Bird Boy: Evolution at Lightspeed

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Abstract

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What is the difference between human and animal? How might we define the murky place between us? How might we explore it, identify it, and make peace with the spaces where we brush up against one another? Is there some of the animal inside all of us? How do we connect with it? Should we? And if we do, what will we find? Using extended metaphor, personification, and transformational images of the body, *Bird Boy* adds to this collective questioning. The speaker of these essays and poems pushes against the animal inside of himself, aligning human emotion, introspection, and morality with the physicality, rituals, and behaviors of birds.

Bird Boy: Evolution at Lightspeed

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Mallards

I was beginning to think that I would live and die like a mallard duck. An existence of beaks and feathers, diving beneath water, waddling along wetlands. There was something in the eyes of a duck that I understood.

In my junior year of college, I joined an ornithology class. I was already in love with birds at the time. I felt deeply connected to our prehistoric ancestors, these dinosaurs after the dinosaurs. In their bodies, I saw the genetic mock-up of a raptor, in their beaks, the suggestion of razor-sharp teeth, in their feet, the three toes found in fossilized footprints. Our professor was as passionate about the birds as I was. I remember how excitedly, how quickly he would speak when we would spot one in the park, in the forest, even on campus, pointing at them from the classroom window as they soared past. I attended every class, took diligent notes, and sat in my backyard to listen to bird calls, marking down when I heard something I recognized. In my childhood home in SoCal, it was mourning doves and mockingbirds I heard, croaking ravens, the strange crackling of an acorn woodpecker. I learned my native species and kept my eyes peeled for any rarities. I aced every test, showed up for extra credit, and would stay late to discuss eagles and owls with my professor.

Once, our class took a field trip out to a park a few miles from campus. I still remember the horror of being stuffed into a van with a half-dozen fraternity brothers, whooping and hollering about some sport event that I hadn't gone to. At any moment I was sure they would say something about me, to me, maybe point and laugh at the smallest and quietest person in the van. How I chastised myself for proudly climbing into the 'boy's' van, how I wished now that I could disappear, or that I had not come out to this class during our introductions. These boys did not make sense to me, and I was sure I did not make sense to them. This was a flock I wasn't sure I

would ever feel part of. I drummed fingers against my knee and willed us to get to the birds faster. Birds I could understand, not these boys, never these boys.

We stopped on the beachy side of a small lake, sand crunching under shoes, dead leaves clinging to the edges of the tide. Out on the lake was a single mallard duck, drifting across the top of the pool, alert, watching us, not hurrying in any particular direction, simply buoyant and bouncing with the movement of the water below.

My professor said that thing that people just love to say when they see a duck, about how gracefully they move along the top of the water, their proud heads curved upward or lazily tucked into the wing, but under the water, they're paddling endlessly, boat propeller feet, kicking and kicking. How elegantly the duck seems to float along the water while its webbed feet kick against the current. The phrase means something about people, though I could never quite understand it, something about how even the most graceful of people may be working very hard, or that hard work can produce a beautiful result. I couldn't grasp at it. Wouldn't you want people to see your hard work? I could never quite understand the desire for seamlessness.

And anyway, I was too busy watching the mallard to listen, watching them through my binoculars, admiring the patchy dark spots on their sides and belly, and the shimmering green head, the freckled beak, the purple tail feathers poking out from under the end of its wing. An intersex mallard, displaying both male and female phenotypes, the professor explained while I ogled.

Mallards and other ducks are particularly well-known for this mixed morphology[1], for the peculiar look of their intersex ducks, the perfect and beautiful mix of male and female characteristics. They are ducks born with female anatomy but lacking in the typical, female reproductive hormones, due to mutation or age. This results in the appearance of male plumage

in the spring and a darkened appearance in the fall. They cannot breed, their life expectancies are short. They are, in a way, evolutionarily redundant, anomalous. Oh, but how beautiful they are, how incredible a flaw, a glorious mix of hormones and phenotypes, absolutely sublime. I was fascinated and so in love. Here was a creature whose journey I felt like I could understand, had a body that I saw my own in.

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When people say “water off a duck’s back” what they really mean is that the water never even touches the back of the duck. Mallards have over eleven thousand feathers pinpricked across their bodies, most are under the roof of their contour feathers which are oiled and tightly woven together, like a wicker basket, overlapping and curved. Droplets repel off them, never get a chance to sink into their down feathers, into their skin. They are surrounded by water, but are never able to touch it, to feel it drip down the spine. The only part of them that hits the wet are their feet to paddle and sometimes the beak, all purely for utility.

This was how I understood my existence, how I boiled it down into its barest parts. I am nothing if not metaphorical, craving descriptions like this to explain myself. My whole life was water off a duck’s back, never letting anything sink down into me, emotions passing over me but never quite touching me, not the deepest parts of me. I waded through them when it was necessary, but I was certain I was not feeling them right. They repelled off me, could never quite penetrate me, my feathers woven together far too tight.

I was fifteen when I realized I was a transgender man. It wasn’t an all-the-sudden sort of thing, more like a gradual dawning. The way the feathers of an intersex mallard duck begin with the muddled brown and then slowly start to grow in green and iridescent, my understanding bloomed slow like that. I started to see the differences in myself, a discomfort with my body,

feeling like I did not fit anywhere. I had begun changing my plumage more and more in those days, to try and fix the discomforts, cutting my hair shorter than it had ever been, my clothes collecting more color, going by my preferred name instead of letting the dead one linger for fear of being confusing or difficult.

In this mallard, I saw my life stretch out before me. I would live and die just like them, nothing but a statistical wonder. Lonely drifting, watching everything from afar, the constant paddling below the surface that I desperately wished someone would notice.

—

Even as more interesting birds came and went, as we began to finish the circling of the lake in search of other species, my gaze kept returning to that mallard. I lifted the binoculars to my eyes just to check that they were still there, that they hadn't been swallowed up by the water or eaten by some larger animal. They hardly moved in all our time walking around the lake, only a shuffle to tuck their head under a wing or to dip their beak under the waves and send droplets cascading across their oiled contours. I felt almost weary in its loneliness.

But then there was this rush of wings and quacking, a sudden cacophony. A flock of mallards dipped out of the horizon, seemingly from nowhere, casting shadows across the lake. Maybe six or seven of them descended into the water, landing in splashes. The class stood silent to watch them and so did I, watching the ducks swim to the intersex mallard, preening at their feathers, grooming under the wing, as if friends greeting each other after a long time apart. The intersex mallard returned the affection, wading along just to bump into another bird and begin nibbling happily at their necks. A handsome male swam just behind them for a while, a possible pair bond. My professor explained, it was common for intersex ducks to still be part of a flock, to

have a mate despite their inability to breed. The ducks quacked and moved to another side of the lake, all in a group, and my professor laughed. “Look at that! Paddling friends!”

All at once I welled up with tears, my throat spasming, my lip quivering. I had to hide myself behind the binoculars, watching this duck with their flock, watching them eat together, swim together. And though I began the journey assuming I would live and die like that mallard duck, I left wishing I would be so lucky, to flock despite my anomalies, preening my mates, still kicking under that water even if the surface seemed so still.

I aome out of that ornithology class somehow changed, and on walks my gaze now innately moves upwards to catch fluttering in the sky or down to watch the waterfowl swim. Is it possible to become bird-ier? I do not know, but I feel it now.

Dodo (Part One)

//

i did not have

a natural predator

before you came here

i walked along the beach freely

my toes made soft prints in the sand

//

you named my island dina arobi

then do-cerne then mauritius

named it after your ships

your princes, called it uninhabited,

but i had always been here

//

i was flightless

you called me a penguin

i was curious enough to

walk up to you but

i never knew your name

//

After The Crane Ornament (1889) – *George de Forest Brush*

The silky white plume of your body
The carve of your wing into the tan of his thigh
His hands red with your blood, but gentle

They call you wild but all I see
Is marbled background, sculpted feathers
Are you not perfectly civil, your head tipped back

His head tipped forward to gaze upon you
Are you not demure, not soft? Compared together,
You are hard lines juxtaposed to the softness

Of the human body. How tenderly you share
The green rug. Like two lovers; like the lover
of your artist whose parents called him ‘too wild’

There is nothing wild about you, or at least
There is nothing scary in your wildness
There is just you, dead and loose, your wings open

There is just you and him and the world
Is empty otherwise. Faded green into faded white
Into your fading body. His fading body.

The Home of the Body

I was a "wild child," often barefoot and running up and down asphalt, the soles of my feet stained black for days on end. I came home with devil's head thorns stuck in the tires of my bicycle, my knees scraped up, hair tangled and messy. I was always sporting bruises and sunburns, my skin patchy with eczema and hives from playing in grass. I climbed trees and rocks, always eager to be somewhere that I shouldn't be. My parents often recount a story about me from my days in daycare, finding a way to push a plastic playhouse up against the fence so I could reach the limb of a tree dangling from an adjacent lot, swing from it, and yell like Tarzan. The daycare staff had to bolt down the playhouse after that, and they always kept the limbs of trees cut short. I was often being trimmed like that.

I remember wanting to be wild. I remember always wanting to be running, how I used to love the feeling of sun-warmed pavement on the bottoms of my feet, that I longed for the blisters from swinging on jungle-gyms and climbing trees. I remember pedaling on my bike for hours through the abandoned dirt lots in our neighborhood, willing the sun to stay up longer, warming myself in the oranges of afternoon. I remember, mostly, that I wished to be fast and nimble like a cat, that I craved elevation. I wanted to be taller, wanted to climb, wanted to fly. I wanted to go somewhere where no one else would witness my being. I wanted to disappear amongst the desert lizards and cacti.

I was young when my dad told me about children who were abandoned in the woods and cared for by wild animals. Maybe we had just finished watching Tarzan, or my dad had told me the story about Romulus and Remus discovering Rome after being cared for by a wolf, or even more likely still, we had finished reading *Where the Wild Things Are*. But I remember craving with every part of myself that I might be so lucky. Lucky enough to be tossed headlong into the

woods, to be cared for by the animals, to grow up on hands and knees, *wild*. This is what I wanted more than anything. I had vivid fantasies of running away, making myself a hermit, letting myself become an animal. Or maybe I thought I already was one, that being in the wilderness would have been more correct than the houses I grew up in.

—

I was a strange child, socially withdrawn and awkward. I didn't understand other people and they didn't understand me. I wanted everything to abide by rules, wanted everyone to say exactly what they meant. I had so much trouble reading between lines. I longed for structure, longed for a script that we could all follow diligently. I wanted people to make sense to me, but they didn't.

I knew the wilderness was, according to everyone else, a lawless place, but it made sense to me. Animals made sense to me. Food chains and ecosystems, berries that grew fat and red to let you know they were poisonous, geology and biology, scientific and understandable. I knew that my cat hissed when he was upset, that my dog wagged her tail when she was happy, that animals would warn you if you were getting too close to them, that they would lean in if they wanted you closer. These were signs I could read so much easier than the signs of people. People lied, people hid their true intentions, people had ulterior motives. People did not give me clear signs, or if they did, I could not see them. My blindness for social cues only seemed to extend to my same species—animals I could see clearly, nature I understood in her intricacies.

And I was so much closer to the animal of me when I was younger. I used to walk on the tips of my toes and crouch through our backyard on all-fours. I used to climb and swing myself around. My mother would call me her 'little monkey.' I used to eat with my hands and come

home covered in dirt, lapping from our hose in the summer months like a dog. I was mostly a solitary animal, but I was still an animal, waiting for the wild to claim me.

—

But then something happened to me. I think the animal was stripped from me or that it was tamed, forced into docility. My body began to change into shapes that I didn't recognize, made me dysphoric and stressed, made me want to cover it, my clothes getting baggier, darker. I dropped my heels, kept myself upright. Evolution at lightspeed. I slouched my shoulders in to hide my chest, felt like I had to change how I talked, how I walked. Suddenly, people weren't seeing me as the wild child, they were seeing me as immature, they were telling me that 'a young lady shouldn't act like that.' And I hated it for more reasons than I knew at the time.

So, I trimmed my wings and plucked out my feathers one-by-one. I made myself human. Forced myself into friendships, forced myself to start learning how to read social cues. I started learning how to make eye contact even though I hated it, taught myself to search for what was between the lines. I was never perfect, but I was acceptable. I was human. I thought it would be better, to shred the animal out of me, to train him, to kill him even. The wild child became an isolated and depressed teenager. Vampiric, almost, in my ways. I stayed inside, never left the house in anything less than jeans and a hoodie, rarely spoke unless it was necessary. My anxiety got worse, my OCD kicked into high gear. The child who used to drink out of the hose could barely eat if he knew food had been sitting out for more than an hour. The kid who used to turn up covered in mud now washed his hands to the point that they were red and raw.

I can still remember how it felt, to rip the animal out of me. Nowhere was safe, not even within my own skin.

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Birds are migratory animals; compasses in their bodies, magnets in their spines, designed for long journeys. Birds know landmarks at every time of day—know the lake to splash in for the night, know the field of tall grass that shields them from hawks, know the shape and curve of the earth, her electricity and magnetic fields, her spin. And with all that knowledge, they know how to orient themselves to a world that changes overnight and get themselves home. Even after the forest burns down or the lake dries up, few things disorient a bird enough to throw them off track.

Even just the shape of their bodies guide them towards home. Some waterfowl are unable to walk on land, forcing them to dip directly back into the water after flight. Common loons have long top-heavy bodies, their feet beginning far back on their bellies[2]. If they end up on land, they can only scoot themselves along, the distribution of weight making it impossible to keep themselves upright, so after crossing the wetlands they crash into water, knowing what their bodies are designed to do.

Swifts stay aloft for nearly their whole life, generally spending less than one percent of their time migrating on land[3]. Bodies built only for flight, their too-long wings make it impossible to gain enough momentum to shoot them skyward from a flat surface. So, they stay in the air, stay on perches and branches. They eat, mate, collect nest materials mid-flight. They might even sleep mid-flight, like it's suspected that frigatebirds and other large waterfowl do, turning off one half of their brain at a time—engaging in unihemispheric sleep[4]. Trusting their bodies to keep them skyward even while half of themselves shuts off.

