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Birds

John O'Brien

In the wintertime I used to throw bread out on the snow for birds while I waited in the back shed with my cat. I would hold the cat on my lap and we both would watch as the birds landed. The cat would get all tense, its tail flipping back and forth. Then when there were enough birds, I would let the cat go and it would rush out the door. We never caught any birds that way.

My older sister bought a blue and green parakeet once. Said she was going to teach it to talk. It never learned a single word, but it used to mutter to itself all the time. It would mutter itself into an outrage and end up squawking and screeching till someone banged on the cage or threw something. At dinnertime my father threw spoons and butter knives. We hated that bird. Then it took to pulling its feathers out and in a short time it was naked except for the feathers it could not reach around its head. It was an awful sight. One time, when my sister was cleaning the cage, it got out and ran all around the house. When I finally caught the bird, it bit my thumb and I squeezed the life out of it.

Route 70 is straight and flat as it cuts through the Midwest. Once in January I was hitch-hiking just outside of Kansas City. I was stuck for over an hour in the same spot and it was damn cold. I had my collar turned up, but the wind came down my back anyway. It was just about dusk when I noticed a sparrow perched on the power wire beside the road. I was sitting on my suitcase watching as the bird flew from the wire to the road and back to the wire again. It did this over and over. I walked down to where the bird was landing and found what it was after. From tire flattened manure it was picking grass seeds.

A gang of us went to the Philadelphia Zoo one spring afternoon and managed to entice two pigeons close enough to catch. We tied the wings down on one and threw it to an alligator. The alligator ignored it and the pigeon drowned. We let the other one loose in the lion house. It was just before feeding time and the bird flew back and forth near the cages, driving the big cats wild.

My grandfather had a trellis in his backyard that was covered with morning glories. In the cool mornings and evenings when the blue flowers were open, the hummingbirds would come to drink the nectar. They would hover in the air and dip their long, thin bills into the flowers. Once or twice a summer my grandfather would sneak the bottle of sweet peach brandy from the cupboard below the sink. He would pour it into a tea cup so that grandmother wouldn't notice and some of it he would eye drop into the morning glories. We would watch from the back porch as the birds got drunk and fell to the ground. They would flop and struggle around looking cock-eyed. Grandfather would let me keep them as long as they were drunk, but when they sobered up, I had to let them go.

On Route 70 again, I saw a crow, black as black with crow importance, at the road edge. In between rushing cars it would strut out and pick at the body of a snake. A black sailor with a rolling walk, a feathered mortician doing his work.

Pigeons nested in Old St. Clement's Church for as long as it was there. In the evenings you could always see them settling onto the eaves and ledges. I remember one of them got into the church during old Father Riley's funeral mass. I was in second grade and as the bird flew back and forth, trying to find a way out, I thought it was Father Riley's soul.

A little after that they tore the old church down. The day the steeple fell all the pigeons left. That evening they came back and wheeled and circled over the ruins, looking for the roost.

I've caught two birds with a fishing rod. One summer night I was fishing with my grandfather. We were drifting down the Capon River in a canoe, plugging for bass. I got my plug hung up on the bank and was jerking at it when a small owl swooped down from a tree and grabbed it. We paddled to shore and found the owl hooked to the plug. It kept trying to bite or claw when we tried to turn it loose. Finally we just cut the line and let it fly away with the plug hooked to its foot.

The second bird I caught deliberately. I threw hard corn into the backyard and around a kernel tied one end of my monofilament fishing line. I waited in the shed with the rod. Starlings came and ate the corn. When a bird took the kernel with the line tied to it, I let it swallow, then reeled in the slack. I came out of the shed and all the birds flew away except the one I had caught. It fluttered around under the cherry tree, trying to bite the string. I reeled it in.

After a snowstorm I watched starlings land on a power wire. There must have been hundreds of them. The wire began to sag under the growing weight until it touched the one below it. There was a cracking sound and a smell of burnt flesh and feathers. All the birds fell off into the snow.

