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The Birds in My Life

Christopher Sylvester

UNF Writing Center Award for Creative Non-Fiction

The Mockingbirds

A fence encases the lake and on its top-bar is perched a she-crow. The yellow of her chest shines dull in the morning light. She preens and watches me watch her from down the way.

All at once, out of the trees lining the walkway that circles the fence comes an uproar of birdsong. No, not birdsong: it is too cacophonous. There are hisses, buzzes, clicks, and chirps; wild trills and terse screeches. There is something shaking the branches. Something is angry. The she-crow takes no notice. She lifts a wing and straightens the feathers under it.

And then, they are swarming. Five or six mockingbirds in their drab grays and whites and occasional streaks of brown surround the she-crow, the whole time croaking and bleating.

The attack is well organized. Each bird takes a position: rear, front, either flank, or above, and waits for the right moment to strike. When not on the attack the bird wrangles the enemy, keeping it from escape.

Despite the mockingbirds' tactics the she-crow takes flight. They are still with her in the air. As the whole knot of them moves over the water, the crow is forced lower and lower. The mockingbirds give her no quarter; they reel upward and then plunge back down again at staggered intervals.

Now her wings ripple the water as they flap—now I can no longer see her delicate claws above the surface.

Now, she is only a struggle and a splash, and still the mockingbirds work. They dive blindly, at random.

The she-crow is lost, the lake is still, and all the mockingbirds return to their branches, trilling their victory to one another.

The Robins

Fat wing-ed red fruit.

The Egrets, white & blue

During the summer months, if you play it right, you might just get to see this.

Time of arrival: 7 AM

Weather: Preferably foggy. Just-morning hot.

Location: Riverside Park.

Jacksonville, FL.

What you will see:

On the fence around the lake, in the trees of the island in its middle: egrets, blue and white. In the fog they are smudges of paint, each making the other's color more vivid.

In the trees they are a white cloud veined with darker, more menacing streaks. On the fence, they line up like kindergarteners, white-blue-white-blue. They stand solemnly as if scolded for previous misconducts. At times, these egrets, they quarrel, like brothers and sisters queued up against their will—they take it out on each other.

And then, when they leave it all explodes. A thousand flaps of wings, a storm of white dotted with blue, and the trees bare and the fence is again a lonely rail.

The Sparrows

The sentient cloud bobs and weaves; splits and reunites. It flows down the street—toward me.

Pensive, it rears up into a ball. It considers for a moment, then shatters and each tiny bird finds purchase in the branches of a hedgerow.

Only a few feet away, I see the bush come alive. It shakes and chirps. It dances and screeches at frozen-me.

And one small sparrow, a brown ball with wings and a miniature black mask, sits atop this miracle shrub, no larger than the butter yellow butterfly that pinwheels past us.

The Bluebirds

Birds of the ghetto. They travel in pairs and talk constantly.

Their thrift is unparalleled. The Bluebirds spend hours picking through brush, on the hunt for the perfect morsel or scrap of debris for a nest.

Forever cautious. Their paranoia is born of an intimate knowledge of the world's workings—from below. The bluebird is well aware that it is a minor cog in this apparatus and has learned to use this to its advantage when possible. They watch each other's backs, and with a cry depart at the earliest sign of trouble.^{1 2}

¹ Exception: when the bluebird's home is threatened it fights without rest against any foe: cat, bird, snake,

or man.

² Exception to the exception: they are often dislocated by other birds (See: *The Mocking birds*). When

evicted they leave for a new tree where the whole process starts again; the

process of survival.

The Ducks, river

Two by two, the ducks float by. It seems there is nothing to do but drift back to shore and then push off again. They do this endlessly, neither bothering to look at the other.

The Woodpeckers

Beak against wood and the sound that it makes, which is:

Bursts of staccato notes; spanning only seconds.

The Ducks, pond or lake

Over-population is always the pond-duck's woe. For every female there are armies of males. In such a closed circuit rife with competition an infinite number of variations develop in appearance among the male ducks. Love mutations.

Ex.: There is a male with a small tuft of feathers on its head. As if trimmed by a topiary expert the feathers balloon out perfectly and cinch where they meet the skull. The duck proudly displays his lollipop shaped protrusion.

Ex.: Another has a ridge of feathers rising along its neck and head. He repeatedly dips beneath the water, simply to shower droplets around him and let the water bead on his crest.

Ex.: Still another has bands of white on his light-brown wings, which he waves at almost all times, even when seated on the lake.

Ex.: There are many more, mostly unremarkable, and they all paddle in a tight circle around a single female who has a mind not to look at any of them.

The Crows

Crows are everywhere. They are spontaneously created by empty space. A dusty closet, the trunk of an abandoned car, a square of dirt cleared for some new building, the shell of a house burned long ago, all such places produce crows from their dark inertia, simply to fill.

And then the crows haunt us, a reminder of space left to its own devices.

The Waterturkey

The underwater world is a wall-less maze and the waterturkey knows all the back doors.

Above water, its serpentine neck swivels and darts, its sole visible part. One can only assume there is a body below until it takes flight in a spray. And even then it is gone in a haze of water-caught sunlight, leaving only the memory of slick black feathers and the rush of wings.

