Guide
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GUIDE

All Summer we could feel the pressure building
as the contagion stalled in Siskiyou,
against the High Cascades, and out of fear
we draped the cages with mosquito netting,
so even on the sharpest days our birds
lived in a dull half-light that hid their wounds
and blurred their distinctive markings. So carrying in
a defrosted rat with a smear of vitamins
like mold on its wet, white belly, I thought
the shadow the approaching virus cast
a kind of willed obscurity, as if a brush
had been dragged across the wet, pigment-
loaded surface of a photorealistic landscape.

Outside, the studious children pressed close
to the fence in their matching day-camp T-shirts,
each one holding a small handful of shade
over their eyes or squinting through the mask
brilliantly applied to their morning faces.

With a kinked, self-entangled hose spitting
at the joints and a clipboard of my tasks, I led
the little yellow-shirted mob up and down
the Center's steep-pitched precincts, giving each cage
a plaque of description as I dragged in
the coils and washed away the chalky mutes,
returning to the mild reproach of their silence
and sun-shocked stares with a swatch of rodent pelt
or leathery viscera in my latexed hand.

How strange I must have seemed to them! a bald man
inside a veiled box talking about
the Silent Spring and loss of habitat,
and how the kestrel's ultraviolet vision
can see the trail of vole urine but not
the power line that interrupts its flight,
as he fed an injured shadow with a voice
like a rusted hinge and a rending appetite.
From Kestrel to Kite they followed me, Goshawk,
Osprey and Vulture, Pygmy to Spotted Owl,
until we reached the gravel turnaround
where by the minivans their parents waited,
knoted in tight social clusters, and where
as a form of farewell, to give these brilliant kids
a less approximate sense of what their strained sight
had guessed toward, I brought one of our display birds,
Taka, a Swainson's Hawk, out of its cage.
Released from the necessary constrictions
of its mesh-covered enclosure into the open
extremities of summer air, the dark
morph male had a conniption fit, yo-yoing
against his jesses toward and away from
the closing-in circle of day-campers,
who were also scared and excited. Children,
that fluttering you feel in the muscles outside the ribs
over your heart as the bird I hold out to you
opens his wings, which are dark grey and brown
like dry, weather-worn shingles, and with the sound
of a dishrag shaken clean threatens to break
his splinterly pinions on the air between us,
is how your bodies would redress a wound
older than you, by taking off my hand
that portion of his weight that is the fear
he has instead of marrow in his bones.
To soothe the hawk I sang the lullaby
we use at feeding times to call our birds
to glove. The song is archaic but it works
as a point of contact between us and allows
an allotment of freedom like the length
of jess between swivel and anklet Taka tests
as he treads along the forefinger of my

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double-thick goatskin glove, eyeing the children with a look of fiercely prim skepticism as they disperse into their parents' cars to be belted into their booster seats.