Albatrosses do this too for their long journeys over ocean[5]. Rarely stopping for much longer than it takes to dive, wandering albatrosses glide for hours. Ship workers report rarely seeing an albatross flap its wings. With a shoulder sheathed in strong muscle and a tight joint,

albatrosses lock their wings, conserving energy and staying airborne. Masters of the aerodynamic craft, they need only to flick their tailfeathers to change direction while gliding or swooping. It's possible that unlike other birds that they can fully rest on the wing, sleeping for minutes at a time while remaining in flight.

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And I wonder what it's like, to be so specialized. To know home by the way it feels on your webbed feet, the way it buffets against your body and keeps you airborne. To know precisely where home *isn't* because the shape of your body won't allow you to be there.

I wonder because I don't think I have ever felt *at home*. Not in a place, not in my body. I wonder if you could ever feel at home in a place when your body feels foreign, unknowable. I am not sure what it even means to feel it—*at home*. Comfortable, belonging, centered, collected? Emotions I understand but I'm not sure I have ever felt, not really, not deeply.

It has something to do with this body—the way that I tore the animal out of it. My feathers are unpreened now, my feet un-taloned and smooth. I have never felt at home in it, never felt like it was mine. I spent years avoiding its reflection, would startle myself when reviewing pictures of me, wondering who it was that I was looking at, that it certainly could not be myself. I was seeing a girl in the mirror—I was seeing someone familiar but not me, like an acquaintance you cannot remember the name of. "Oh you're… *me*? Aren't you?" This question posed to myself day in and day out. Even looking down at myself felt like seeing an incompletely portrait. Who was it that this body was meant to be attached to? It certainly was not me.

Even the parts of me that I am slowly reclaiming these days feel somehow incomplete. My tattoo, my jewelry, the teeth that were pushed into alignment, they feel like an art project half-finished. This house—the house of me—I do not believe it is my home. I don't believe that I

am designed to be anywhere. Not like the loons, not like the swifts, not like the albatross. I cannot trust my body enough to guide me where it is meant to be.

These days, I am wondering about my feral-ness, wondering about the animal of me. This anxious animal, I still feel him sometimes. At least, I think I do. Sometimes when I picture the wild child, hunched on all fours, flying up trees, jumping between rocks, toes in the sand… I feel it there. I think I knew my body better then. Knew how to listen to it, to talk to it, to push it to its limits.

—

I wonder if I could map myself the way that birds map the earth—learn my landmarks, know the fields of my energy and the electric current that runs through my nerve endings—would I then know how to find home? Would I then be able to feel it?

I wonder if one day I might trust my body well enough to tell me where I am meant to be. I wonder that I have been staying grounded for too long, that I am only letting my webbed feet push me awkwardly on my belly, forgetting that there is a crisp pool of water that would hold me. Is some part of my body too long, too top-heavy? Is that why I stay so firmly planted? Did I not hear my wings lock into their sockets? Have I been holding myself for a flight that I am not taking? Can I trust my body, can I trust its shape, can I trust what it tells me?

All I want now is to be an animal again. To bundle myself up and send myself floating down river. All I want is to be found by some nurturing creature, one who would let me be wild once more, would let me learn to fly again with these clipped wings, with this featherless body, with my beak misshapen and gnarled. I want to be reminded what it is to love this body again, to let myself use it how I used to, to treat it with respect again. I want to be an animal. I want to be the wild child I have always been.

Ode to the Northern Cardinal

You are flitting, quick, whole body
A streak of color, crested, crowned
Blood, rose, cranberry. Lucky bird,
Figurines of you kept in the pocket,
Thumbed for fortune. Cardinal, name a
Number, an omen, they say you are
The ghost of someone once loved,
Who used to be vibrant and bold
Like the scarlet in your downy. Bright
Against the city dressed in snow.
Operatic phantom, first voice in the
Dawn chorus, *cheer-cheer-cheer*.

Ode to the California Quail

A topknot of dusky, black feathers,
Sprouting from her delicate head.
Her muted brows, stripes and spots
On the belly, fluffed up for the dry,
Winter desert. She stands among
Her sisters, serene. Her own covey,
Her own darling little quails to keep
Her warm, soft, safe. She smells of
Home. Sage brush and oak trees,
Whisps of clover on her tongue,
Juniper in her coat, on her beak,
Nesting in hard, desert rock.

Mockingbird

You sing. I mimic the shape with my own mouth.
How tenderly I imagine the shape of your beak,
How easily I conjure you. Your voice, your gestures,
Every fluttering movement of your body.
How warmly I feel you between each fold
Of my vocal chords, in the rumble of my chest.

Mockingbirds sing to mark territory. Am I that
Possessive? I dream of jarring you like
Mulberries, carrying you with me, pressing
Kisses to the lid. I would bring you feathers
And sticks and build walls around us.
I would learn every song you sing. Is that too much?

Little lyrebird I am, little liar bird. I sing
Your own music back to you. Dress myself
In gray feathers and soft tummy so you
Might imagine me as someone else. Oh, but
It's you. It's you. It's you. It's not enough and
I need to do more. I must do more.

Keep you mine, keep you inside me,
Like music you know by its feel in your throat.

Flaco the Owl

On February 2nd, 2023, Flaco the Eurasian eagle-owl escaped the Central Park Zoo after a vandal cut the mesh wiring around his enclosure. Flaco was a large bird, his species called 'eagle' for their size, baring a signature orange-brown coat and tufted ears. Like other Eurasian eagle-owls, Flaco also carried the same distinctive, bold orange eyes. In the weeks following his escape, Flaco flew free around Central Park, the only one of his kind, learning to fend for himself in this newfound freedom. At first, Central Park Zookeepers were eager to lure Flaco back to his home, but he proved elusive and capable of living on his own.

As an owl born in captivity (debuting at the Central Park Zoo in 2010), Flaco was experiencing a completely new world. He was reaching heights he had never been allowed to before, catching his own prey, finding his own perches. Stella Hamilton, a birdwatcher, was quoted saying that Flaco had somehow "remained wild inside,"[6] surviving even though he shouldn't have, learning how to hunt when he had never had to before. And Flaco was no fledgling, he was thirteen years old when he escaped, but he still managed to survive and avoid recapture. In the wild, most Eurasian eagle-owls live to be twenty. If Flaco had remained in captivity, there's a chance he could have lived three times that long. As it stands, we're not sure what his life expectancy will be now that he is living free range. In February of 2024, a year after his escape, Flaco continued to live in Central Park, not too far from his original home, and he continued to make the news, people wondering what, if anything, should be done about Flaco.

In researching Flaco's story, I come across an interesting phenomenon. The headlines and words used to describe him seem to vary widely. The bird puns abound. "Flaco the owl doesn't give a hoot," says CBC News[7]. But more interesting are the words used to describe the escape and the escapee. New York Times says "Everyone Loves Flaco the Escaped Owl,"[8] but AP News

compares Flaco's flight to that of a criminal, saying he "Eludes NYPD," as though he's on the run[9], when the truth is that police officers are simply not equipped to chase down an owl. Others sound sad or strangely ominous. "Escaped Owl may be on a Hopeless Hunt for Love"[10] says the Independent, and CBC news, after dropping their bird pun, says that Flaco can "fly free *for now*," [italics mine] almost foreshadowing his capture or death.

As a Eurasian eagle-owl, Flaco is completely alone in Central Park. He will never run into another one of his specie, and as an apex predator, he will likely live a long time unless killed by something man-made or treated with chemicals. It's unclear if he even has a mating drive, with no other owls to respond to his calls, it's possible he is not searching for one at all, it's possible he doesn't know that he ought to be searching.

—

Unsurprisingly, I am wondering if owls get lonely. I am wondering if I might climb inside the owl's head and understand him from there, if I can project myself through him. What I want to say is that I am the owl. What I want to say is I have been in captivity for so long, and now I am escaping, and some will call me a criminal and others will say that I was well-loved, and another might go with the obvious pun and say I am *trans*forming. What I want to say is that I "remained wild inside," that I survived, that I adapted.

But I've said that to you already, so I won't say it again. Instead, I will say that birds in captivity and I go a long way back.

There's a childhood photo of me. I won't show it because looking at old pictures of myself is disorienting. But you can imagine a child of around six, big round cheeks and a smile full of baby teeth. I had blonde hair back then, cut into the worst bob you can imagine, thick bangs down to my eyebrows. I am wearing something frilly and purple. I do not look like myself

at all, but somehow exactly the same at once. In my arms, I am cradling a red parrot with his feet sticking up in the air, his wings tucked against me, his head cocked to look at me with one black eye. I am smiling the biggest smile that will probably ever grace my father's camera.

Birds in captivity and I go a long way back. My grandmother was a collector of strays. My father grew up surrounded by all kinds of animals that she rescued from the streets. Rats, mice, Guinea pigs, an orange tomcat with an underbite my dad called Mugsly, a goat named Star, and yes, birds too. But these animals were all mostly free range, even if they were living in my grandparent's house, surrounded by their eleven kids. The animals came and went as they pleased, though most of them seemed keen to stay.

When I was born, my grandmother's collection had waned to two birds. One, a mourning dove named Mr. Pidge, who they would later learn was a female, but still let him keep the name and the pronouns (I wonder if I would have been so lucky, had my grandmother been alive when I came out). The other, a friendly little starling named Chirps.

There is another photo of me, a plump, round baby, still too small to even have hair, being bounced on my grandmother's knee while Chirps watches from my grandmother's shoulder. My grandmother looks ancient in this photo, thin and frail, but only because she is dying of a blood disease. She won't live to see my fourth birthday. Chirps will. Chirps will, though I have no memory if it now, land on my head and let me walk him around the house after I learn to do more than crawl, will hop after me as I run around the backyard, will let me coo and babble at him with my clumsy toddler tongue.

Yes, birds and I go way back, but this deep, all-consuming obsession will not come until my third year of college, during that ornithology class, listening to bird calls, flipping through mountains of flashcards to learn their Latin names and where they fly, and I will fall in love in

the way that John Green describes it, “slowly, and then all at once”[11]. It’s stereotypical and dramatic, maybe, but it’s true. How quickly I began to amass knowledge, began adding posters and paintings to an ever-growing collection, began to emerge myself completely in birds.

I want to tell you that I know I am *not* a bird, but something tells me you might be unconvinced.

I’m *not* a Eurasian eagle-owl, freshly escaped from life-long captivity, struggling to survive in a world I know nothing about. I am not beaked with big, orange eyes, or tufted ears. But in the skeleton of an owl, do you not see the barrel of a ribcage, the suggestion of an elbow, a thumb with the same pesky joints prone to overuse? We are all just stumbling apex predators, are we not? Suddenly released into a world that seems to want to kill us?

I am not an animal in the way a bat is not a bird. Can I trust you to figure that one out?

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Flaco is not the first bird to escape captivity. He won’t be the last. In California’s Oakland Zoo, in March 2023, six different birds managed to escape after a storm damaged their enclosures. Two pied-crows, three superb starlings, and one hooded vulture managed to break out into the wild, though not too far from home[12]. They were lured back with snacks and familiar zookeepers, helped by the neighborhood around the zoo keeping an eye out for them. Very quickly, five of them were found and returned to the zoo, but the sixth, a male pied-crow named Diego, was never recovered.

Earlier this year, in January of 2024, a rainbow lorikeet latched onto a visitor, riding him to freedom. The lorikeet remains on the loose for now, and it’s possible that if he survives through the winter, he may be able to live in the wild, just like Flaco. A rainbow on the loose, they’re calling him a “flamboyant fugitive”[13]. Large birds have left zoos too. In 2005, a

flamingo, only referred to as No. 492 escaped a city zoo in Wichita, Kansas. Nineteen years later, No. 492 continues to live in the wild, sticking to South Texas, where the wetlands are close enough to its home environment[14]. And even in Rome, there are rose-ringed and monk parakeets that escaped from aviaries and private homes in the 1970s and 80s which now flourish in the middle of bustling Italian cities[15].

It's interesting to think about the words we use to describe these birds, these "escapees," these "fugitives." For birds raised in captivity, the zoo is all they know, their escapes are largely due to accidents, they likely have no understanding that by leaving through a hole in the fence, they are leaving home. Besides, it's usually much safer for a bird in captivity. Birds generally live twice or even three times as long under zoo care, with access to veterinarians, to food, and no predation. Zoos often provide fantastic mental stimulation to their avian clientele as well, teaching them simple commands (that can also help them receive medical care), and providing toys and puzzles to keep them enriched. We can't expect them to know this, however, that staying in their enclosures is safer, so is it fair to call them runaways?

But one must also wonder if in some way they *do* know what they are doing, by fleeing their nests. One wonders if they long for the wild, even those birds raised in captivity. Do they truly "remain wild inside?" And what would it mean if they did? Surely, they have instincts; for predators, the instinct to hunt, for others, the instinct to nest, to roost, to do their mating displays. But they also learn that food comes from the keepers, or from a designated hole in the wall. They get used to people walking past their cages, that they don't need to hide from crowds.

As an animal lover, someone concerned with the relationship between animal and human, and someone who feels, maybe, a little *too* connected with the "wild," zoos feel like an intellectual and ethical exercise. On one hand, I love going to zoos. I love getting to see animals

that I otherwise would never get the chance to see, and to learn things about them, either from their placards or from their handlers. I love the conservational and educational efforts of zoos and their partnered agencies, programs like the California Condor Recovery Program that brought the wild California condor population up to (currently) 350 and monitored a successful hatching in the wild[16]. I love that they help children learn about animals and ecosystems.

But it is only human, I think, to see an animal behind a glass pane and think that they must be sad to be in such a closed off spacet, to be forced to circle the same paths over and over. Especially for the birds, animals built for long migration, for open skyways, and unencumbered movement, it's difficult to see them behind bars. Even more so because they often can see out, watching the city birds fly wherever they wish. One cannot help but imagine jealousy, longing, a yearning for freedom. But these are also singularly human ideas, or so we are led to believe. Still, the urge is to free them. Especially when we hear stories about animals who do not fair well in captivity, like porpoises, some of which display depression after being captured.

I am still learning to hold contradictions. Can I love and hate zoos in equal measure? Can I say that zoos are good and bad at the same time? And further, can the contradiction be the truth of the matter? Can it be that zoos simply *are* good and bad? It is so difficult for me to see the world in shades of gray, but I am trying.

—

You already know what I'm going to say don't you?

