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MARC BERLEY

WHAT KIND OF BIRD ARE YOU?

My mother is dropping bombs on us. My father and I are standing in front of our house, looking up high into the sky, and it feels like bombs. But it is only turds exploding on us, her turds, warm and creamy and white.

My mother claims she has turned into a bird, which makes no sense, because my mother hates birds, hates them with the deepest kind of hatred, which is rooted in fear. She cannot be a bird. How could she be a bird? But she is my mother, and there she is, soaring, so I have to go along. I marvel at her aim.

She also claims my father is a worm. I say no. But she swears he is a worm. She swears about a lot of things, swears to God. My father, she says, is a worm writhing in the soil, covered in the white excrement she wishes were his blood.

She swoops down.

Don't make any mistake about it. My mother is a fighter. Whatever kind of bird she has turned herself into, she is still a fighter, a fierce creature, with talons and a face that bears down on you.

My father could fight her, and could probably win, but he doesn't bother. Not that he's lazy. He just doesn't think it would be polite or proper. I tell my father he could keep his hands politely in his pockets and instruct me how to pick up a stone, instruct me how to throw the stone up at her as she dives down toward us. But he does not. It would only be instruction, I tell him, a father to his son. He tells me it would be unseemly. He tells me to remain calm.

"Is what she is doing not unseemly?" I ask.

My father says nothing. He shakes his head, stays quiet.

"Against unseemly," I say, "what is a son to do?"

He stares into my eyes with that look of his that says we must stand and weather this, too, like statues in a piazza beset by pigeons.

He should shout, I tell my father, shout up the truth, that he is not a worm, that she is not a bird, that I am only a child. But he does not shout or say anything. It is hard for me to tell if he is just being polite and proper, or remaining calm, or if he is in some strange way incapacitated.

"Mother," I shout. "Why is this the life you must choose?"

Her wings and her body are shiny and black. Her neck is thick and strong. Her beak is bent and sharp. She appears vicious, and desirous of being vicious, but she is limited in ways she does not understand.

"I studied birds in school," I remind my father. "Their bones are hollow. So her bones must now be hollow. Otherwise, if her bones were still solid, like human bones, she would, like ostriches and penguins, be unable to fly."

He does not say anything.

"What hollowed out your bones?" I shout up.

My father has retreated from my mother for the moment, or perhaps for all of time. He is letting me do the shouting.

She angles her wings, cuts the air, circles, makes a beautiful descent, beautiful like she was once beautiful. She maneuvers, dives above our heads, shits on us again, most of it exploding on my father, his head and his arms. Only the splatter reaches me, mainly on my feet.

She is ignoring me the way she always ignores me when I make a good point, which makes me want to get technical and deliver information that is lofty and true, so she will have to accept it.

36 "Have your bones not fused into a single ossification?" I say. "Are you not now possessed, Mother, of a pygostyle?"

I would swear I hear a remnant of her laughter—airborne, avian, changed utterly, but still her laughter.

"Don't think you can lord over us just because you have a fused sternum," I shout, my head tilted, my eyes trying to follow her jagged flight.

I know what she is thinking. I can always read her mind. Right now, she is thinking about my education: *You and your damn reports. You and your damn learning.*

She makes another arcing pass and shits on us again. Most of it explodes on me this time.

It is all so anomalous—the beauty of her flight, the way her wings stretch out and veer subtly, her body floating in the air above us, making graceful motions in service of her base intentions. Why, I want to ask her, must she shit on her son?

"You have a diapsid skull!" I shout, my voice carrying in its own flight, thudding, expanding sound waves I am certain she must feel.

"Yes, I said it," I say. "A diapsid skull. Just like a reptile. You are no different, no better, than the serpent in the Good Book."

I look at my father. His eyes are registering an unwillingness to accept defeat, but also an unwillingness to allow the fight to descend into embarrassing ugliness.

“Come down here,” I say. “Come down here, Mother. Be bird enough to alight upon my shoulder. Stop shitting on me! Come down, here on my shoulder, so we may speak, species to species, face to face.”

She does not even lower the trajectory of her flight. She can read my mind as well as I can read hers. She knows I will put my two hands on either side of her furcula, make my wish, and start pulling.

What a way it would be for her to go—the wish and the actualization simultaneous.

God, how she shits. Sometimes it is like rifled bullets. Other times it is like a shotgun, which makes me think she is eating far too much coleslaw and not enough crackers.

“Do not think it is easy for me,” I say to my father. “All this unseemliness, the ugly splatter that has hit my heart.”

Finally, my father steps up and says something to my mother, but he says it in a calm tone, and it is speculative.

“Okay, so take your premise,” he says. “You are a bird, and I am a worm. Fine. But the child is a child. The child is only a child. On that, can we agree to agree?”

Finally, my mother speaks.

“Duck,” she says, “if you know what’s good for you.”