When diving, the waterturkey vanishes completely. Like memory, it leaves a ripple-less surface and is gone for any stretch of time. And then, just when its existence is forgotten it reappears, a seamless emergence back into the world. Like memory, when it is fully exposed, which is rare, the waterturkey arches its wings and throws back its orange needle-bill. It bellows and demands averted eyes.

Waterturkeys cheat time and space without second thought and sometimes upon resurfacing the flash and wriggle of a small, silver tail can be glimpsed before the fish is swallowed whole.

The Buzzards

—At a distance.

A column rises into the air. A multi-tiered tower, each of its levels in perpetual motion. The whole apparatus gyrates at different speeds, each particular black dot moving in sync with the others on its plane. They are a massive set of wind chimes held together by invisible strings; too far away for anyone to hear them ringing in the wind. —In close quarters.

I dreamed once that I was alone on the shoulder of a night-time highway. It was dark and I had no way of knowing how I got there. With nothing else to do, I walked. After a stretch of more darkness and quiet, I saw a set of headlights in the distance. The car came fast and I do not remember its make or appearance. But, in the glare of its lights I could see the other side of the highway. There, huddled together, was a group of old men dressed in black robes, their backs to me. I could see the white hair or bald skin of their heads. At the moment of the lights strongest intensity, one turned around and looked straight at me: he had the ashy-black face of a buzzard. His hands were talons. He opened his immense beak and rasped.

The Blue Heron

You are almost my height, but most of you is legs: long, yellow things ending in a three pointed splay. They carry your towering body over oozing mud and into mysterious water.

You totter forward and then freeze. In the sunlight your blues let their purples emerge and those legs, they light up neon.

You become a blur—suddenly. No tensing, no preparation. Not even a blink and your colors, your form, smear as that narrow head rockets down.

The recoil is a slow reformation and then you're yourself again and I am watching you and there is no sign of your prey.

You march on through the midmorning; slow, deliberate, and unmoved blue machinery of death.

The Pigeons¹

Birds of commodity. They grow fat on the lost French-fry or abandoned pizza crust.

Pigeons are hated for what they reflect: our growing girth, our laziness, our own stubborn fixed-ness.

They are hated for their lack of humility. Having lost their fear of us, they don't even have the good sense to move when we grow angry with them.

Pigeons are attracted to statues, monuments, shopping centers, gas stations, movie theaters, government buildings, doctors offices, schools, universities, auto dealerships (used, new, or both), churches, or almost any source of our cultural lock-jaw. These places become the pigeon's home, where he takes roost in our speechless mouths.

The Geese

- a. White: Over-sized paper lanterns, ghostly on the water.

- b. Speckled: The speckled geese are heavy, weighed down with purpose. No matter when you encounter them, they are always on their way somewhere, always in the middle of something. Their appearance lends itself to their hurried aspect: A flurry of color—red, white, and black are most prevalent. There is no pattern only a confused play of markings. Both males and females have a beak that can extend into a leathery mask, covering part or all of the head. These masks can be topographical, especially in males. Both are constantly on the defensive and will chase threats halfway across any park.
- c. Enormous, gray, and brown: I had never seen geese like these before. There were only two on the lake that morning and that's all it needed: a pair of graceful, long-necked animals. Their bodies, situated far below their heads, were a solid cream with wings tucked in. Just at the top of their necks were stark, white rings. Their bills, a dark, brown hide, pushed up between their eyes in strange ridges. And where these ended stripes of white feathers began, bisecting the geese's heads into two halves of tan.

The Pelicans and the Seagulls

Birds of my memory, they are no longer in my life.

They populate the three islands of my past: the isle of infancy, the isle of childhood, and the isle of youth. Blue

¹ Cannibal Ox says: The pigeon eats trash because it is trash. They "congest on a majestic street corner" at night. But, the pigeon has a certain freedom too: "A pigeon can't drop shit if it never flew." Starting as trash can lead to immortality and metaphysical purity: "SCREAM PHOENIX." The pigeon is anyone who knows that "life's ill/sometimes life might kill."

waters, brown waters, waters white with foam.

On the shores of these islands, on their sands, brown or white or black, my memories play.

Above them, pelicans carry water filled with living fish in their mouths. Huge, flying fish tanks, they practice maneuvers and formations across the sky. My great-grandmother's voice drifting: "A Peli-Can." My little memories watching in awe as pelican after pelican breaks rank, peels downward, and plunges into the unspeaking sea.

Meanwhile, gulls hop unperturbed around the knots of my memories along the strand. They pick through the unwatched provisions my thousand memory-mothers have packed for their memory-children.

Some of those little mes chase after the flying noisemakers; shrunken, pink hands grasping for a white, white feather.

There are a few who keep their distance, eyeing the gulls with caution.

Many are busy throwing handfuls of half-stale bread. They watch the yellow beaks flash, open, squeal, strike over crumbs.

At least one or two of those memories secretly plan to feed the gulls Alka-Seltzer tablets just to see if they will explode into a poof of feathers like someone at their memory-school said they would. Of course, these rascals don't do it.

Now, I never see these birds.

Pelicans are always-only a shadow-configuration on the sand of some beach. Whenever I look up for them the sky is empty.

Seagulls cry but do not reveal themselves. Even inland I hear them, but fail to spot a single gull. At times, I think

it is only the cry of my memories from those far-off islands, the wind carrying the noises of them fast at play.