But I'm not sure if it would be right, my urge to call my adolescence a 'captivity,' rather a rigid set of expectations. My life made difficult and confusing by the pressures of cis-heteronormativity and neurotypical expectations. My urge is to say I was stuffed into a box, an enclosure that could not fit me, one I tried so desperately to fit. And yes, my urge is to say that I

“remained wild inside” despite this. My urge is to say that one day, someone cut a hole into the net keeping me from the open sky, and I flew the coop.

My urge is to say this:

I was bird born in captivity, hand-fed, trained to complete tasks, given enrichment. I played my role as a tourist attraction dutifully. I posed for pictures and cawed on command, and I parroted everyone’s words and gestures accurately and with finesse. I almost convinced them that I liked being in the cage, that I was happy to be viewed, that I enjoyed doing exactly as I was told all the time. I almost convinced myself. But I would look out of my enclosure, and I would see other birds flying overhead—crows and mallards, geese migrating one way, then another as the seasons changed. And I wondered why it was that I was behind the net. Beyond that, I looked at the other birds in the cage with me. Why did it seem like they were so much better at being behind the net? Why did they seem happier? Maybe they were just as good as I was, at convincing themselves they enjoyed it. Or maybe, quite simply, they did. But me, I was struggling to maintain appearances. I was tired, my tail drooped and dragged along the ground. My voice got quieter and quieter until it was gone. Until one day, something cut a hole in my netting. Who knows what it was, who it was, that freed me. But I squeezed out and opened my wings all the way for the first time and took to the sky.

But this is a lie, and my urge is inaccurate.

Still, I feel you must understand in some way, what it is I am getting at. Don’t we all grow up fearing something is wrong with us, something intrinsic, something we must escape from? I’m not sure. Maybe I’ll try again some other time to talk to you about this in a way that doesn’t include the animalization of the self or the personification of the birds, but it feels so

impossible to do anything else. It feels so right to speak like this. Like we are one being, the birds and me.

—

Flaco the owl represents the broader trend of charismatic megafauna[17] or "the Bambi effect"[18]. Even as a large apex predator, we cute-ify Flaco the owl. He becomes a flagship for the rest of his specie, for owls in general. He becomes a mascot for Central Park, where tourists and natives alike come to try and view him, to take pictures of him. In the news, headlines that capitalize on his "hopeless romantic pursuits" or his "brave escape" from the zoo create a character out of the owl. Humanizing him, neglecting his animal nature. It creates a dangerous landscape for the owl. The more attraction he gains the harder it is for him to hunt, harder for him to stay hidden, harder to roost. Cute-ifying makes us sympathize with them, makes us want to protect them, but it can also make us push back against things that would actually benefit them because they *seem* worse.

Questions are then raised about just what we should *do* with Flaco. In an article from Audubon, many perspectives are given on the issue of Flaco[19]. On one hand, many experts are concerned for his well-being. Flaco is, first and foremost, an owl raised in captivity, with no experience in the wild. While he has been able to fend for himself and hunt, it comes at a cost, not just for him, but potentially for other wildlife. As a non-native predator, it's possible he could begin picking off native species of birds or potentially crossbreed with other local owls. Both pose a threat to the balance of the ecosystem in the area. Another point of concern is that Flaco's current diet of Central Park rats could prove fatal, as New York often uses pesticides to deal with their rodents, and the ingestion of pesticides could lead to Flaco's death, as it's suspected it did for another beloved owl, Barry.

Barry was a barred owl, native to the Central Park area. She gained popularity due to being friendly, and generally unafraid of humans[20]. Her fans were referred to as a "cult following," citing her "lovable face and soulful eyes" as reasons for their adoration. Owls are typically solitary and nocturnal, remaining hidden until they can hunt under the cover of night. As a more "outgoing" personality, birders delighted at being able to see a barred owl with such clarity. She would even swoop and hunt with people nearby, unafraid of eyes watching her every move. She was a young bird, likely only a year old, and while many birders expected she may leave of her own volition, to find a mate or better hunting grounds, none could have predicted that she would befall a devastating fate. It's suspected that she ingested a rat that had been treated with pesticides, leading to her being dazed or disoriented. She was struck by a Park Conservancy vehicle, resulting in her death. New Yorkers mourned her as though she was a celebrity, writing heartfelt messages to her and speaking about moments of connection with the bird[21].

After the incident with Barry, the next course of action for Flaco becomes even murkier. The truth is that Flaco would be safer back in the zoo. While he's able to fend for himself and continues to thrive for now, there is always a danger present. He could very likely befall the same fate as Barry the owl. In the wild, he is in a constant danger he would not otherwise be in. He also faces the threat of humanity, as attention drawn to his location puts him at greater risk for mobbing from other species or making his hunting grounds scarce.

So what do we do with Flaco the owl? One person may recognize his 'humanity,' may wish to see him free to roam the skies, free to be viewed and admired. But another may recognize the wildness in him and in all animals, that no matter how much we push our humanness onto Flaco, he is only just an owl. Safety in the zoo would be better for him long-term. But the correct view does not necessarily exist.

—

This is the danger of what I do, and I recognize that.

When I tell you I am like Flaco, the bird in captivity, and I tell you how much I long to be free, the next conclusion must be that Flaco desperately wants to be free too. But even I recognize that there may be no truth in that at all. I tell you I grow feathers and sprout wings, but I cannot tell you that the birds do the opposite. The birds do not find themselves suddenly growing hands or losing feathers. As much as I connect with them, I cannot, in good faith, humanize them, can I? Or maybe, I *can*? Maybe there is a way to do this properly. Is there a way to animalize the self and humanize the animal that does not result in distilling either of us? Can I open the door to these concepts without forgetting the truth of the matter? Or realize that there is no truth of the matter? I do not know. I am trying my best.

I am trying to learn more about myself, to learn more about the world around me, my place in these things. So, I look to the sky, and I look to the birds that I love so much, because it's true, I see myself in them. I see myself so vivid and clear, better than I do when I look at myself in the mirror. This body has fought me for so long, so I project myself onto another creature entirely. It's easier to see myself there, the same way we see ourselves in places, in sounds, in memories. It's easier to see myself in the birds escaping from zoos, to see myself in the pigeons on the sidewalk, to see myself in the crows, the gulls, the finches, and grackles.

I am trying to reckon with recognition in reverse. Projecting my emotions onto the birds. Do I hurt them by giving them emotions I cannot carry alone? Do I set them up to be more than they can be? I do not know. I am learning. I look to the sky with reverence and love. I acknowledge my misgivings. This is all I can do. I hope the birds can forgive me, for deciding they must be sad, deciding they must ache for freedom, deciding they feel as trapped as I do. And

I hope I can forgive myself for the urges I have to draw comparisons and make my metaphors, to anthropomorphize and de-humanize, to blend myself with the animal I believe is inside me.

Forgiveness. I fear it is the most human thing I can offer.

—

I finish writing this essay, I put it away, send it in to be edited and looked over, and a week later, Flaco is dead. He is found after flying head-first into a building, dying on impact. New Yorkers grieve his death in the days and weeks following, Twitter explodes with tweets, his name trends on the site, and I watch with bated breath, trying to decide what there is to do now. For moments too long, I worry that it is somehow *my* fault. I was part of the people who had humanized him, after all. Had I learned of him sooner, how would I have advocated for him? Would I have urged them to let him stay free? Would I have hoped for his return to the zoo? But of course, my words had barely left my own fingertips, and I was still deciding how I felt.

The comparison of Flaco's death to Barry the barn owl is frightening, but what's more is that an autopsy done on the bird reveals many underlying conditions, all likely caused by his being in an urban setting as a wild bird[22]. He was carrying a pigeon herpesvirus and was suffering the effects of consuming rat poison. Sick, poisoned, and in an environment completely different from his natural habitat or the safety of the zoo, Flaco dies, and still the internet speaks of his big orange eyes, his flight of freedom, his importance to the Central Park community.

This is the danger of what I do, and I recognize that. Or, I am still recognizing that. Or, I am wrestling with it, fighting with it, trying to understand it. I wonder if you might spare me grace while I try to make sense of it all, of the animal in me, the me in the animal, and the animals as they are, as they have always been. I am learning, I promise.

Ready for Takeoff

[A Cento made of Tweets about Flaco the Owl]

A fantastic year of freedom

Oh sweet #Flaco

The bird that opened my eyes

Doing the Hokey Pokey in August

He looked skyward as the flakes fell around him

Channeling Picasso's blue period

Goodnight, sweet Flaco

I decided to write a haiku so that it would be short and sweet

Press HH to Hoot

in Heaven. The owl? *Who?* Oh,

He loved to say that.

Legitimately devastated ☹

Finally! I went to his memorial!

One last image

Consumed more rat poison than is healthy

The NYC owl died today & now I'm just bummed

Flaco's premature death was an inevitability as soon as his enclosure was vandalized

Ode to the Bowerbird

A bird in their blue period, always
An obsessive collector, a curator, an
Artist, architect, and builder. You
Hopeful romantic. Putting together
Your best blue bits, your bottle
caps and cornflower. You spit to set the
Pieces, use parts of yourself like
Glue. All your treasures, your body,
They become a part of the art,
A part of the flirtation, a part of the
Show. Dress yourself in your best
Plumage, little bird. Be blue.

Ode to the American Crow

Inky black and piercing eyes, crow,
Your song like barking and laughter.
Your body, gothic and black, beak
Open to croak, caw, crow, cackle.
Murder, they call you and your friends,
As you roll down snowbanks and
Drum against tree bark. Feathers
Falling off you like spoils. Spolia,
A building made of something dark
And deadly, but, in the dawn, I hear
Your voice the loudest, watch the sun
Bloom across your ink-spilled feathers.

Dodo (Part Two)

//

i am not sad we met

i was always friendly

i only wish you had given me

more time to learn

to be cruel

//

1598 to 1662

you discovered me

and killed me fast enough

that some people didn't believe

i existed at all

//

i did not evolve fast enough,

quick enough to run

from the housecat, smart enough

to move away from the fire,

scared enough to hide from you

//

Ecstatic Death and Ivory-Bills

I watch an excerpt of Michael Gitlin's *The Birdpeople*[23] (2004). I'm fascinated, but unable, in the moment, to bring myself to watch the full sixty-one minute film. Still riding a wave of strange and murky grief following my uncle's passing, I cannot bear to see any more dead bodies than those of the birds in the excerpt on Gitlin's website. The film investigates what it means to birdwatch—to consider what we view and how we view it. And this short section makes us think about the collection of dead animals, how we use them, how we talk about them.

The first body to strike me is an ivory-billed woodpecker. Dead, taxidermized, sitting endlessly on a block of wood. The bright head of his crown appears like a slicked-up mohawk, his body just a little too thin, something about his neck seemingly uncomfortable. In place of his eyes are two glass beads meant to look like eyes, and though they are reflective, they are hauntingly empty. The bird is still, and though I knew coming into this film that there would be dead birds, I am restless about it all the same, my body reticulating away from the screen. I feel my lips drag downward into a frown.

Sharp stakes poke through his taloned feet, holding him close to the board. He is meant to look like a woodpecker about to feed, long beak pointed towards the wood, feet made to appear like they're clenched to the bark. Perhaps this is what bothers me about it, that even in death we force him to act out a part, to peck, so we might imagine the drumming of his beak as he searches out beetle larvae[24]. In death, he may not fly, hold himself comfortably, to rest. His body will be fussed over and prodded at by gloved hands to preserve the delicacy of his feathers. We will use his body to learn more about the species so we might uncover something groundbreaking about our living prehistoric ancestors.

But for now, he sits in the room of a museum, in a laboratory, as decoration in someone's house. Sometimes, even as I adore the science, the research, all we can learn from the glorious donation of his body, I cannot bear to be witness to it.

The extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker is contested. Even as recent as May 2023, scientists present papers, audio recordings, and unconfirmed sightings of the woodpecker, say that it's too soon to declare the species completely extinct, even if the last confirmed sighting of a wild ivory-billed woodpecker was in 1944[25]. The image of them on Cornell's Lab of Ornithology website, and even their header image on Wikipedia, is grainy, black-and-white, likely taken in the 1930s, during a Florida expedition mentioned in the full film. Even in those images the birds already look dead, the male's eyes disappear into his black feathers, ghostly. The female is half out of her nest and appears a moment away from free fall. The image is taken less than ten years before most will decide that wild ivory-billed Woodpeckers are extinct.

—

I'm not disgusted by dead animals exactly. The feeling is harder to pin down. They make me sad the way that all dead things make me sad: for the sake of their deadness. But the simple fact of their bodies doesn't disturb me, doesn't make me nauseous or sick. It seems to me that I stumble into them more often than other people, as if seeking them out without realizing it.

In undergrad once, a bird hit the window of my friend's room, and being the birder that I am, and generally unemotional about such things, it was my duty to check on the creature. I willed it to just be unconscious, dazed from the collision, but its body was stiff with rigor, and its eyes were dark, and I knew though I wished not to know it. I told the news to my housemates, and one by one they looked at me, and I knew it was my job to dispose of him.

I dug him a grave in the backyard with a spoon from the kitchen, tucked in his wings and wrapped him in a bath towel. I placed him in the hole and silently covered him in dirt. I didn't cry, I don't think I said much of anything about it in the moment, but I still think about him, about his legs sticking straight up, his beautiful wings pulled into his body, eyes so lifeless. In the murky pool of my memory, I imagine him a finch, but it could have been anything—I'm not sure if it matters—I grieve him like I grieve everything, daily, numbly.

—

But the ivory-billed woodpecker in *The Birdpeople* somehow expedites my grief.

The full film features an overwhelming sense of unease from the jump, tugging at your perceptions. Transitional frames and clips in the film are blurred, sometimes played backwards. Close-up clips of birds darting between bushes and crags. The music is tense and quiet, sometimes sounding like bird songs overlapping, reverberating as though in empty space, making every bird seem foreboding. This, intertwined with clips of birders standing completely still, staring into the camera, making you feel both like the watcher and the watched, making you consider the act of voyeurism in birdwatching. Narration, low-pitched and loud over the quiet of the movie, forces you to contemplate it still, "first we are looking for you. Then, we are looking *at* you." But nothing churns my gut more than the clips of the taxidermy woodpeckers.

