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Processions of Birds

We sat in a Pasadena cafe next to Vroman's Bookstore enjoying an afternoon away from end-of-year tempests at the high school. The place had what we thought of as a British pub look—dim lights, lots of wood—satisfying to two teachers of literature.

"I overheard that twerp call me 'Bird Legs!'" I said. "I think he meant me to hear. He turned and said it just as he was leaving the classroom. I should have—"

"Bird legs? I'd have the twerp drawn and quartered." Maxine blew on her black coffee and smiled. "Bet he didn't like the grade you gave him. We pamper those athletes."

Outside, California's sunny skies, manageable traffic, contented people seemed a utopian vision—perfection designed by a happy god. Birds sang from somewhere aloft, and June breezes scattered the particulates in the Los Angeles basin so we could breathe. Birds entered my consciousness a lot that week, and for some reason bird metaphors crowd my memories now. I write about the past with birdcalls and whispers of flight in my ear. They help me tell this story, bring me to recognition.

We liked to make fun of our students in the afternoons at the bookstore. It was the mid-sixties. Change was forcing itself into our world. Bold idealists pressed for an America of peace, equity, and freedom. Black people stormed for civil rights. The war in Viet Nam moved college students to protest in the streets, go to jail, agitate for an end to the war. I'd received letters from young people I'd taught who were now at Berkeley striking against the University for a more relevant curriculum.

Maxine and I were two radical teachers doing our part to undermine the conventions at the high school and advocate for rebellion. The students enjoyed our witty criticism of the 'establishment,' as we called the conventional world. The school administrators quavered in their offices like trapped hummingbirds, afraid to censure us. On that June day, however, Maxine and I could have been two aristocrats oblivious to the armies at the gates.

"Too late for executions," I sighed, fingering the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* I'd purchased. "Brad's gone to college as of today. He's probably at UCLA right now signing football contracts. I guess that means he's not a twerp. Besides, he's right. I do have bird legs."

"No you don't . . . Birds don't have knees."

My slender, fashionably-dressed companion, as composed as a solitary heron, never took a false step in those spike heels of hers. I'd taught for just three years—I was twenty-six—and gathered teaching ideas from her like a hungry sparrow pecking at the sweet crumbs she passed to me. She had a smartness I wanted to appropriate—those shoes, that critical eye. "Still, Brad sort of made my day," I added. "I like excitement." I took a last sip of coffee, heavy with cream. "He's a dear in lots of ways. I wish him well in college." I picked up the check. "My treat. You've made me feel better about the twerp. Thanks for coming on short notice."

I remember our conversation because of what happened afterwards. The scene in that bookstore clarifies who I was before a memorable visitor walked into my classroom at the high school a few days later. After that woman came to me like the angel of death, I made less of an effort to appropriate Maxine's cool composure and radical humor.

The next day, I put on my glasses, unlocked the door of my classroom, and entered the cheerful space, golden with light from windows along the east wall. As I remember those avian days, I'll say that an Audubon bird print captioned with a phrase from Whitman, "I sing myself," graced the bulletin board.

Next to the bird print, a poster of a medieval knight viewed with indifference the students crowding in the door behind me. The girls wore bright red lipstick and the boys sported short haircuts. These young teens of prosperous white America were segregated from less advantaged students—even though new equality legislation had been passed—and they exuded a sense of entitlement. You'd never guess they'd have to face racial turmoil or shocking counter-culture folk who didn't look like them. They seemed incapable of dealing with protest, let alone incubating such thoughts themselves. I saw myself as influential in these young peoples' lives and hoped to turn them into a flock of soaring geese with a wider perspective.

Proud of the attention and respect these docile students paid me, I walked to my desk—conscious of my bird-legs—and pointed to the armored man in the poster. "Can you turn your thoughts to the Middle Ages so soon after lunch? Just look at this knight for inspiration." My voice had an authoritative positive tone adopted from Mrs. Miller, my seventh-grade teacher. She was a wise and tough lady, a hawk—top of the food chain, scrutinizing and confident. I tried to be her.

"If you ask me," Claudia said softly, regarding the knight poster, "he was awfully short."

I started the record player beside the lectern and we listened to Alexander Scourby reciting lines from *The Canterbury Tales*, a procession of scrappy, naughty pilgrims progressing through medieval England. They were not like the orderly group of white Americans in front of me. My student fledglings looked like they'd been hatched from the same eggs. I must have looked bland myself with my Sandra Dee haircut and self-satisfied smile.