The starling was originally an English bird. An Englishman who came to America brought a few dozen with him. He liked the bird mostly because it walked rather

than hopped like other birds. The first few dozen were released and never seen again. A year or so later the same man brought a few more dozen over. He really liked those starlings. The second group disappeared also and it seemed that they would just not take. Then after a few years passed, there were reports from farmers about flocks of strange birds destroying fruit. They were starlings. From that time the birds grew and grew in numbers and took to the cities. Now, of course, they're a problem.

In Philadelphia they would come into Center City each day at dusk and settle on the ledges of City Hall. There they would screech and whistle and leave droppings all over. The people tried everything. They put poison out, but then the song birds started to die too. They put some kind of sticky goo on the ledges and that didn't work. Finally they got a recording of a starling's distress cry and broadcast it over loudspeakers. This worked fine for as long as the cry was broadcast, but as soon as it stopped, the birds came back. The record was as bad as the birds and so they gave it up.

At the east entrance to the Philadelphia Wannamaker's Store, there was an arch and in the center of the arch a large bronze eagle. It became a tradition to meet friends or lovers there. On almost any day you could see people waiting for someone under the eagle. To meet "under the eagle" was a romantic thing and I used it as a ploy with every girlfriend.

The Presbyterian Church on Greenway Avenue was covered with pigeons' nests and droppings. It was a beautiful old stone church with a sharp sloping roof and a fine tall bell tower. It was a shame for the pigeons to be making such a mess of it. Someone came up with this idea. Plastic owls were bought from the sporting goods store and posted on the ledges. One was even put on top of the gilt cross at the very peak of the bell tower. It worked. For the first few days, the pigeons circled and circled, but would not land. Then they left for good. On Sundays I used to go to a place "The Sugar Bowl" right across the street from the church. I went there to play the pinball. I would watch the good Presbyterians coming out and going into church under the steady gaze of all those owls.

On Philadelphia's South Street, in the open market, there was a poultry shop with cages and cages of fowls. They were stacked on the sidewalk and inside the shop. The white chickens always clucked and picked at their own droppings. The ducks sat quietly and the geese arched their long necks out between the slats of the cages, made soft oboe sounds, and looked so mournful. There would always be a fat man standing in the shop doorway absently smoking a cigarette, his eyes half closed. He wore a dirty blood-stained apron and looked bored. In the morning the apron was white and clean, but by midday it was always bloodstained. The Italian ladies came to the market with their straw carrying bags, and after inspecting all the cages, would pick the bird they wanted. Sometimes they would reach in and pinch the chicken's leg, just to be sure. Usually they picked chickens, but sometimes before holidays, they would take a duck or maybe a goose. The man would reach in, pick the selected bird, then casually wring its neck. He

would have his cigarette pinched between his lips and would talk as the chicken struggled in his hands.

“Yeah, Mrs. Rosanna, I ain’t seen you for a month. How’s the back?”

Then he would go into the shop with the bird still jerking around and butcher it.

On down the block there was the meat shop with goat bodies hanging from the lamp post and live rabbits in the window. On the other side of the street was the fish man’s store with live carp in wash tubs on the sidewalk and piles of dead squid on shaved ice.

On my first visit to New York I went to Central Park with my older sister. We walked around, then sat down on a bench. There was a woman sitting on the bench just across from us. She had a boy with her who was mongoloid. His head was very large and round. The woman put popcorn on his shoulders and head and told him to hold very still. The pigeons came and sat on his head and shoulders and he would begin to giggle and laugh till he shook and all the birds flew away. They did this over and over. Just as we left, the boy tilted his head back and howled, “Light, light. The light is falling, Mama.”

I hadn’t been in Philadelphia for over two years and I came back and went to the “Sugar Bowl” to play the pin ball. Henry, the fat owner still ran the place. I looked across the street to the Presbyterian Church and noticed that the owls were gone. I asked Henry about it. He looked thoughtful for awhile.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Them owls. Now I remember. Yeah, they had them owls to keep the pigeons off. Well, it worked for awhile, but then the crows started.”