I am so suddenly taken by the lack of *aliveness*, and yes, it seems obvious that dead things will be, well, *dead*, but in birds the stillness is so palpable. I imagine it's the same feeling one would have when seeing something impossible.

Birds are heightened animals; the speed at which they dip and soar, flutter their wings, even cock and bob their heads is anxiety-inducingly quick. Anna's hummingbirds achieve velocities of up to ninety feet per second during courtship displays[26]. Peregrine falcons

(considered the fastest living bird) can dive at just about one hundred and eighty-five miles per hour[27]. The most common of house finches or sparrows can pluck insects right out of the sky like the masters of an old martial arts film. Even flightless and large birds can still act with frightening speed. Large, awkward geese can snap fish right out of the waves, emus can run at thirty miles per hour in a sprint[28], and even penguins who wobble awkwardly on land move like bullets under the water.

What I mean to say is that birds have the whole "being alive" thing down, some even have heartbeats or breaths connected to the pump of their wings, movement keeping them alive. In *The Peregrine*[29], J.A. Baker says in his opening, "[birds] know suffering and joy in simple states not possible for us. Their lives quicken and warm to a pulse our hearts can never reach. They race to oblivion" (10). Life at breakneck speeds, constantly in flux. So, when death stills them, it feels unthinkable. How can a creature so incandescently alive be so dead?

And the way they die always appears so singularly metaphorical, on their backs, wings opened wide, feet splayed upward towards the sky; "whole body craving into flight," "clutching insanely at the sky in their last convulsions" (Baker, 121, 15). Even in death their bodies seem to struggle for the life they knew, a specter desperately trying to take flight.

It's difficult even for me, as someone not spiritual or religious, not to take the death of a bird as an omen. Perhaps it is because I feel tied to them, or that I grew up hearing stories about bad things swiftly following the gathering of crows and ravens. Or perhaps I am seeking them out without my knowing it, finding them decaying on busy city streets and on my daytime walks through the wetlands.

Perhaps I am slowly becoming obsessed with death, seeing it more often, hearing about it. In his introduction to *The Peregrine*, Robert Macfarlane suggests that Baker tries to cheat

death, to “abolish [himself] through intense focus on another creature” (*x*). “Self-obliteration” he calls it, as Baker loses himself in the peregrine falcon, slowly becoming one with the bird, his “I” becoming “we” towards the end of the text. It’s revealed that Baker himself is suffering a terminal illness as he becomes one with his falcon. Maybe I am trying to do this too, attach myself to the animal to cheat death, or maybe I am trying to understand it, trying to understand what it is that I believe about dying.

—

My uncle died suddenly but not without warning, both of these things true somehow at once. He was an alcoholic and a smoker. Growing up, we would go to his house for BBQs and Christmas, but then we stopped going. Years later my parents would tell me it was because they asked him to stop drinking around me, but he wouldn’t. Even for his favorite “niece,” he could not put down the bottle long enough. I didn’t see him much until I was an adult, and by then, the cycle had begun. He would promise to get sober, get clean, go to AA, go to therapy, and for a month or two he would be fine, normal, fun to be around even, but then he would slip. We would start over until the next time he made promises he could not keep. Over and over again.

In the years preceding his death he was threatening suicide after each binge, running away from home, violently acting out. My mom and dad would race to my aunt’s house to keep her company while he was off, leaving weird voicemails on her phone, incoherent and babbling. When I heard the news that he had died, I wasn’t surprised, even if it had technically been sudden, unexplained, his body just stopping, but not as a result of the alcohol or anything else.

He manifested his own death, it’s the only explanation I have. Sudden and not sudden at once. I knew it was coming, but I didn’t. I can’t remember if I had seen any dead birds in the days leading up to it, but I could imagine it’s possible.

—

Gitlin's film makes me think about my birdwatching. The way my eyes pull upwards towards sky, towards trees, down into the water of lakes, always searching for them. I point my camera or binoculars toward them, feel the need to call them by name, to point, to urge my friends to look in the bird's direction. "I'm talking to a birder in the field," the narrator says, "the eye contact between us is constantly being broken… We're not looking for other people to talk to, we're looking for *you*."

I watch the full film for the first time in a café, in a seat that points out towards the rest of the building. I often chosoe this seat or ones like it, the one that faces outward. I have an inclination towards people-watching, have since I was younger. It is less of a for-fun sort of thing and more like research, watching how people talk to each other, how they move their hands, how they move their mouth around different words. I am a people-watcher by necessity. When you spend so long as a 'wild child,' it requires practice to pretend you are human. When my eyes drift away from the film and up toward the café, I find myself making accidental eye-contact with strangers. My gaze immediately darts. I cannot handle being looked at though I do so much looking.

"When we look at you and you return the look, what are you looking at? What taxonomy are you using?" Gitlin asks this of the bird, but I ask it of the people around me. What are they seeing when they look at me? Have I done my job well enough to blend in? And if I have, why do I always feel so gawked at, like I am some rare species? I thought myself as the one with the binoculars, the notebook open to mark down what I see, what I hear, but I always feel watched. Yet, when I spot a dark-eyed junco outside the café window, my eyes can follow him for minutes

at a time. His returned stare feels comfortable, like an old friend. Does the bird feel the same comfort, or does he also feel so small under my lens?

In Jacques Derrida's *The Animal that Therefor I Am*, the philosopher muses about the gaze of the animal[30]. He speaks about being caught undressing by his housecat, how although the cat is obviously naked herself, that he feels the need to cover himself, feeling shame and embarrassment from the cat's stare. He goes on to argue that shame is a dividing line between us and animals, that animals feel no shame at being naked. "The [animal] is more naked than the human, who is more naked than the [animal]." (61). The animal, though more physically naked, feels somehow *less* naked than a human, because there is no shame in their nakedness.

This is what I think about, watching the film in the café, noticing my own gaze tugging and pulling away from the stares of others, sticking to the stare of the bird instead. I feel more naked under the stare of another person than I ever have under the gaze of the animal. I think of my childhood dog who had watched me change countless times over the years that I grew up, whose stare never brought me discomfort, more so amusement than anything. I think about my mother once having to check me for ticks after a long hike, how I felt her gaze like the crawl of a tick itself, wishing I could somehow extract myself from my body so that she might look it over without me having to be present. I wonder how much of my discomfort is dysphoria, how much is anxiety, how much is disconnect from my humanness, and how much is the gaze itself?

—

Months after my uncle's death, while walking to the bus stop with a coworker, we came across a dead crow, wings fallen outward, its chest caved in, beak half-open, eyes piercing and shining in the moonlight. A black angel, haloed by dead leaves. It was strange, the position of it, just below a tree. Something about its body, the way its chest had been hollowed out, but it

otherwise appeared fine, like it might suddenly flip itself over and take flight; it was startling. Overcome with needing to know what happened here, I stopped, eyes glued.

My coworker was speaking to me still, but I couldn't hear her. Transfixed, moving towards the creature, squatting down to get closer.

"That's disgusting." She said over my shoulder. "Don't touch it."

"I'm not." I said, but maybe I was. I needed to understand so I could decide if this was supernatural or not, if it was a sign of apocalypse, or if this meant something about *me*. A dead bird, *my* dead bird; how often did I feel like crows and I were linked? It made no sense, but this is what my mind told me. I couldn't explain that to her though, I could barely explain that to myself. "I just want to know what happened."

"It fucking died." She said, as if that wasn't obvious.

"Yeah, but like, how?"

"I don't know, man, sometimes things just fucking die."

Sure, they did. I wanted to say things *always* just fucking die. But this coworker was younger than me and antsy about getting back to her dorm to go to a party, and I was realizing how silly this looked. So, I got up, we got on the bus, I tried to forget about it. But when my mom called me later that night, I was certain she was going to confirm my fears, that someone else was dead, that some other unfathomable tragedy had struck. But she only told me the latest update about her favorite TV show, and nothing bad happened, except I can't stop thinking about it, and I know I won't until something *does* happen.

—

How easily Gitlin creates omens out of the image of the bird. Even in the opening sequence. A low, rumbling sound that shakes through my earbuds, the sound almost like an old

creaking ship. The image is distorted, old, colors washed out. A black bird hops along the ground, picking at dead leaves. At first, I see a crow, but no, too small, too narrow. A starling, maybe, until I see the curved beak and I realize that it's likely a bowerbird, though I can't quite trust my eyes enough to say it with certainty. His eye is bright yellow and pupilless in the blur of the film. He twitches and flutters, but with the low humming sound, the movements appear wrong, too jerky. Perhaps the clip is sped up a little or slowed down, but something is definitely off. It isn't until later that I realize that what I've just seen may have been played in reverse.

I wait, expecting to see this bird dead, wings open, completely still, but it never comes. But still, I sense the omen. Black birds and death. The bowerbird, as a collector, a homebuilder—I fear we are collecting omens. That *I* am collecting omens.

—

So maybe I am obsessed with death or obsessed with bad things happening or maybe it's that my personality is obsessive in nature.

Maybe it's that I'm hoping we might all be so lucky, to be so certain what we are meant to do that our bodies reach for it even after we're gone. "Craving towards flight." I hope my body craves towards something, that it fights against death long enough that I might pass away with my wings splayed open, eyes glittering in moonlight; that when I die, they might say about me that I knew "suffering and joy in simple states," that my life was "quicken[ed] and warm[ed]" (10). I am hoping for all of us, that in the pursuit of something we might obliterate ourselves and become one with what we seek.

The Phoenix
After The Peregrine *by J.A. Baker*

Perhaps, what it is, is that I want to destroy myself
Completely, remake & rebirth, different & somehow
The same. Feathered. Taloned. All which will make me

An animal. A monster. A bird or some other beast.
That which I already am & that which I will one day be.
& may that monster be able to sing, swoop, & nest better

Than I ever did while I was human. This terrible, naked body.
Declawed & plucked, tolerable & personable, docile & kind.
I want to destroy that boy completely. Shred him out of me.

Phoenix birth & brimstone. I will recreate myself
Out of hellfire & dip into the cool water of the duck pond.
Steam sizzling, vapor rising off the fresh quills & bones.

May I claw myself out of the eggshell & be rapturous.

DEATH MACHINE

A cento compiled from Ada Limón's *The Vulture & The Body*, Althea Davis' *Kinder Than Man*, Laura Giplin's *Two-Headed Calf*, and Nikki Giovanni's *Allowables*. Four poems which I return to often when I am considering the animal of myself.

How dare we live on this earth

To carry grief, some kind of heaven,

Swallowed whole, a perfect summer evening.

The great black scavenger, A thousand suns

And my body, not just my body,

My death machine.

Tall soft grass, trapped bodies.

Let death be tomorrow.

The dead animals fly parallel now.

Trickster no longer. I am

Frightened. No one

Knows how to find me

I don't think I'm allowed.

Urban Nesting

Nesting is one of the more complicated of avian rituals alongside mating dances and displays. There are a dozen different kinds of nests: cups, scrapes, burrows, mounds, cavities, platforms, pendants, spheres, and more, made of different materials and in different sorts of environments[31]. Each uniquely designed, crafted, specific to their specie or genus. An instinctual act, birds build homes and raise young without being shown how to do it, like the urge of a beaver to build a dam even if they find themselves in a place without a stream. And the building of nests is intricate, architectural; sticks laid out for foundation, smaller fibers woven between each of the larger pieces until the inside is moisture-proof and stable. Then some birds glue together their structures with spiderweb, mud, or their own saliva and preening oil. They fill it with soft things like fur, dried leaves, and for the urban avian, things like tattered clothing, candy wrappers, and Styrofoam[32]. Each bird, an instinctual understanding of what they need to create a nesting place, an understanding of architecture, of what is needed to create and keep in warmth for their eggs to hatch.

But their homebuilding can become bothersome to our own, human homebuilding. Mountains of websites and pest control companies boast being able to take care of "nuisance" birds[33]. They mostly mean larger birds, ducks, geese, pigeons, crows, birds that can be particularly loud or "disruptive," ones that might leave a lot of scat behind. We speak about them as though they're the ones infringing, but are we not the ones that are forcing the birds to urbanize? Are we not the ones who deforested, relocated, and hunted them? Now, we call them city birds, as though they're the ones who have found themselves in places they shouldn't be. We joke about pigeons having New York accents, watch them flutter around subway stations and hop on trains, laugh at seagulls plucking food straight out of a tourist's hands, watch house sparrows

pick at discarded food bins and trash bags. Even birders will distinguish their findings between the birds they see in the city and the birds they see in the wild, despite being the same species. And even I can spot differences between city crows and wild crows, a certain difference in the way they interact with the world around them, a difference in the way they fly and stoop, the way they talk to one another. A similar difference, I imagine, of someone born in a city and one born in a more rural place.

We put spikes on the roof to keep birds from nesting on rooftiles or from dirtying storefronts. We put out fake statues of owls to scare away the crows and finches, we chase mallard ducks out of the pool, we try to scare off red-wing blackbirds from their own territories because they can be protective and aggressive.

It's called hazing, when we use loud noises and other scare-tactics to get birds off our properties[34]. There are many ways to do it, like the standard use of owl statuettes or scarecrows, moving them every few days to keep the birds frightened of the predator's movement, to stop them from realizing they're fake. You could bang pots and pans together for a few minutes each day while the flock is nearby. Reflective tape can confuse a flock, keeping them away from the tops of neighborhood fences or a specific area around a home. More effective and intense methods include sound cannons and laser pointers or even the frightened calls of other birds played on a speaker. The most extreme method includes using other birds, like falcons or hawks, that are trained to chase other birds. A dozen ways to keep birds out of the places that they naturally belong, and all of them involve terrifying them. "The idea behind humane tactics is to put pressure on the birds … to make a building so uncomfortable for the animals that they leave voluntarily."[35]

Of course, those are only the methods that are approved. In 2018, the use of the avicide Avitrol led to the death of dozens of crows in Portland. They “fell from the sky, seizing on the ground and dying.”[36] “They caused the crows to suffer a cruel and inhumane death and they put people, pets and non-target wildlife at real risk of secondary exposure.”[37] A scene like the fall of the angels or the Rapture, winged creatures falling in heaps. A researcher explained, “it's a very slow painful death, but also leaves secondary poisoning potential, whether it be a bird of prey like a peregrine falcon, or a raccoon, or a coyote which could eat that pigeon.”[38]

It wasn’t even the first time, just a few years before, in 2014, at least thirty crows were found dead from the suspected use of Avitrol in a downtown area of Portland. All over the world, the use of Avitrol is banned or heavily regulated. In Canada and Europe, the concern for Avitrol spreading amongst endangered or protected species has lead to many provinces and countries having the use of the avicide or other pesticides strictly kept to professionals. But people keep using them, trying to rid their houses of unwanted droppings and loud noises.

