I don't hold others to the same standard because it's stupid.

I also can't stand coconuts.

Virginia is one of two presentation birds. The other one is Toby, a red-tailed hawk. It would be inaccurate to say Toby likes being handled. I don't think any raptor likes much of anything, but Toby can be manipulated. With the wiggle of my wrist, she will readjust herself in a position both of us can tolerate. When Virginia gets on the glove, I have to hope she starts somewhere comfortable because she isn't going to change.

I only ever had her on the glove once. My boss and I had just finished giving a presentation on raptors and their adaptations to a group of enraptured kids and adults. I'd had Toby and while I loved working with her, her constant attempts at jumping off my glove could wear me down, especially with a crowd of people gasping every time she tried to make a break for it.

When my boss asks if I want to take Virginia back to her cage, I can barely contain my excitement. I open up the box we keep them in between presentations, grabbing the leather jesses dangling from her ankles. My bare fingers almost touch her talons, grazing the feathers that keep her feet warm in the winter. It takes a special bird to

be a presentation bird, one that won't take a go at unguarded human flesh. I tuck the jesses between my thumb and palm, attaching the leash so she can never truly escape and tug her up onto my glove. She hops up onto my wrist. Even with the leather gauntlet, I feel her claws push down on my wrist. A few people pause to watch me walk Virginia down the hill to her cage. They stand at a distance, admiring us. When they want more, I go through my encyclopedic spiel. Someone asks me if Virginia likes me, "I don't know. She's not a pet. None of these raptors are really friendly. Owls especially. They're like cats. Very independent. They tolerate you at best."

They laugh and let me move on. The whole time she stares at me, blinking heavily. I can't tell if she is looking at me as something recognizable to cling to or if she recognizes me as the ultimate disruptor of her routine. When my boss takes a picture, I try to maneuver my arm so she might look at the phone camera, but she keeps her eyes level on my chest. With her super hearing, I know she must hear my heart bounding away. The world must be incredibly noisy for owls.

I can't stand most country music. I'm not opposed to Garth Brooks, however. It reminds me of my childhood time in North Carolina, of blue mountains.

I like the color of my hair, but I could do without the old ladies touching my head as if they could absorb the red through their skin.

I hate when people sniff repeatedly.

My sister did this constantly when we shared rooms until I couldn't take it anymore and yelled at her to blow her nose for Christ's sake already.

There are two great horned owls at the sanctuary. The other one is named Clicky. The sanctuary staff is, admittedly, not terribly great with names.

Virginia lives somewhere between annoyed and terrified. Clicky, on the other hand, is three pounds of anger and hatred. Her cage is wider than Virginia's so it's easier to move around. That said, it doesn't matter where I am in it. As soon as I close the door behind me she hisses and snaps her beak, the origin of her name. When she's especially ornery, she inflates her body to twice her size.

Like Virginia, she spends most of her time in her box, but her zone of no-entry is wider than Virginia's. I avoid cleaning under her box except on deep cleaning days when my boss joins me and I have the rake to give me a longer reach. I make sure to duck down, try not to meet her eyes. Birds feel more confident if they're above you, so I'm told.

I don't hate the men who tell me I'm throwing my life away for not continuing my studies in fisheries and wildlife, but I wish they knew a STEM degree doesn't guarantee me a job anymore.

I like the colors yellow and orange, but they don't like my complexion.

I feel I have too many interests. I wish I could do everything. I fear that I will waste away my life waffling between jobs.

I have to finish every book I read, even if I hate it. I won't let a book beat me.

Learning to do health checks is exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Twice a year, the raptors are taken out of their caging. We weigh them, check all their parts, and

fix anything we find wrong. Birds are notorious for showing no sign of illness or injury until it's too late. It's not uncommon to find a bird dead in the morning after looking perfectly healthy the day before. These checks are vital, but hardly easy.

Holding a bird is a balance between gentleness and a firm grip. My boss starts me off with the screech owl. She's small enough to fit in a coffee mug and has little capability of causing bodily harm to her human handlers. However, since she is only missing the tip of her wing she can fly fairly well. Many of the birds we will be able to spook to the ground and corral, but she requires more work.