“Crows?” I said.

“Yeah, crows come by one day and started fighting with them owls. Put up an awful racket. Remember that one on the top? On the cross, ya know.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, them crows knocked hell out of it. Knocked it right off. Fell through a sky light or something.”

He went to wait on a kid who came in. Then he came back.

“It’s funny about them crows. Never seen them around here till they put the owls up. They showed up once, then didn’t come back for a few days. Then they come every day real early in the morning, just as I was opening up. They used to sit in them trees in the graveyard. Could hear um calling like they was having a meeting or something. Then they’d all take off and attack. Just knocked hell out of them owls. Finally they took um down. Now they got pigeons again.”

On the second day of our trip to Alaska, the generator burned out and we had to stop in Indiana. It was a truck stop place and the mechanic had a few cars ahead of us so we had to wait in the cafe. We sat and drank coffee next to a window. A semi-truck pulled up to the fuel pumps and as it did, a large gray cat came out from under the last booth and pushed the screen door open and went out to the truck. It stood up on its hind legs and peered into the truck’s grill. Then it got down and came back inside. A bit later the cat did it again, but this time it

reached into the grill of another truck and deftly pulled a dead bird out. Then it carried it off behind the cafe. We watched it inspect every car and truck that came in. The waitress told us it had been doing it for years. She said that the semi's often ran into birds and got them caught in their grills and that they didn't have to feed the cat very much. The cat had it down to a system she said.

In Nebraska we picked up an old man who was hitchhiking. It was early in the morning and the doves were on both sides of the road, pecking at the gravel. They would fly as we passed them. I thought the old guy was a drunk because he had yellow eyes and a red face, but he said he had religion. He was a preacher, though he didn't have a church. He used to hunt those doves, he told us, but that was before he was born again. Anybody who read the Bible couldn't kill doves because they were God's special birds. He said that the ride we gave him was surely a blessing and that it was a fine morning and that those doves used to taste awful good.

We camped right outside of Anchorage for a week and on the fourth day a call for men to fight a forest fire came over the radio. I signed up and went with about twenty other guys in a truck to the fire. There were two native men in the truck. They thought the whole idea was fun. One of them said that native people sometimes started fires so they could make the \$2.50 an hour putting them out. When we got to the fire, they gave me a shovel and told me to start digging a trench. We could see the fire across a valley. It was moving toward us. When it got in the valley, we started to feel the heat. I watched a line of crows flying toward us. When they flew over the valley, they fell one by one into the fire.

We lived for a year on a small island about one hundred miles off the coast of Alaska. In the fall the ducks would come past and stop in the bays and lagoons to rest as they made their way south. There were two lagoons near us and when the weather was really bad, the ducks would fill both of them. There were golden eyes, old squaws, mallards, sea quail and sometimes snow geese and Brant's geese. The native men would take two fishing boats, one to each lagoon, and all the ducks would fly to the other and there more would be killed. On the days when the weather was really bad and the ducks couldn't fly very far, they would get them going back and forth from place to place till hundreds were killed.

We heard a story about the Eskimos way up north. It seemed that new game laws about ducks and geese were passed, limiting the number of birds and prescribing a legal season. That was the first year it was in effect and a man from a village killed two geese out of season and was arrested. He didn't have any money and so was taken and jailed in a nearby town. Two days later all the men from the village came to town bringing hundreds of dead ducks and geese. They piled them up in the street in front of the jail and just waited there. I never heard the end of the story.

The old people on the island were superstitious and told stories about an eagle with triangular eyes. It was a very bad sign and although no one had really seen it, they believed. There were other things too, like a cross fox that walked on its hind legs and a man-sized octopus that stood on top of the water at certain phases of the moon.