Our fears and disgust around rodents and birds aren’t new. So readily we call them “pests.” We have been convinced that animals like rats and pigeons carry disease or are in some way dirty. Even as far back as the days of the Black Plague, we were convinced that rats carried disease when it was actually fleas, more quickly spread between humans than the animals.[39] Still, the disgust persists. The pigeons on the sidewalk are given scornful glares, they’re so used to being walked over and through that they rarely move out of the way of oncoming foot traffic or cars. They’re haggardly birds, missing toes, talons, or a complete limb, feathers sticking up in odd directions, beaks broken and chipped. They come in all colors and sizes, with spots or patches, mixed and mutated like the (gently domesticated) mallards. The people who feed the pigeons are scary or insane, like the Pigeon Lady from Home Alone[40]. “I’m like the birds I care

for," she says, "People pass me in the street. They see me but they try to ignore me. They prefer I wasn't in their city."[41]

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Sometimes I am certain that I am the unwanted, wild bird, that I'm the one soaking up community resources and basking in a place not built for me but that I live in anyway. I wish I could explain to you what it was: the queerness? The transness? The autism? The OCD? Maybe I just have a lot of 'problems.' Maybe I'm just difficult. Or maybe I'm dirty and disease-ridden and they will try to scare me off like they always do. Banging pots and pans over my head: the sound of the schoolyard chants and taunts as I dipped my whole wing into the mud because I liked the way it felt against my feathers. The scarecrows and fake predators: the girls in junior high who pretended to be friends, but plunged knives straight into my wing joint the moment my back was turned. The falcon swooping in to kill me: the time a boy pulled me into the boys' bathroom, asked me to kiss him, and when I refused and pecked his cheek, hordes of school boys suddenly came pouring out of the bathroom stalls, leering, pointing, cackling, like some complicated lekking ritual I couldn't understand. They've tried to scare me off. Maybe they succeeded. I haven't been back home in three years. I convince myself my friends don't want me around even though they've never tried to clip my wings. I still can't bring myself to go into the boys' restroom.

Am I not good enough to be handled humanely? Am I too wild, too loud, do I leave too much of myself behind? Shedding layers like loose feathers, scratching up the fenceposts with my beak, tearing up the trees to make my bedding. Maybe they confused my molting for some kind of rebellion, the dark plumage around my eyes as something more than a mask or evidence of sleepless nights, or did they misunderstand my adaptation for parasitism?

I was only trying to live too. I was never trying to intrude, trying to take something from anyone, I was only surviving in the only way I knew how, in the only way I could. I want to tell you that I'm sorry even though you're the one trying to kill me. I want to believe it's my fault the way that you believe it is my fault. I've come so close to convincing myself. Last night I found Avitrol in my nest, but I've no idea if it was me or you who put it there.

—

Pigeons used to be rock doves, a larger version of the bird as we know it, with two bars across its wings and a kaleidoscopic patch of feathers on the back of its neck. Then we domesticated them. We started a long time ago, pigeons and doves appear in ancient hieroglyphs, tamed as pets and livestock. In Native American communities, it was believed the pigeons carried the spirits of the dead, a ghost on the wing. Even later, they were used by soldiers in the World Wars to deliver messages across battlefields. We kept them as pets, bred them soft and tame, used their droppings as fertilizer, their feathers for bedding. We changed their Latin name and kept them in neat cages. *Columba livia* becomes *Columba livia domestica* or *Columba livia forma urbana*.

But then something happened. Our perception of the bird changed. The once useful, sweet dove became a nuisance. We stopped needing them for communication, stopped using them as livestock, let them out of their cages and onto the street. The pigeon became feral again, started to adapt to its new environment—the cityscape. And they thrived in this new place, as much as a bird can. "For the biologist who study the 'novel ecosystems' of cities, pigeons are exciting and interesting because they've adapted so well"[42]. I think pigeon's city expertise is evident in just how widespread they are. New York to Los Angeles, pigeons appear on the sidewalks, sitting on construction cranes, and roosting on telephone wires. The dilapidated flocks

of grizzled cocks and hens dot the skyline, as much a symbol of urbanization as a modern Starbucks or skyrise apartments. "'More than most other urban animals, [pigeons] prefer concrete and sidewalks over ledges over grass and shrubs,' Jerolmack says. 'Rats will retreat to the sewers and bushes and remain out of view, but pigeons invade the spaces that we've designated for people.'"[43] There are videos of pigeons that have seemingly figured out how to use subway cars and get off at specific stops, meeting up with the rest of their flock or kitte[44]. The "rats with wings" have completely overtaken human spaces, even more so than the common Crow or Gull. And for some reason they absorb most of the insults and brazen attempts at 'pest' control. And despite their clear intelligence, being able to survive and adapt to a place that is so eager to neutralize them, most people are offended at a Pigeon's very presence on the street. We think they're dirty or disease-ridden, but it's only because they are so desensitized to us, whether because they were once tamed or because they have lived beside us for so long. Of course, Pigeons are not the only birds who succeed in cityscapes, they're just the ones who are less afraid to show themselves.

—

I visit Chicago at the tail end of fall and all I can think about are the Pigeons wondering around the street downtown. They flock together the way my friends and I do as we navigate the busy street, coats pulled around us tight, moving close to each other to conserve heat and bolster the wind. I make grabby hands at the pigeons and my friends laugh and shake their heads. They're used to my behavior; they know I like birds. But I don't think they understand it. I don't think they know that I *am* the pigeon.

I've been trying to explain it through writing, and while the concept seems simple on the surface, I find myself mincing words and repeating myself anyway. I don't think anyone gets it. I don't think *you* get it.

What I mean to say is I was feral once. *Columba livia*. I had iridescent feathers on the back of my neck and a black bar across my wings. I was bold and brazen, and I would sing songs to myself at every hour. I was wild and open and laughing. There are so many home videos of me as a child. A big smile. All my teeth showing. Laughing. High-pitched and cackling and warm. I can still hear it. (I wonder if a mockingbird gets songs stuck in their head. Do they hear the low wail of a mourning dove in their head on loop before they can repeat it?) My point is this: My bird song wasn't pretty, but it was happy.

What I mean to say is I was always a smart bird. I let them reshape me into what they wanted. A gifted kid, a teacher's pet, a goody-two-shoes. So polite. So small. So quiet. Adaption, evolution, natural selection. Cover the laughter with a hand. Smile without teeth. Be a *girl*. Be a *parrot*. Repeat what they say so you might convince them you are a part of the flock, that you are not some brood parasite. (Do mockingbirds ever feel existential? Do they wonder if taking on the song of another bird will obliterate their individualism? Do they look in mirrors and have no idea who is looking back at them?) I don't recognize myself anymore. I don't have bars on my wings anymore. My call is different. My flanks are scarred and my colors are muted and I hardly feel like a bird at all anymore. *Columba livia domestica*. You have made me into another species entirely. I let myself be renamed. Who is more to blame here, you or me? You who convinced me I needed to become something else or me who let you? Me who heard you taunt and recreated myself because of it?

What I mean to say is I was feral once and then they tamed me and now I am trying so desperately to be wild again.

—

Inadvertently we give birds great places to nest in our urban areas, in our bustling cities and suburbia. Nooks in architecture just big enough for the cup nest of a Hummingbird, trashcans full of viable bedding for keeping eggs warm, a million perches and stoops almost perfectly made for the tiny talons of a finch or the webbed feet of a duck. We plant our hedges close together in the backyard, creating hollows protected by the hard line of leaves; the perfect territory for blackbirds and robins. Our phonelines make good spots for perching mourning doves as they stake out their feeding grounds during the dawn chorus. The warm stadium lights make great nesting spots for falcons and hawks, who use the elevation and open field for hunting. Man-made lakes and fountains give ducks and geese somewhere to paddle between long migratory flights. Of course, we make special accommodations for the birds we find pretty. Bird feeders for the hummingbirds and songbirds, bird houses for the finches, ornate birdbaths for the jays. But we can't deny that in our own attempt to urbanize, to adapt to our changing environment, we have changed the evolutionary route of so many species.

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Once, while I still lived in the High Desert of California, my dad and I watched through the window as an Anna's hummingbird began nesting in a small hole in the archway of our front door. My dad set up a ladder so we could peak inside when she left to collect things or to hunt insects. She was a gorgeous thing, that little brown bird, I watched her build her nest like watching the slowly growing architecture of an ant-farm. She began with soft moss and dried leaves, tufts of feathers and hair. A perfectly round cup nest appeared over the course of just a

few days, just big enough for her to sit. Her eggs looked like two breath mints in the pile of fluff, fragile and miniscule. I was almost afraid to look at them, like the force of my staring would shatter them apart, leaving a trail of eggshell and yolk across her perfect nest.

One day they were eggs, and the next day they were fledglings, naked and open-beaked, screaming for food. They didn't look like things that would eventually become a hummingbird, they looked prehistoric. Two tiny, naked beasts with wide open mouths and eyes glossed over in blue-gray film, the slowly growing buds of feathers appearing like spiked scales across their bodies. But I loved them. I remember that we named them, but I don't remember the names anymore; I was a child, and my attention was pulled fast. I can't seem to remember the moment that they became Hummingbirds instead of soon-to-be-Hummingbirds. But I remember two fat Annas consistently visiting our feeder for the next year. My mother would have to refill the sugar water daily to keep them fed. And now, I wonder if the mother placed her nest above our door because of our man-made food resource, if the fledglings could figure out the difference between plastic flowers and real ones, if the difference even mattered to them. Without us, would the birds have survived? I'm not sure, but they were just as much at home there as I was.

—

Even our trash is useful to birds. Items like cigarettes and plastic can help prevent parasites and bugs from infiltrating the nest[45]. Bowerbirds use bottlecaps and glass to decorate their displays, and scavengers often sort through trashcans to find discarded food and nesting materials. But even more impressive are the birds who pry up anti-bird architecture and use the spikes or reflective tape for nesting. The birds who most often do this are Corvids or Corvidae, a classification which includes crows, ravens, magpies, jackdaws, jays, and other large Passerines. They are some of the smartest species of birds, regularly showing an understanding of tool-use,

materials, water displacement, and cost-reward problems[46]. They can solve puzzles, open locks, bond to humans, give gifts, and even learn to mimic human speech. Their use of anti-bird material is called “rebellious,” or “ironic”[47]. It’s impossible to guess if they know what they’re doing. Even though it’s very likely that they see the anti-bird spikes and barbed wire and see only material, completely unaware of its purpose as a deterrent, Corvids are also incredibly intelligent. Do they see the other birds land on spikes and come away bloody? Does their use of the spikes in their nesting serve more than one purpose? As we adapt to changing world, so do they, and if we continue to try and deter them, they can only respond with adaptation or extinction.

—

Adaptation or Extinction. It’s hard for me to say which is worse. If I change myself completely, is that not a death? If you force me to molt my feathers and wear new plumage, have you not killed me? I’m not only speaking about the outside of me, I mean that my bones have shifted too, my tendons pulling so hard they hurt, my joints aching. I am not the same bird I used to be, not just as a product of age, but as a product of socio-economics and the thing they call ‘status quo.’ I don’t even have the same name I did when I started.

Once a professor made us walk around the room, pointing at objects, calling them by the names of things they weren’t. Chair became Needle, Table became Xylophone, Book became Dinosaur. I look back on this event like a great extinction. And while I don’t consider the name I was born with a ‘deadname,’ I do still believe that something ended the day I dawned a new title. It wasn’t the beginning of my re-feralization, but a gentle nudge in that direction. I’m trying to say that I am changing again, that I am reverting back while also moving forward. I don’t think I will ever be exactly the bird I was, but I think I can retrace my evolutionary steps. My wing bars

grow back darker now. My beak is no longer chipped from picking at myself. I preen, but not because it is expected of me.

I rebuild myself out of the things you used to hurt me.

I reclaim the words you used to try and scare me off, I wear clothes you used to tease me for wearing, I laugh louder than I did when I was a kid. I am adapting, but no longer to your benefit. I will pry up the spikes you put on the rooftop, and I will use them for bedding. And when I become unrecognizable, I'm sure you will name me something else, as you always do. But I know my own name now, and you cannot obliterate me again.

Eggshell
In response to *Fall of Icarus* – Ivan Vilim, Serbia, 2021

Is it the hubris that careens me into flight
Or the need for elevation? The clumsy pride
Or the bone-deep wanting—desperation for height,
Warm touch? Sun beating against my honey-slick back,
Shining through the feathered edges of my body,
Crowning me with bright halo, sunshine and gods' light.
Doomèd angel, aren't I, father? Disgraceful? Proud?

But I am so recently hatch'd, egg yolk dripping
Down my waxèd body. Is it the arrogance
Or the joy that will kill me? My longing for heat?
For the Sun? And how better than to throw myself
Against him? My whole body, my new wings? Burning.

Is my end guaranteed? Apollon's prophetic
Women singing sweet hymns of my illuminat'd
Death. The Sun was only just whispering his sweet
Nothings into my wind-beaten ear. I heard him.
Saccharine cries over the rush of green ocean
He named after me. Were we not all in love once?

Believing that the wax wings would never melt, or
That our lovers would not burn us? That the ocean
Would unburden the fall? Trusting in our father's
Promises that we would be brilliant and fine
And radiant. No matter how closely we flew.

Ode to the Peacock

Brazen and bold, but oh so demure,
The way you hang those pretty feathers
Like a wedding train before you open
Them up for the crowd to see. Shyly,
Bowing that crowned head, batting
Those silky eyelashes, flaunting
The blue of your neck. You open up
And become a different bird entirely,
Feathers like a hundred shimmering eyes.
There's a bird underneath all that pretty,
All that decoration, and he is only just
A hopeless romantic at heart.