She sees us coming, closing her eyes and scrunching up in her very best attempt to look like a tree branch. When we get closer she abandons this idea and leaps away. My boss swings around a net while the screech owl bounces against the chicken wire keeping her in. When she is caught, my boss helps me pull away the nylon, wrap her in a towel. She is so small that I can do without the leather gloves we rely so much on. The towel completely envelops her. Nobody even knows I hold a living creature in my arms when we leave the cage.

I don't believe in bad birds, but I don't like identifying gulls.

I never want to live in the middle of the country. The idea of living away from large bodies of water terrifies me.

I graduate up to the barn owl after I prove myself with the screech owl. The barn owl lives in a cage built in the shape of a barn. He does not appreciate the extravagant set up. Like the others, he claims a corner as his own. His wing is badly damaged, hanging

limply at his side. When I get close to him he springs to the ground, rocking his head with wings spread out. It would be funnier if it weren't for the flat, almost human-like face and black eyes.

I'm warned that that the barn owl will scream when he's grabbed. I think I'm prepared for it, but it's nothing that anyone can prepare for. He screeches like a woman in a horror movie. A human scream for a human face.

I've never been able to write on my hands. I'm not sure why. Dirt doesn't bother me, but something about words on my skin set me on edge.

Sometimes, when I get confused, I look really upset. I'm not, but my face doesn't know how not to grimace when I'm unsure.

I've been told I'm very unapproachable when I'm wearing my headphones.

I can't say I have a favorite invasive species because they're not really a thing to have favorites of, but my least favorite is the multiflora rose. I spent a week as an undergrad ripping them up. My ankles legs still bear the scars from their thorns.

I'm not violent, but when a man came into the bird sanctuary and joked about feeding the birds rocks I wished I were a person who would punch someone else.

Clicky is one of the last birds to get a health check. She, like many of the other birds at the sanctuary, has a major wing injury that prevents her from flying. Spooking her to the ground is slower, more delicate. We make sure to give her a wide berth as she plunges into the gravel. If any of the raptors were to take a go at us, it'd be Clicky. With a set of towels, we wave her into a corner, grab her and wrap her into what my boss calls

the “birdy burrito.” One edge of the towel is pulled over her wings until only her head and legs are exposed. Even a great horned owl is contained by this. The most important part is making sure that there is a strong grip on the legs. Guests will ask us if we fear the bird’s bite, but it’s the feet that do the bone breaking, the flesh rending. One slip up and we’ve lost a finger or the bird’s made a clumsy mistake. It doesn’t help that the leather gloves are much too big for my tiny hands.

Still, I manage the hold. Her talons are strong enough I can hold them hard without hurting her, though my full grasp is only a fraction of what she can do. I cradle her in my arm and take her into the storage building that doubles as a clinic for health checks. She clacks and hisses as my boss stares into her ears, pulls back tail feathers to check her vent.

The last thing we do is coping. While I hold Clicky, my boss props open her mouth while using a small drill to sand her beak. I smell the heat of sander meeting keratin, trying to comfort her as she attempts to wiggle away. Even though she needs this, even though it doesn’t really hurt more than getting nails clipped, it’s hard to meet her eyes. I hope that owl memories don’t compare to the ones of mythology. I hope that she can forget and know something beyond this discomfort.

## The 'U'au

From the Supply Trail I can see the whole of Maui below me. Windmills catch the pre-evening light. Smoke rises from sugar cane fires on the isthmus, an essential step before its harvest. Tourists coming up for sunrise see the beads of red and gold and ask if it's lava from the volcano. All around the ocean stretches. My coworkers have lectured me about riptides and waves. Nothing I say convinces them that I already knew these things. I know the Great Lakes aren't the same, but the endless stretches of water are one of the few things here that always feel like home.

It's this montane land that makes me feel all the four thousand miles separating me from home. In Michigan, the elevation rarely tops a thousand feet. Here, I live more than a mile above sea level. There are none of the maples, oaks, and cottonwood. Instead, there are shrubs with thick stems and leaves to hold in water during the dry season. Even though it's well into spring, temperatures rarely climb over sixty. Most visitors in the park are from California and have never been so cold in their life. Every sunrise I see people huddled together under hotel blankets and bathrobes, their only defense against the chill. That's not to say there isn't beauty in Haleakala, but sometimes I'm left winded at its alienness.