In the winter, fog banks and low clouds would cover the island so that the mail plane couldn't get to us. There was one time when we didn't see the sun or sky for over two weeks. There were three days of constant rain and on the last day a delicate, long billed bird fell onto the school playground. The children gathered all around and watched it try to stand up. One of the older boys went to get the teacher. He came out and took the bird. The people in the village had never seen a bird like it and they knew all the birds for hundreds of miles. They finally decided that it was some kind of strange thing blown away from its normal range by the storm. The teacher kept it in a box by his kitchen stove. He tried to feed it everything: worms, bread, meat, fish. But it would eat nothing.

The eagle, our national bird, is a scavenger. We would often come across one feeding on a dead seal or fish on the beach. It was also one of the first birds to mate in the spring. There was a strange mating habit with the male chasing the female for miles until he finally caught her. The natives said they mated in mid-air, but I can't see how that could be.

A lot of sea birds come back in the spring. There was one bird, a puffin or sea parrot, which was black with touches of white and yellow and red on the wings and the thick, heavy beak of a parrot. They swam like ducks and fed on the schools of candle fish and when they found a good school would gorge themselves till their bellies swelled and they couldn't get off the water. They were tunneling birds and dug their nests in the small islands or on sea cliffs. When they came back, there would be hundreds of them floating on the bay.

The native children would take their dinghies out and row around after the birds trying to hit them with the oars. When the children got close, the puffins would flap like mad and skip across the top of the water, their bellies dragging them down. When a boat finally caught up with one, the bird would duck under, then bob to the surface yards away. One day the kids stunned one and brought it back to shore. They plucked some tail feathers out and the bird squawked and tried to bite.

"He don't like dat," one of the kids said, giving the bird a human pronoun the way they did with most animals.

"Dat makes him mad."

They plucked a few more feathers out. Then one boy, Big Arnie's son, got careless and the puffin clamped onto a finger, leaving the very tip hanging by a thread of skin. Everyone laughed, even Big Arnie's boy. He jerked the tip of his finger off and held it up for everyone to see and then threw it into the salmonberry bushes. Then he felt the pain and began to scream. He ran home.

A few minutes later he came back and got down on his hands and knees,

whimpering to himself, searching in the bushes for his finger. Big Arnie was drunk and told him to go find it.

When spring really started, the natives would go to the small stone islands and look for gull's eggs. They were as good as hen's eggs, they said and larger too. To find the first gull's egg was a big thing with them. Long before nesting they would check the islands.

One day Ula and I were sanding his boat, getting it ready for salmon fishing, when he decided to take me egg hunting. We took the skiff and a bottle of hundred proof Vodka to a special place he knew, two small islands right next to one another just off the north end of our island. It took an hour to get there and Ula drank half the Vodka by then. As we approached the place, he told me the Aleut word, a whole series of strange guttural sounds that made up one name. The name meant "A man climbed up here once" or at least that's how Ula translated it. He said it was always the first place to have gull's eggs, but it was hard to get to because there were steep cliffs on every side. He was too drunk to climb so told me to go. He waited in the skiff, rocking in the surf, taking swigs from the bottle. He watched me climb.

Near the top there was a patch of yellow dirt that was filled with puffin tunnels. I was holding on as best I could, flat on my stomach, finger tips dug into the dirt. A puffin burst from a hole right in front of my face. It hit me on the forehead and I slid down to the edge of the cliff and barely managed to stop myself. Ula sat in the boat with his hand over his eyes.

"I'm all right," I shouted down and Ula looked up and smiled.

He took a long pull on the bottle.

Once I made the top, I walked around through the high yellow grass. I could see where the gulls had made nests, but there weren't any eggs. I crossed and re-crossed the top of the island. The gulls flew over me crying and screeching because I had disturbed their nests. Finally I found two eggs on a stone ledge that stuck out over the sea. The eggs were brownish green and still felt warm. I took my shirt off and made a sack by tying the sleeves together. Then I made my way back down carrying the shirt in my teeth.