Ode to the Hoopoe

Your name, an echo of your sound,
A *whoop*, and the soft laughter
Of a child, hoopoe, toes in the sand,
Water sparkling on the horizon.
Stretching out your wings to sunbathe,
Orange afternoon in your crown,
Dark twilight on the wing, sun-up
In your call, hoopoe. You, noted in
Hieroglyphs and folk song. You,
A guide, a healer. Old and new.
You've been here for centuries, yet
You continue to grow, ever outward.

Changing Feathers

The winter of ‘23 has been harder than the last two I spent here, as if I’ve somehow grown less acclimated to Seattle’s wettest season. I am seeking out whatever warmth I can find. I sit in front of my electric heater, settle into the steam of a scathing hot shower, squish myself against the nearest friendly body that I can find. I am building up my collection of sweaters and gloves. A close friend hand-knits the first scarf I’ve ever owned in a neat monochromatic pattern. I wear beanies not just to hide my bedhead, but because my ears ache from the chill and wind. I am trying to adapt as much as I can, but I’m a California boy through-and-through. I am used to the prickling heat of desert, hot blasts of sand from the Santa Anas; the arid air that comes with elevation. I am always seeking out that same blistering heat. My body can’t seem to acclimate to the PNW’s ever-shifting weather, but this wet, winter season most especially. The humidity makes me sniffle, the barometric drops make my fingers and ankles ache, I nest in blankets when the sun dips low early in the afternoon. I’ve spent far too many hours in bed, wishing I could hibernate through it.

Yes, this winter is tough, though not just because of the cold—it’s actually been a warmer season than most—but because of the lingering dark, the distance between me and the rest of my flock. It has been lonely and quiet. It’s cloudy, fog hanging on the edges of buildings whenever I manage to make my way out of my apartment, and the fog clings to me too, my thoughts, like thinking through smoke. I’m not sure what has happened to me—I used to love being by myself, used to love the stillness, the silence, always knowing exactly what would happen because it was my choice. I would prefer it even, spending weeks alone, only leaving to collect groceries. But now I walk around my apartment with music blaring through earbuds, talking to myself, listening

to podcasts so I can make-believe someone is in the room with me. I don't know if it is a sign of me getting better or worse.

Is it good that I can't stand my own company anymore, that I wish I was surrounded by friends, listening to someone else's birdsong? Or is it bad that some days I cannot stand being alone with my own body? Either way, I am tired and sad, waiting for the winter to end.

I'm wallowing. I can feel myself wallowing, a conscious awareness that I am letting myself steep in loneliness like loose tea. I desperately try to force myself into motion, but I cannot seem to help it. I'm lonely, and I'm whining about it. I wallow but not for the same reasons I used to. Better or worse, at least it's growth in some direction, some change. It's been so long since I've felt like I've changed, yet at the same time I feel like I am exactly how I have always been. I'm still learning to how to hold two opposing things truths at once.

—

Unlike me, birds are masters of cold weather, waterfowl especially. In the colder months, the pigeons, finches, crows, and sparrows suddenly fluff up, round and plump. Little feathered orbs, like Christmas tree ornaments or snow globes, with their little beaks or feet peeking out from under the down. The sudden expansion isn't a result of bulking up with food, but rather the density of their feathers. It's similar to the human body's 'goosebumps' or 'gooseflesh,' when the skin of the arm or leg suddenly dots, prickles, and the fine hairs on the skin stand out on end. It's the body's way of maintaining and creating heat, making insulation out of whatever bit of fur there is. For birds, their feathers insulate, outer feathers wicking away the chill, inner downy circulating warmth[48]. They can tuck in one foot into their body then the next, continually warming themselves, their own heating blanket. Some birds even conserve energy by letting their body temperatures drop overnight. A black capped chickadee can lower their body temperature to

22 degrees Fahrenheit, slipping into a miniature hibernation, allowing them to save their energy for daytime, when it's easier to forage[49].

Waterfowl have the added advantage of their special oil glands, spreading it evenly along their outer feathers to keep themselves water repellent. Their preening oil keeps them buoyant and warm when the temperature of the wind and water drop. Their legs also have special circulatory systems that have what is called a counter-current heat exchange. The warm blood from their core pumps alongside the cooler blood in the feet, warming the blood before it can travel further into the core of the bird, even as their webbed feet paddle through freezing water. The counter-current keeps their extremities from bringing down their core temperature. Their bodies have also evolved to keep blood flow directed around their vital organs, and keeping their energy expense low for when food is scarce[50].

In these ways, birds have mastery over the chill. Evolutionary advantages for dealing with winter temperatures, a heater built into their feathers, bodies designed for maximizing their energy levels over long, cold nights.

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My friends tell me that I'm warm when I pull them into a hug or reach for a hand. It's usually said with a gasp, a laugh, a tighter squeeze. We compare our warmth to each other, nestle in tighter. I let them take whatever heat they need.

It's new. I didn't used to be warm. I was a frail, frightened thing when I was younger. Anemic and weak, warmth dripped out of my fingertips and left me frigid and clammy at all hours. In High Desert summers I could be found in a hoodie and jeans, splayed out in the sun like a lizard. I was rarely out past sundown, preferring my bed to cool desert nights. I was cold

and lethargic, and now I'm warm and restless. I can't make sense of my own contradictions, my own changing body.

I am a bird at heart, in the brain, but the desert landscape is in my body, oscillating between freezing and sweltering. I am open sky, cloudless, sun-beaten, and star-lit. And I'm the red-tailed hawk that cuts through the airspace, my wings caressing the blue sky as I hunt prey between the Yucca and Saguaro. I'm not sure what it means exactly, to intersect the self, to be predator and ecosystem at once, individual but crawling with life. I am trying to make sense of it still, what it means to hold two opposite truths at once.

Forgive my metaphors, I am only just trying to make sense of my sudden warmth. I have logical guesses and less-logical ones, and I can't decide which is more important. An iron-rich diet, a multivitamin, a change in hormones; those are the likely cause of the heat, better circulation that makes me seem warmer, but my mind seeks out further meaning. I do not feel any warmer to *myself*—I still struggle with cold air. I struggle with the weight of winter nights. Why do I, the heat source, not get to feel any of the heat myself? And if my body is changing in this outward way, why do I not feel it inside?

I wonder about my insulation. No, what I mean to say, is I wonder if I *am* the insulation. What am I meant to be keeping warm if it is not myself? The bird inside the downy feathers feels warmer, but the downy feels…? Nothing? Are the feathers happy to be warming the body within? And does the bird ever feel grateful for the feathers? I know the real answer to those questions, but I still find myself wondering them anyway. It is another new thing I am trying to understand, my desire to raise questions like this, my desire for the extended metaphors, my desire to mix the metaphors into mush and then try to separate them out again.

I tell you I am a bird, I tell you I am desert, I tell you I'm insulation. Can you forgive me for being so confusing?

—

Another tactic for warmth in the avian world involves the flock. Between crowded bushes, a flock of black-capped chickadees nestle in together in a tight ball, sharing heat, sapping what little bit of warmth they can from the stems and leaves of the plant around them. Like the 'V' formation of a migratory flight or the long march of the emperor penguins, they trade turns on the outside of the ball so each of them can equally share in the closeness[51]. They become a moving, living thing, the group of them together, one bird clustered into something larger. It's moments like this when considering the individual is pointless; the place where one bird begins and the next ends is negligible. A Crow becomes a Murder, a Flamingo becomes a Flamboyance, a Chickadee becomes a Banditry. Like a school of anchovies swimming as one collective unit, there is safety in a flock's numbers, and as social animals, there is an advantage in their collective as well. The closeness of the flock improves a flock's ability to survive, communication between individuals leading to better cooperative hunting, flying, mobbing, and mating. Birds have a billion special ways to flock, different kinds of collections. Polyandrous birds have one female bird and a group of males, and polygamous birds have one male with many females. In flocks with juveniles, a smaller flock of males will break off and group into a lek, where they practice courtship rituals amongst themselves before presenting them as fully matured males.

However, there are also flocks that expand beyond one specie. Both in winter and not, different species come together to form colonies, a much larger group of different individuals that nest or forage near each other[52]. Many species do it. The pigeon and the house sparrow

search for scraps side-by-side. Herons and storks spend time roosting together, in a colony of seabirds more commonly called a rookery. Even more territorial birds will set their breeding grounds amongst a different species. The bird colony has its own advantages over a smaller flock. Larger numbers, less predation, a larger network of birds to go foraging and find feeding grounds. Colonies can even expand to include some mammals, like on Triangle Island off the coast of British Columbia, Canada[53]. Its primary residents include auklets, seagulls, and tufted puffins, but also sea lions. A colony of animals use the island as a getaway from predators, as a breeding ground, and as a place to find community.

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I imagine my friends and I as a ragtag colony of birds. I'm the rock dove, no, the pigeon. Lexi is the house finch with the bright pink streaks through her hair and the sweet morning call, eager and excited. Rhiannon is the yellow-headed blackbird, protective and furiously loyal. Eric is the snowy egret, with its bright yellow feet and elegant gait, its long wingspan and observant eye. This is the family I know, the roost I live in. My colony. In my mind, we live on our own Triangle Island, where we can live without fear of predators, and they support me as I evolve or devolve or whatever it is I'm doing now. And I help them forage, build nests, and preen. I collect rocks and sticks they can add to their collections, I make them art and send it by mail across avian highways, and they find me new feathers I can add to my downy to keep me warm through these long winter nights. When we're together, on our island, we sing birdsong together, write together, send each other little encouragements throughout the day.

I hope they will forgive me for comparing us to the birds, but I find myself making my avian connections all the time now. I am bird-brained as I've said. My mind goes reaching for adjectives and comes up with feathered, taloned, beaked, winged. The only words I can seem to

shake out of myself are all the names of birds or their activities. I am repeating myself, but then again, birds only know a certain number of songs.

Forgive me, I am only trying to make sense of myself and of *you*, my friends, and birds are what I know best.

—

When I first moved to Seattle, I bought a giant bag of birdseed. I would sprinkle some on the edge of my balcony fence, sitting by the window, waiting for the birds. There were some that I recognized, house sparrows, robins, the odd crow or two. Delighted, I would reach for my phone, snapping pictures, sending them to my friends. They were birds I could feed, birds I could be familiar with. This is what I wanted, birds I could attach myself too without having to bring them into my home or having to go searching for them with binoculars and hiking boots.

I got familiar with the flock of crows that frequented the parking lot around the grocery store across the street, the American robins that flittered between holly berry trees on my walk to the bus stop, the pigeons and sparrows picking at the sidewalk in the nearby outdoor mall. These were my birds. I would say good morning to them when I passed by, used them like oracles or runes to determine what kind of day I would have. The more birds, the better. A crow sighting would instantly lift my mood. For my first few months in Seattle, the birds were the only familiar thing I had, and I began filling my walls with artwork of them. Posters, cards, paintings, a thousand feathered friends that could fill my space.

In the first spring I spent in the city, I began to notice birds I hadn't seen before. They were sparrow sized, with bright, ginger backs and dark heads, a gorgeous white belly. They were puffed up and round in the early spring before the weather had fully warmed. I took pictures, consulted my bird guides and apps, and learned they were dark-eyed juncos[54], common birds all

across the west coast. In fact, I had seen them before. But these ones had plumage that I didn't recognize. Here, they had Oregon coloration or a slightly duller cismontanus coloration, which was common further north. These variations had a more defined difference between the color of their body and head. In California, I had only ever seen their slate coloration, a smooth rustic gray, but with the same shape, the same white feathers under the tail and on the belly, the same bright beak.

It was strange, that birds I had known all my life were suddenly unfamiliar to me, wearing different colors despite being in the same species. On the fringe borders, where two colorations of the birds meet, they can still mate with each other, further changing their shade. But their ability to breed confirmed they were of the same species despite their feathers. These were all the same bird, all the same juncos with the same beaded eyes and quick, flittering movements[55].

—

And I wondered if I was the same bird too, just in a different shade. Had moving here, two states and twelve hundred miles away from where I had grown up, changed something about me intrinsically? I was pretty sure it had. Videos of me from back home, when I was a child, a teenager, an undergrad, they all looked like someone else, they all sounded like someone else. How quickly and suddenly I had changed. I wasn't so small anymore, so afraid to speak, so afraid to make mistakes. I'm brighter now, I think, at least on some parts of myself. My wings, my belly. Maybe I'm finally learning to lift my mask.

What would they call my coloration now? Washington plumage? Winter variation? I have been imagining myself as an entirely different species, but maybe I have been the same bird all along. Is it all the same on the inside? I wish I could say for sure. My younger self feels like a

distant, murky memory and also like a mirror, a direct reflection of today. How do I make sense of that?

But the birds seem to know. At the crossing of territories, they still recognize their own kind in spite of the difference of their feathers. The same bird song, the same short beak, but one has a darkness around the eyes, and another has orange on its back. One is gray and soft, another has more dynamic stripes along its wings. Still, they know each other somehow. I wish I had the same sureness, the same ability to recognize myself even as I change.

—

The dark-eyed juncos became a more common sighting on my balcony, so I searched up their preferred mix of seeds and purchased another huge bag. I sprinkled some on a plate and set it outside, watching eagerly as they would swoop in from above or below, picking for a while before fluttering back to wherever they came from. Sometimes I would leave the glass door shut but open the blinds completely, sitting on the other side of the glass, so I could imagine in some way that I was sitting with them, speaking to them, even though I wasn't sure they knew I was there at all.

In the long months before I had finally been accepted into a grad school and between grueling hours at a retail job, I would occupy myself with their presence. The text messages between my parents and I were full of photos and videos of their happenings. The sleek, bright male who would often chase away other kinds of birds from the seeds. The larger female who would sit on the edge of the balcony for minutes at a time, seeming to look out into the courtyard of my apartment complex. A juvenile who would swoop at gnats by my porchlight, managing to plonk against the glass door from time to time, but luckily never enough to get dazed.

I watched their lives unfold though I was sure they had no understanding of mine. There wasn't much else for me to do but watch them. So, when a small ball of brown and gray feathers suddenly appeared in the corner of my balcony, I was enraptured. A fledgling, still so small and round, short tail feathers and tiny wings. The parent birds would flutter by from time to time, dropping food into its big, open beak. And I watched it each day, making sure that the baby bird was still safe, still being fed, still growing. In some small way, he had become my baby bird too. Slowly and quietly, I would creep onto the balcony to set out more bird seed, giving him a small carboard plank to hide him from any larger birds that might come by, cooing to him softly through the glass.