She descends in an arc of exquisite symmetry, but then her wings flutter, a hiccup in midair. Her shit lands in front of us and behind us, but none of it upon us.

“Mother,” I shout. “You missed.”

Another time. This is another time.

My father and I are bivouacked, astonished, standing in front of our tent, which is being disrespected by the wind. We are camping out, bonding, our canteens leaking rusty water at our feet. Our heads are tilted. We are looking up, lowly foot soldiers in the family war. My mother is mainly steady in her flight, only occasionally thrown off course. I can hear her eerie laughter. The screech of a bird.

This is years later, or years earlier, or just another time, or it is the same time.

"Is this *again* or *ago*?" I ask my father.

My father says he cannot remember.

"This is good," I say to my father.

"Good?" my father says. "How good?"

"Think about it," I say. "We cannot even remember. We are beyond back-story. We are just here."

He looks at me, confused.

"I worry about the ways you have been damaged," he says.

"Damaged?" I say. "If I am damaged, am I not less vulnerable? Do I not have less to fear?"

"I don't always understand you," he says. "Please don't hold that against me."

"Shh," I say. "She might hear you."

I am looking up. I am always looking up. I see my mother. She is, in an awkward fashion, descending. She is faltering in one of her patterns, her flight less steady than before. She is closer than she has ever been since she turned herself into a bird. My father cannot watch. He retreats into the tent under the pretense of needing to locate our compass, which he says we may have lost.

My mother's feathers seem tattered. The feathers on her head are ruffled, worn away. She is balding, like an eagle. But her feathers are too black for her to be an eagle. Maybe she is part eagle and part balding crow.

I hope she doesn't cry, because the cry of an eagle doesn't sound like a bird. It sounds too much like a coyote, sick desire howling inarticulately at the wind.

I desist from my shouting, my shameful shouting, which comes from weakness I have not yet been able to transform into strength.

I want to cry up to her. I want my voice to carry like rain, except moving upward, toward the clouds, into the heavens. I want my voice to speak. I want it to tell my mother we are only people, people not immune to pain. I want to tell her people should have high aspirations. Not merely to fly and wreak havoc on those below. People, I want to tell her, can do good things.

I determine to try softness.

I pose, in a tender whisper directed at the sky, an indelicate question.

"Mother," I say. "What kind of bird are you? Why are your feathers black? Is your heart black, too?"

She is sweeping down, still in the air but closer. Maybe she thinks she is still far away and I cannot see her, but I can. I can even see her feet. It is always hard to see your mother's feet, with all of the imperfections and the wounds, but this is worse, far worse. Her feet—it used to be merely toenail fungus, but now it is scales, corneum, years' worth of keratin, which she used to put in her brittle hair.

She has almost landed. She is making dizzying circles only yards above my head.

"Where is your father?" she says. "Where is that worm? I swear to God I'll break his neck."

I point out that worms do not have necks, although there is that part near the top that is different, kind of flatter, a wide, smooth band, a dividing line, but not a neck.

"Worms don't have necks," I say. "Actually, it's called a clitellum."

"Don't you get smutty with me," she says.

"It's not what you think," I say. "You might remember. I did a report on worms, too."

"You and all your stupid education," she says.

"You cannot tell me," I say, "that you no longer have a four-chambered heart. You share that still with human beings. So you have no excuse. You cannot tell me you do not still have some human feelings."

"Come on," she says. "Grab hold. Take a ride with me."

But it is not as if we are going in her car, the red convertible her last boyfriend gave her before he left. She says to grab her talon.

"Talon?" I say.

"What, big shot?" she says. "Big smutty words you know, but you don't know from talon? And to think I made you all those school lunches and stood with you at the bus stop."

"I know what *talon* means," I say.

"You don't know what anything means," she says.

"You are consumed by anger," I say.

"There you go again," she says, "taking his side."

"I do not take sides," I say.

"Grab hold," she says. "Come to my side. Come with me."

This is uncomfortable to say, but I am certain something went wrong with my mother. Something early on, in her life and mine, both. Her bonding with her mother didn't go right. And her bonding with me wasn't enough to make

up for it. It was a disappointment to her. She craves the bonding of some other species. It is grave, primordial stuff.

But she didn't have to swoop down upon each of my girlfriends, like she was a bird of prey and my girlfriend was a willing mouse.

Her flight now is almost like a hovering. She is right above me, within my reach.

"Grab hold," she says. "Come."

"Where would you take me?" I say. "What is it you intend to do?"

"Come, you'll see," she says. "You are not supportive. Your loyalty is askew."

I hear my father in the tent, a hushed rustling.

I am too afraid to go with her. I am certain she will attempt to do something unwholesome. Or she will crash me down, break all of my bones.

"No," I say. "You will crash me down and break all of my bones."

"It doesn't have to go that way," she says. "But don't worry if it does. I will take you to my veterinarian and hold out every hope that you might heal. In my heart, I know you would make a beautiful kestrel."