Maybe that's why I've set out on this hike even with the daylight quickly slipping away. Armed with a small dinner, binoculars, camera, and my cellphone, I intend to look for the 'u'au. Every day I tell guests about the how the petrel's wide wings carry it for

weeks at a time over the open ocean. On my guided hikes I always bring a photo of one sitting in front of its nest, big eyes staring at the camera. There are some who would be reluctant to call it cute, but I have no such qualms. For a month I teach the public about the bird. They do not know it's a bird I have not yet seen.

I don't think anyone really cares, but I do. I can't stand the gap between knowledge and experience. But it's even more than that. I've been here a month with the 'u'au practically on my doorstep. I can't go another night without trying to witness it firsthand.

This urge to see is familiar, the obsession comforting. I'm used to chasing down birds. Even though I'm forced to clamber over rocks and cinder, the procedure soothes me. I don't worry about how I will get back down or how tired I'll be working the visitor desk at Haleakala National Park the next day. Those will be things post-'u'au Ashely will be happy to deal with.

After two miles of hiking I get to the crater rim, taking a seat at the top of the switchbacks that lead to the crater floor, pulling out a somewhat-disintegrated tuna fish sandwich. Just like the 'u'au I've brought seafood to the top of Maui, though I will try not to leave any trace of my sandwich unlike the squid beaks they regurgitate near their burrows.

The story goes that the 'u'au was believed extirpated from the islands until a man visiting the islands chased down rumors of strange noises in the crater, rediscovering the birds as they flew in to roost for the night. I tell the visitors this story to encourage them to explore, convince them that they too can make great discoveries. I leave out the part about how the man was an ornithologist, since they'll see the bird as realms of experts

instead. It's hard enough to get all these transient people to care about a place they consume as a point on a vacation checklist.

I don't intend to do something so incredible. Sometimes, just working here is an honor too much to bear. I don't understand how someone like me can be working in a place like Maui when so many others applied. In the quiet moments, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the opportunity. I get lost in the rising of Scorpio, Maui's fish hook, over the volcano or in the shade of the rainforest. Maybe it's too much to ask for the 'u'au on top of everything, but I want to try all the same.

I wait and wait as the last bits of daylight slip away. I try to stay patient, but I've made such a commitment. I know I'll have to hike back in the dark. The moths have already emerged, buzzing past my ear. In the silence of the mountain, they are as loud as helicopters in my ear. Back home the crickets and tree frogs would be chirping, but it's only insects and the wind at this altitude. The island can seem so empty at times.

Somewhere in the crater I hear a low "ooo." I tilt my head, trying to figure out if the sound is true or some sort of hope-induced hallucination. A minute passes and I think I hear something, but once again, it's too far away to be sure. More minutes trickle past until a barking "ku-ku-ku" sends me to my feet. The clouds that had filled the crater start to part, but I can't see anything yet. The wailing of petrels builds, as if they were all waiting for that first bird to give the call, a symphony unlocked from the cinders. Though I can't see it, I imagine the 'u'aus coming home to their burrows in the crater walls, squeezing their bodies down between stones and greeting the single hatchling they will devote all their attentions to for the next half year. Somehow, they carve out homes in the

volcano with their webbed feet and blunt beaks. I listen to their reunion songs, wonder if the 'u'au somehow recognize the impossibility of their lives.

This melody would have been enough, but in the darkness I see something move. I don't bother with my binoculars. The thing moving is too fast and it's too dark for my binoculars to be much use. I catch the shape again as it cuts around an outcropping, something black as a piece of old lava carved into wings. It turns, exposing its white belly. It stands out so sharp against the twilight mist that its impression is burned into the spot long after it's gone. I have seen the 'u'au.

I linger in the dark for well past sunset, stunned. I almost feel as if I could never move again, living off the echoes of the 'u'au in song and sight. Reluctantly, I remember my early wake-up time for work and put my head lamp on before heading down the mountain. In the light of moth eyes I can hardly believe my luck. How have I been so lucky to see these animals? How will I be able to tell others of my gratitude? I know I will stumble when I share this. Coworkers and tourists alike will smile, maybe offer a small congratulations.

As the lights of my small apartment come into view and the bird's song has long since faded away, I wish I were someone better with words, to share with them the clouds sifting around the jagged rim peaks, how the nocturnal chorus finds me just as the silence overwhelms. But I know my joy and maybe that can be enough. The 'u'au can be enough.

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