Larger primary feathers on his wings slowly began to sprout, his tail growing longer, the softer feathers of a fledgling giving way to a cleaner coat. I had missed his first flight. I returned home from work one evening to an empty balcony. For a while I was certain he'd been eaten or fallen off the ledge. But after a few hours he returned, uncoordinated and fluttering about wildly before landing back in his usual spot. His parents came back to feed him, but it was clear he was well on his way to being a fully independent bird now. His wings came in darker, his belly filling out with soft downy, slowly beginning to resemble a juvenile male, with the slight darkening of the feathers on his head and his body beginning to lighten to brown.

One afternoon, he simply flew off. I'm not sure if I've seen him since, but the juncos still visit and peck at the bird seed when I leave it out for them. The next spring, no fledgling appears, but the balcony is rife with visits from the fully grown birds. I still find myself smiling when I see them on my walks, wondering if any of them are the bird I watched grow. He wouldn't recognize me, I'm certain, he wouldn't care to. I was just some big thing that approached him every once and a while with food he was too small to eat, that would get harped at by his parents

for standing too close. He would never know how often that I watched him, or that he had been filling my days with brightness during some of the darker times of my life.

—

I'm not certain if all I am doing is simply 'growing up.' It's true, yes, that I am entering the part of my life where people say you grow and change the quickest. Early twenties are giving way to mid-twenties. Each day I feel I wake up slightly different than how I went to sleep. But there is something more inside me. Or at least, that's how it feels.

Is it the fact that I have finally been diagnosed, that I can now point to my anxiety, my OCD, and say, there, that's the issue? Is it the meds? The 40 mgs of Prozac I swallow every morning that keeps me from having panic attacks on the bus? Is it that sudden, heartbreaking understanding that my childhood had not been a good one, that I am still grieving a life I did not get to have, that at every moment I am being eclipsed by my own anxiety, my own pain? Maybe it's been the therapy, or the sudden uptick in tragedies around me, or maybe I'm spending too much time on the internet, and not enough time with the birds. No, maybe it's *too much* time with the birds. Far too much time with the birds.

Forgive me, I'm not trying to overshare, I am simply trying to make sense of myself, and I am failing. Birds are all I know, and I'm not sure it's enough. I can only seem to speak about myself in terms of evolution, of migration, of changing plumage. Is it wrong? To animalize the self? At least I'm doing it before anyone else can do it for me.

I am the fledgling whose feathers are finally filling out, or I'm the bird on the edge of changing plumage, or maybe I am simply fluffing up for the winter. Maybe I am reading too much into my changing seasons, placing meaning where there isn't any, making my long

metaphors when they aren't necessary. If I draw enough comparisons maybe I will reach an understanding with myself.

If I write these long entries where I tell you that I am a bird and the birds are me, at some point the truth must reveal itself. Either I wake up tomorrow with feathers or I don't. I grow a beak or I don't. My life plays out like Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or it doesn't. You and I both probably have an idea of what is more likely to happen. But I can't pretend I do not see myself reflected back when I read about the birds, how they change over the winter, how they warm themselves, how they change their appearances as they cross state lines. I see my family in those bird colonies, the huddles of chickadees in the brush. And I see my changing too—the expansion of the feathers, the fledgling growing into a juvenile, the simple and complex evolutions of each specie.

Forgive me, I am a bird at heart. I am the desert in my body. I am intersecting myself. I am a fledgling trying to figure out how to spread my wings and find the courage to take the first leap off the balcony ledge.

Ode to the Wandering Albatross

The two points of your white wings
Spread far, carry you across ocean
Coast to coast and back again. You
A passenger, a compass, an albatross.
Your body knows the earth's current,
Your eyes seek out landmarks and
Ships. But you do not land. You lock
Your wings outstretched and soar.
There's no time to slow down, no
Time to wonder where it is you are
Going. You are already there, exactly
As you need to be, exactly as you are.

Ode to the House Sparrow

Commonplace but not common,
An adaptational wonder. We call you
house sparrow, because of how easily
You live beside us. Your brown feathers
Are familiar as sturdy stone walls.
City bird, you are, you grow with us,
You grow around us, you give us room
To change, and flutter just a step behind.
Comfortable, the sight of you on the cement
The crumbs of leftovers dotting your
Beak, your gentle head tilt. Curious bird.
What an honor it is, to learn beside you.

Dodo (Part 3)

//

there is so little

left of me now

a head, a foot, kept in a museum

i live only in textbooks

the name *you* gave me means *fool*

//

i was too polite

too soft to live

too kind, too gentle

i am the definition

of *human-induced extinction*

//

can i forgive you?

for your easy violence

could i? would it matter?

my forgiveness

i cannot even offer that

//

Molting

The quarter ends, I finish most of the generative work for my thesis, and I start testosterone.

It was a long time coming, something I was too afraid to do, something I convinced myself I did not need or could not have. I wish I could explain why, but it would take far more pages than it's worth.

—

I've been thinking a lot about transformation. Human to animal. Boy to bird. Boy to… Man? Man feels too serious. We'll come up with better words eventually, I'm sure. But I've been thinking a lot about change, about bodies, about where home sits inside of you, if it does. I've been thinking about shapes, how easily and irreversibly we can change them. I've been thinking about the animal in me and the animal in us all and how we have been animals the whole time. I've been thinking about the birds. I am always thinking about birds.

Testosterone works quickly and slowly at once. I see the subtle changes of its working all over. My skin oils, I sweat in places I cannot recall ever sweating before, I can do more push-ups than I have ever done. I start to feel things differently. Spicy food suddenly tastes less spicy than it used to—I crave peanut butter and all my beverages must be near-frozen to be enjoyable. Other things will take more time. Hair, voice, musculature. I await them with bated breath. I do not mourn what I have lost in the slightest. I steep in my joy—euphoria and giddiness. I share updates with anyone who will listen and sometimes I share them more than once.

At the beginning of this process, I was certain that it was a bird that I was turning into. I could almost feel the prickles of feathers all across my shoulder blades, the beginnings of my bones hollowing, talons growing at the ends of my toes. I was certain that a bird is what I wanted

to be—anything but human, but now I see, the transformation I was seeking was one that was happening inside me.

Cliché, I know. I'm sure that in just a few years' time I will cringe at this revelation, and even now I wonder if transformation is the right word. Nothing is becoming something else; it is only that which was already within is now moving towards the surface. And I know I am lucky to be able to have this blooming, to have people who care about it, to have the means to afford it, to be supported by doctors and therapists and friends and family.

The boy becomes bird becomes boy again. Or boy is still boy. Boy has always been boy. Boy loves those birds though, he really does. Boy sees himself in those birds, boy cherishes those birds, boy thanks the birds for teaching him lessons about what it means to be boy, to be bird, to be boy who was always boy. Boy loves the birds.

Boy will always love the birds.

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Poetics Statement for *Bird Boy: Evolution at Lightspeed*

Parker Dean Smith

What is the difference between human and animal? How might we define the murky place between us? How might we explore it, identify it, and make peace with the spaces where we brush up against one another? One way that writers explore the boundaries between animal and human are through literary devices—animalization and personification, by projecting the feelings and actions of one upon the other. Both in the classical and contemporary, authors reckon with the physical, emotional, and conceptual boundaries between humans and animals. Philosophers argue and muse about the dividing lines between us, considering the ethical implications of such a divide. We raise questions of each other, of ourselves. Is there some of the animal inside of me? How do I connect with it? Should I? And if I do, what will I find?

Using extended metaphor, personification, and transformational images of the body, *Bird Boy: Evolution at Lightspeed* adds to this collective questioning. Through nonfiction essays and poems, *Bird Boy* examines the relationship between birds and the speaker, citing personal experiences and researched facts about birds to show the places where human and bird can meet, finding both pleasure and melancholy in their shared connections. *Bird Boy* is inspired by works which explore this theme using varying modes and styles, most directly by *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Other works which inspired and aided in the creation of *Bird Boy* include longform prose such as Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* and J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*, several poems including Nikki Giovanni's *Allowables* and *Two-Headed Calf* by Laura Giplin, the philosophical writing of Jacques Derrida in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, and several other works.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Undrowned* interrogates the connection between human and animal by putting the reader in conversation with the evolutionary patterns and techniques of various marine mammals. Gumbs' prose often returns to breathing as a connection point between humans and animals, what it means to hold the breath, and what it means to breathe in time with other creatures. In her work, there is a sense of shifting perspective and address. The 'you' to whom she speaks is sometimes the reader, sometimes the animal. She states, "The intimacy, the intentional ambiguity about who is who, speaking to whom and when is about undoing a definition of the human, which is so tangled in separation and domination that it is consistently making our lives incompatible with the planet" (9). Like Gumbs, *Bird Boy* examines and participates in the "undoing" of the human conceptually, emotionally, and physically. Though the address and perspective doesn't shift in the nonfiction essays in *Bird Boy*, a sense of ambiguity comes through the speaker's descriptions of his own body, often calling himself "feathered," "taloned," with "webbed feet." At times, the reader may be unsure if the person speaking is aware of his own humanity, or if he believes himself to be a bird. "How can we discern the differences between generative boundaries and destructive borders?" Gumbs asks (87). *Bird Boy* attempts to answer this question, but also examines further the boundary between not only the speaker and birds, but also the boundaries created between the speaker and other humans.

Following Gumbs' example, *Bird Boy* places the reader in conversation with birds, their physicality, behaviors, and rituals to examine them through the lens of the speaker's humanness and to highlight the blurry places between the birds and humans. In the essay "Urban Nesting," the speaker of *Bird Boy* explains the variety of ways in which birds build their homes, explaining how they use trash and other man-made objects to make nests (45-55). By placing the reader there, in the behavior of birds, the speaker then draws out a metaphor about reclamation, about

using things that initially hurt the speaker and turning them into something that he can build himself up with. *Bird Boy* also engages the reader, in the style of Gumbs', by directly asking the reader questions, addressing them, and sometimes directly wondering what the reader thinks about his musings. "What do we remember and what do we forget?" Gumbs asks the reader (29), "what about you? Are you swimming sideways?" (48). *Bird Boy* asks "we are just stumbling apex predators, are we not? … can I trust you to figure that one out?" (23) and "you already know what I am going to say, don't you?" (25). Questions posed to the reader offer space for the reader's reflection, insight, and understanding. Gumbs also connects the reader to the text and to the marine mammals by offering her own thoughts, wonderings, and anecdotes. To herself she says, "sometimes I wonder how I got here too. How did I change to learn to breathe here? What did I lose?" (91) while *Bird Boy* wonders, "Can I open the door to these concepts without forgetting the truth of the matter? Or realize that there is no truth of the matter?" (29). These moments let the reader inside the mind of the speaker, and as the speaker compares themselves to the animal, so too can the reader. "I can breathe through salt water," Gumbs tells the reader (64), from *Bird Boy*, "I am the wild, unwanted bird" (48).

Bird Boy also attempts to emulate Gumbs' style of research-heavy creative nonfiction and the way that she expertly weaves together concrete scientific facts and emotion-driven prose. While Gumbs' prose exerts a blending of these elements, moving between the research and the personal without any break in the page, *Bird Boy* separates facts and emotion with section breaks, in order to mark transitions and ease the reader into the change of topic. Another aspect that makes Gumbs' work particularly seamless is that the prose embraces the vocabulary of the ocean, its wildlife, and evolution. Even in the moments that are not focused on research, she fills the text with this oceanic phrasing. "In a context that swells and tosses me around," she writes

(44), "… what are the evolutionary practices that stabilize me and allow me to cut a path through?" In this example, though we are speaking of the author's consideration of their own life-balancing practices, words such as "swell," "toss," and "stabilize" connect us back to the movement of dolphins in the ocean, and their evolutionary advantage of the dorsal fin. Like Gumbs', *Bird Boy* also speaks in the language of birds and their practices. Though speaking of his own interpretation of "home," the speaker uses words to remind the reader of a bird's body and movements; "what [is it] like… to know home by the way it feels on your webbed feet, the way it buffets against your body and keeps you airborne?" (16). Another aspect of Gumbs' writing that influenced *Bird Boy*'s prose is a consistent questioning. Over and over, *Undrowned* poses questions to not only reader, but to the speaker themselves. Often, sections begin with a question, or include statements that begin with "I am wondering..." *Bird Boy* does this too, posing questions that the speaker attempts to answer, or admits that he cannot. This persistent questioning brings to the text a feeling of growth, a journey that the speaker and reader take together. By allowing the reader access to the speaker's own questions and winding thoughts, a rapport is built between them. This connection of speaker and reader felt crucial to the success of the prose in *Bird Boy*.

Though *Undrowned* seeks connection through research and personal narrative, other works display a wide range of modality for getting at the question of the human-animal boundary. Other texts which focus on transformation and hybridity include *The Peregrine* by J.A. Baker, *Humanimal: A Project for Future Children* by Bhanu Kapil, and *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder. To varying degrees, these three publications transverse the boundary between human and animal, probing the connection between human introspection, emotion, and thought and the action, behaviors, and sensations of the animal. Collectively, these three pieces focus on

physicality and the body, often using concrete descriptions of the senses and the physical forms of both animals and humans. There also exists in each of these pieces the breaking down of the human, the sensation of a stripping away of humanity. *The Peregrine* attacks this head on, using direct language to express the desire to be rid of the speaker's humanness, "I have always longed to be a part of the outward life… to let the human taint wash away in emptiness and silence…" (10). In *Nightbitch*, we see the dissolving of the human in the increasingly disturbing description of the main character's body and actions, "the bathroom mirror revealed to her a being hitherto unmet, hair matted and mud-clotted, face smeared with blood and dirt, nostrils caked with a tarlike soot" (93). But *Humanimal*'s undoing of the human is in every line. In the opening pages, we are introduced to the animal-human boundary through her prose-poem style, "Behind the church was the jungle… at the edge of the jungle there was a seam… A place where things previously separate moved together in a wet pivot. I stood and walked towards it in a dream" (5-6). Here the 'church' stands for humanity, an orderly place and man-made structure, the jungle acting as something chaotic, perhaps mysterious. The "seam" and "wet pivot" between them becomes the main thread the text follows, the boundary between human and animal, and the subsequent "walking towards it." Like Gumbs, each of these works involve a breaking down of the human and a dissolving into the animal, landing in a place that feels distinctly in-between. Despite their similarities, each text uses a vastly different style to communicate the murkiness of the human-animal boundary.