While Chaucer's pilgrims made their jaunty way, I was aware that to earn my living surrounded by these bright young people was not anything like the tedious routines of the retail store I'd worked in as an adolescent or what my father had endured as a laborer in the California vegetable fields. I delighted in my good fortune to be in that sunny classroom knowing I could awaken these students to resist traditional thinking and see what was happening beyond the periphery of their limited lives. Looking back, I can see a puffed up, strutting mother hen presiding over that classroom. The students admired me, and I manipulated their innocence to get them to adopt my opinions about mindless patriotism, bigoted racism. I wanted my students to fly off to college with my values in their beaks like pennants.

A few days later, I sat alone at my desk at the end of the day, organizing and planning, my efficient teacher's hands piling papers in necessary stacks. I smiled to myself—convinced I did the work of a productive professional. I felt a darkening and looked up to see a gaunt woman standing in front of me, her flat purse held in front of her stomach like a shield. I stood, surprised by a person I didn't know. Late sunlight came in slanted beams through the window-blinds, marking stripes of light and shade on the two of us.

"I'm Jarred's mother," the woman said quietly. Opposite me was a mother whose son, a boy of fifteen, had recently died. "You know we lost him on Friday . . . I'm here to collect everything you have in. . .uh . . . his handwriting." She looked around as if searching for her boy. For a moment her face disappeared into the shadows.

I sat down. "Oh . . . yes. . ." Of course I'd known of Jarred's incomprehensible death. Did I have any of his papers? Was there an essay on the bulletin board? No. I'd eliminated Mrs. Kenten's son from the room, crossed off his name, and reordered the seating chart.

My face flushed. I could hear clanging from the flagpole outside. Someone had taken down the California Bear and American flags for the night, and the fasteners slammed a reprimand against the pole. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I have any of . . . his papers . . . uh. . . Mrs. Kenten.” Embarrassed for stumbling over her name, I was unable to meet my visitor’s eyes. Why hadn’t I anticipated this? A child had died, for God’s sake. My head started to ache. “I’m so sorry.”

Then my ghostly visitor disappeared. I couldn’t finish my work so I gathered papers and left the classroom. Walking unsteadily, I stopped to take two aspirin at the drinking fountain, my heart fluttering with remorse. I’d made a landing on hard ground.

In the privacy of our grassy yard at home, I screwed the nozzle on the garden hose, turned the pressure to full force and made an arc of shimmering water. Watering answered all needs then, including my sense of dis-ease. Maybe it was a California thing, a western cure—to shower the earth in order to heal. You could almost see the parch dissolve, the green revive. I watered like a forgiving god, spreading light and life to the planet. Spray from the hose drifted over me like a blessing.

Our black cat Ebony at my feet, I tried to empty my mind, blend into the green in some metaphysical way. But the yard did not shimmer with transcendence; it lay at my feet as inert and buggy as always. The cat brushed against my leg, reminding me that my body was finite too. I was bound to this prosaic backyard. Death can do that—spell out in neon: everything must return to earth, even you. Jarred, I’m sorry.

A brazen mockingbird called out. She flew low over Ebony so she could dive down and peck his vulnerable bottom. They raced around the yard, and Ebony evaded attack by taking shelter in the ivy. I moved to the paved driveway, withholding sympathies for bird or cat. Let them work it out. All that mattered was the sound of the water shooting the pebbles off the asphalt diverting guilty thoughts in a pleasant scattering rush.

Inside, a few minutes later, Ebony proceeded to the couch, hopped to the high back, and positioned himself to observe the flurries in the trees outside. I sat in a comfortable chair facing outward too. The cat must have been thinking of avenging mockingbirds. My thoughts went to the classroom. I’d not really known Jarred, except for his appearance. His narrow face, dark hair and eyes, matched his twin sister’s. He was a silent boy. I couldn’t remember a single word he’d offered during class discussions. What books had he read? How could I have thought I was a successful teacher, never mind a compassionate one? Did Mrs. Miller—my seventh grade model—begin her career as heartless as this?

I called Maxine at home. I wrote some bad poetry. I petted my cat and stared into space.

The landscape beyond the window seemed changed. Ebony and I had been cast into a smoggier world empty of birdsong now. What was out there beyond my lawn and driveway? The young continued their marches. I’d sent them there, of course, to promote my ideas while I sat safely in a bookstore café. I’d pushed them out of their nests into jails and expulsion from college. Like Miss Jean Brody—who’d used her persuasive talent to send an ill-equipped young student to the Spanish Civil War—I’d been using students to be my surrogates while I watched from a safe distance. I looked like a self-centered step-mother evicting innocent children. Were the flock equipped to survive? The question hadn’t occurred to me before Mrs. Kenten.

In the years since, images of Mrs. Kenten and her lost son have not lifted from my heart despite the compelling wars going on outside my windows. A sad mother stands before me still, a narrow reminder of a decade of political, moral, and academic struggle—days of self-examination and attempts to find in literature some sustaining hope.