"You got some," Ula said, slapping me on the back. "You got the first ones." He gave me a drink of Vodka.

"That sea parrot could have killed you, man. I thought it was the end of you. What could I tell them back at the village, eh? My friend killed by a sea parrot."

We went back to the village and when we climbed up on the dock, Ula began shouting, "We got them. We got the first ones."

He was really drunk by then. Flora, the fattest woman on the island, was at the end of the dock. She waited for us to get there.

"My friend got the first egg."

He took one from my shirt. "See, see, the first one."

Flora slapped his hand, making the egg fall to the dock and break.

"A white man," she said and sneered.

Ula's boat was called the "Grizzly II" and by the end of May, we had started

commercial fishing. At that time of year, the salmon run had just started and it really didn't pay to fish hard so we just sort of scouted around. One Sunday we anchored up in Danger Bay and had nothing to do so Ula and I took the skiff to a sea cliff a mile or so away. The cliff was covered with gulls and kitty-wakes' nests and there were young birds in almost every nest. As we approached, all the adult birds took off and began circling and screaming. We got right up next to the cliff and looked into the nests, finding mostly naked or downy fledglings. It was odd how the birds reacted. The small naked ones would feign death and no matter how you turned them, they would flop back over on their backs and lay still. The birds with down would scream and scream when you picked them up and the biggest ones with pin feathers would try to bite. We took one of the largest ones, thinking we could make a pet of it. It took to the boat right away and would walk up and down the deck with a natural sailor's roll. We kept it for the rest of the season, calling it Sailor because it was white and black and walked like one. We fed it strips of salmon and food scraps. When we were hauling in the nets and the decks were busy and dangerous, it would sit on top of the cabin and watch.

At the end of the season we had to get rid of it. It was a mature bird by then. I took it to the end of the dock and dropped it off. It fluttered down to the water and swam around and around the pilings and would not go out very far. Then it swam to the beach and started to follow a woman. I took it back to the end of the dock and dropped it into the water again, but it just went back to the beach and followed someone else. It was just too used to people I guess. I took it out in the skiff and let it go a half mile away. An hour or so after that I was at my window looking out over the bay. There was a crowd of native children on the beach. Two girls held the bird by the wings while a dog jumped and snapped at it. The girls ran down the beach, holding the bird out as if to make it fly. Then they gave it to the dog.

One evening the crew sat on the deck of the "Grizzly II" waiting for supper and smoking a cigarette after a long hard day. We had fished from dawn till five and had the hold filled with fish. I was cleaning two salmon to hang on the mast and make umaduc. The gulls on one of the small islands got very excited and took to the air. They squawked and circled in the air. We barely paid attention because gulls were silly birds, always getting excited over one thing or another. They quieted down, but after a bit started up again. After the third or fourth time we started watching. An eagle took off from shore, circled around the island, then landed, took a baby gull from a nest, then took it back to shore. It would tear the bird to shreds on the beach and eat it. Ula went into the cabin and got the field glasses and we watched it through them for awhile. The fishermen never liked the eagle because they believed the bird killed salmon. Besides, it was an American bird and they weren't American. Ula took the skiff and his rifle down close and shot the eagle. He came back waving it over his head and shouting, "Look at Mr. Big now. Look at this big shot."

The bird was immense with a wing span well over five feet. Its feet were

as large as a man's hand with wicked talons. I cut the feet off and kept them. I still have them in a little box in my dresser.

Once when duck hunting from the shore of our island, I shot a kittywake out of boredom and spite. It fell in the surf and laid there white and dead gently swaying with the wave surge. Another kittywake, its mate, circled above calling to the downed bird. It landed in the water beside it and seemed content to sit by the body. I haven't killed anything since then.

We left the island by mail plane. Flying over the water, we saw gulls like white puffs on the water and crossed over an eagle too. The shadow of the eagle swam on the water.