J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* is the most "typical" of these three texts, using a more familiar structure than the hybrid forms of Yoder and Kapil. It features a collection of nonfictional passages, in the form of field notes, which follow the speaker through October to April in the mid 1960s, where he obsessively follows a peregrine falcon, marking down each of

its behaviors, locations, and kills. Robert MacFarlane's introduction to Baker's nature writing expertly describes the changes in Baker's speaker over the course of the text, saying that "By the end of [November], he has turned fully feral" (*ix*). This is the beauty of Baker's work, this slow collapse of his humanity and the giving-in to the behaviors of the falcons, and this collapse is not unwelcomed. In his first entry on October 1st, he tells the reader, "Wherever [the falcon] goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of color that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye" (41). Baker's admiration for the falcon and disdain for his "human shape" are repeated again and again throughout the novel, until we reach a breaking point. The falcon and speaker are no longer spoken of as separate entities, as "him and I," but rather a combined "we." Baker says, "*We* live, in these days in the open, the same ecstatic fearful life. *We* shun men. *We* hate their suddenly uplifted arms, the insanity of their flailing gestures…" (95, italics mine), as if to completely separate the falcon and himself from "men."

While Baker's work fits more readily into the genre of nature writing and has a formal style, Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal* explores similar themes through a hybrid-form collection of prose-poems and images. They hybridity of her text lends itself easily to the hybridity of the human-animal connection, which sits at the center of Kapil's documentary-style poetics. Kapil's work documents the story of two girls who were raised by wolves and then "domesticated" in a Bengali church as a way of recuperating them back into society. The collection has an ever-shifting perspective, sometimes the reader will feel as though they are looking through the eyes of Kapil, the documentarian, and other times through the lens of the "wolf girls." The prose belonging to the "wolf girls" is fragmented with beautiful description and a palpable desperation

for freedom and belonging. From the perspective of one of the "wolf girls" we hear, "I want to stand up but I can't do that here. They would know I am a wolf by my sore hips, the look in my eyes" (11), then "With nets and sheets, they made a canopy over my body, and I curled up inside the air. With teeth and earth, they made a net around my body, and I curled up inside my hair" (31). In these passages we read the perceived 'other-ness' of the "wolf girls," and their capture. Often, Kapil returns to the images of fur, the mouth, and the sensation of hunger when speaking from the perspective of the girls. Like Baker's work, human and animal begin to bleed together, as is suggested linguistically by the title *Humanimal*. The "wolf girls" become a new kind of being, not girls, not wolves, but some mixture of the two. In *Bird Boy*, while Kapil's work is not directly mentioned, comparison is drawn to its story. In the essay, *Wild Child*, the speaker mentions his time being seen as a "wild child," explaining his wish to be "tossed headlong into the woods," and be raised by animals (12-13). In that essay, and in others, *Bird Boy* unpacks the feeling of being 'othered' and then 'domesticated," though through different modes of storytelling, and with their different lenses.

Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* ties together both Baker and Kapil's styles and contents. This novel shares a more comfortable form, like Baker, but adopts the same level of poetics in the prose as Kapil. Similar to Kapil as well, there is often a return in the work to the ideas of hunger and consumption, as well as regularly referencing the fur on the body of the main character. Yoder's work narrates the life of a mother who is slowly turning into a dog. Like the other pieces, there is a deep focus on physicality and the sensations of the character as she begins to find more parts of herself that are turning into an animal. She begins the story finding that she has sharpened teeth and patches of hair growing on new parts of her body (3). By the end of the novel, she has completely transformed into a creature that she calls "Nightbitch," a feral and

rabid alter-ego that kills the family cat and catches squirrels in the park. The novel does not give a clear reason for this transformation, whether scientific or magical, though the speaker considers the supernatural, the scientific, and the psychological explanations for her change. Yoder's work acts as a critique of societal views of motherhood, and the experience of motherhood itself. In her novel there are many scenes of the mother caring for her child, nurturing him as an animal mother might, licking his face, catching food for him to eat. At the beginning of the novel there is also great emphasis placed on the mother and her ability to produce milk for her child, another aspect which connects her to the animal world, but is regulated heavily by society, making her go to a special room and use special tools to pump milk while at work (11-14). Yoder's work is also Kafka-esque, not only because of the inexplicable transformation of human into animal, but because of the helplessness the mother feels as she transforms, and the singular lack of help from her husband or friends. Yoder explores this helplessness and transformation through sensation. "She pushed a sound from herself she had not yet heard before, a long raspy growl made up of rage and breath, yearning and sorrow. There was a great and horrible power to the sound, as every muscle strained to expel it, her arbs tightening and throat constricting" (149). In this passage and many others, there is a battle between the speaker and her animal self, a sensation that "Nightbitch" takes over her body, which ultimately culminates in the speaker's acceptance of "Nightbitch." Like Baker, she begins to stop distinguishing between the two personalities and feelings, uniting them into a new self, one that exists as both human and animal, dog and mother.

Bird Boy weaves together many types of writing, inspired by the texts shared above. The bulk of the work includes nonfiction essays which contain researched facts and descriptions of various bird species and their behaviors as well as sections that include introspection—sharing personal narratives and deep thought. In these sections, the work explores the border between

speaker and bird more thoroughly, sometimes acknowledging them as separate and other times merging them together. Like the texts above, *Bird Boy* combines bird and boy into a third identity, one that acknowledges both parts, but also recognizes that it cannot fit cleanly into either category. To further this idea, the speaker often returns to the issue of "holding contradictions," where he must hold two different ideas or two parts of himself though they contradict each other, in the same way that the speaker ultimately holds the identity of bird and boy, while acknowledging the impossibility of truly being both. Extended metaphors offered a way of reckoning with these contradictions and the sensation of holding two opposing truths at once. Metaphor in itself bridges the gap of two things by comparing them together or allowing them to simply 'be' both. Metaphors connecting human and animal exist in many forms and in many styles of writing, but sometimes it cannot quite get at the boundary in its entirety. *Bird Boy* converses with these metaphors, trying to make sense of them, playing with the "desire to mix the metaphors into mush and then try to separate them out again" as a means for exploring anthropomorphism and personification and how they can aide us in our understanding of the human-animal boundary (61).

Anthropomorphic projections have a long history in classical and contemporary texts, and because of this rich history, *Bird Boy* contains introspective prose that directly comments on and observes the uses of that projection and metaphor. Much of this introspection was guided by philosophical readings which deepened my personal understanding of the roles of personification and animalization in a larger scope. The biggest source of this philosophical thought came from *The Animal that Therefore I Am* by Jacques Derrida. Derrida's work investigates the borders between man and animal, dividing these parts by the animal (or animot), the animal *inside* the self, and humans. He explores different ideas of what might be the dividing line between human

and animal, emerging with three different potential boundaries: shame, duty, and language. His argument, fittingly, begins with Genesis, and the idea of shame due to nudity. It is Derrida's opinion that humans carry shame at being naked and that animals do not. "The animot is more naked than the human, who is more naked than the animot" (57). He means that though an animal may be physically more naked than a human, and more often, that a human's shame makes them *feel* or seem more naked. His second dividing factor is the idea of duty, which further extends into the idea of individual rights. He posits that humans have rights due to their also having duties, and that animals, therefore, cannot hold rights because they hold no duties (87). However, he further goes on to say that this dividing line may not hold firmly, as some animals (like livestock and working animals) *do* have duties, and that some humans have no duties, but still maintain their rights (88, 100). Another division that Derrida considers is the idea of language, "man is an animal, but a speaking one" (120). He questions, though, exactly what counts as language, suggesting that animals appear to follow some sort of code, or specific responses to specific sounds. However, he argues that our advanced speech could divide us from the animal, saying "speech is… a gift of language, and language… is a subtle body…" (125). He ultimately ends his philosophical essay with the idea that animals can "go with us" but not "exist with us" (145), that though we are similar in some ways, we must acknowledge that we *are* different, even if that difference remains unclear.

Though the crux of Derrida's argument lies in the division of human and animal, I was most drawn not to these arguments, but rather to Derrida's concept of the animal inside the self, and further, the animal inside of *me*. Derrida makes it a point to explain that animalization is often used and seen as a way of bringing down— or 'domesticating'— marginalized or minoritized communities (104). While he does not say this directly, we can conclude from his

explanation, that racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and other forms of discrimination have roots in the animalization of the 'other.' And further, that the act of animalization weakens the one who is animalized by way of putting the non-animalized in a position of power and superiority (96). This concept became crucial to the structure of *Bird Boy*, and especially the introspective sections of the prose.

Alongside the essays exploring the human-animal connection, using Gumbs, Baker, Kapil, Yoder, and Derrida as guides, *Bird Boy* also contains short poems of many styles. These poems include several odes, which directly reference a specific specie of bird, ekphrasis pieces responding to artworks and texts, and longer poems that blend bird metaphor with personal experience. There are also three pieces referred to as *Dodo Part One, Two,* and *Three*, which act as a throughline, detailing the extinction of the dodo bird, relying both on the facts of the dodo birds' discovery and extinction as well as personified poetics spoken as if from the dodo bird itself. Many of these poems do not fit cleanly with the nonfiction essays, the speaker's voice shift or perhaps becomes a different speaker entirely. The intention behind these pieces was to offer breaks between the research-heavy sections, as well as to allow the reader to connect with other aspects of birds without the speaker guiding them through it. These poems offer some negative space on the page and also allow the reader to sit with the language and sound of birds and ornithological vocabulary.

The poems in *Bird Boy* were also used to acknowledge a darker side of the human-animal connection, inspired by a few poems which I returned to often as a part of my creative practice. These poems include Ada Limón's *The Vulture & The Body*, Althea Davis' *Kinder Than Man*, Laura Giplin's *Two-Headed Calf*, and Nikki Giovanni's *Allowables*. Each of these poems explore a darker view of the connection between human and animal. They share themes including seeing

dead animals as omens, the extermination/extinction of animals by humans, and the destruction of the 'strange' or 'other.' These poems often reminded me that there is a rich history of animalization being used against communities to spur violence towards them or force them into submission, as well as acknowledging that there exists danger in animalization's opposite. The foil of the 'animalization of the self' is the 'personification of the animal.' This issue is directly expressed in the section of *Bird Boy* titled *Flaco the Owl*, in which the speaker outlines the risk of personification, the "Bambi effect," and arguments surrounding animal captivity. It was incredibly important to me as a writer to acknowledge these risks, as I wanted my connection with the birds to remain respectful and to give myself room to make mistakes and learn from them. Moreover, I wanted my work to show the reader how crucial it is to examine this boundary for themselves, to see the act of animalization and personification as something that can make the 'other' feel closer to us, that urges us to consider ways in which we are similar to animals and to each other, rather than only seeing difference.

I had always considered myself as someone animalized—being told often that I was a 'wild child,' and believing firmly that I existed or *should* exist outside of human society, and further, outside of my human body. I was told and believed that my identity as a queer, trans, and autistic person made me somehow less than human, that the 'strangeness' of my identities and disorders othered me from my peers. I felt often that I was being domesticated, or that I had to tame myself, that I had to change how I behaved and connected in order to fit in, that I needed to somehow hide or destroy what was 'other' and 'animal' about me. But in my writing, I come to realize that I do connect deeply with the animal within me, the traits that 'othered' me, and that I wished to in some way rehabilitate what was destroyed and domesticated by myself and others. Throughout the writing of *Bird Boy*, these moments where I acknowledge the bird inside of me

became an act of reclamation. I was *choosing* to animalize myself and see my humanity within the animal and the animal within my humanity. My connection to birds became a deliberate and joyous choice, rather than something forced upon me, and ultimately, it felt freeing to allow myself to reclaim something that had been used against me, to use an act of suppression to instead uplift myself and find harmony within the self

Over the course of my work, I found myself most surprised by my own observations of my writing. I was most enlightened by moments where I would pause to reflect on how I was structuring my arguments and research. I found myself pulled towards long-form metaphors, questions asked to the reader, and moments of honest reflection in the work. These were crucial points of connection between my imagined reader and myself—I wanted to acknowledge points of confusion, mixed metaphors, and the fact that I did not have everything worked out. In these moments, I was writing what I most wished I could read. I wanted a speaker that would acknowledge that sometimes our poetics, as writers, are confusing or disjointed, that we do not often (or ever) have everything figured out. It was important to me that my speaker came across as human—as very close to me. My speaker is self-aware and self-reflective, but also states their own confusion plainly, and wrestles with the fact that they hold contradictions and that there exists a gray area in the arguments they consider. I purposefully gave my narrator a sense of unreliableness, though in an attempt to draw the speaker and reader closer together and let the reader see deeper into the speaker's insights, rather than to create mistrust between them. In these moments, I found the most fun and healing work—I was allowing myself the space to write without direction and to unwind little tangles of thoughts I was having about my own work. I was also able to relieve some stress in these moments as well, to finally put down into words feelings I was having but could not find a way to express.

Here, I am thinking most of my coda, *Molting*. In that piece, I acknowledge a sort of failure in my work. I had been suspecting over the course of writing that I would find the speaker transforming fully into a bird, into the animal. In all of my generating process, that was my intended final step, that the speaker finally gives in and sheds off all human layers. But instead, I found that the speaker's transformation had everything to do with a deepening understanding of the self, and a respect for their humanness. This final piece was important to me not only because it served as a rounding-out of the thesis, but also because it acknowledged my own change in direction and my own growth throughout the creation of the thesis. It serves almost as a diary note in some ways, a direct author's note to the reader, even beyond my introspective essays. In that final piece I acknowledge my most literal transformation, as a trans person beginning to take HRT and as a person accepting all the things that make me different from other people, my queerness, my neurodivergence, and my mental disorders. This is the real transformation at the center of *Bird Boy*. I chose to end the thesis with *Molting* as an acknowledgment of my love and respect towards the birds for helping me understand myself better, and, in some way, to offer gratitude to my own past-self who started the thesis and came out different on the other side.

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