



ONE

Hatchlings

A Bearer, Begetter speaks: "Why this pointless humming? Why should there merely be rustling beneath the trees and bushes?"

"Indeed- they had better have guardians," the other replied.

As soon as they thought it and said it, deer and birds came forth. And then they gave out homes to the deer and birds:

"You, precious birds: your nests, your houses in the trees, in the bushes. Multiply there, scatter there, in the branches or trees, or the branches of bushes."

—*Popul Vub*

7 A.M., Altamont, New York

LIGHT STRUGGLES THROUGH a covering of clouds and makes its way into my room, my eyes. Time to get up. I have a morning class to teach, Public Speaking for college students, followed by meetings and errands, and then I'll head out to the Berkshire Bird Paradise, where I'll stay the weekend to trail after Pete Dubacher and witness his daily routine with the birds.

My own routine starts with getting myself out of bed—no easy task. I'm a night owl, and an early morning class is the scourge of my life. The only compensation is that I often get to see the sun rising at the edge of the Heldeberg escarpment, with the last stars still lingering where the indigo horizon begins to turn gold and pink. There's still plenty of pretty out here on the border of Albany and Schoharie counties.



I creep to the window, scrunch back the curtain to look out over the land.

There's no frost today, though it's been a chilly October so far. The open patch of grass that leads to the woods behind our land is still green, my nasturtiums aren't wilted yet, the pond my husband dug still has frogs. I hear the morning caw of the ravens that take their breakfast at our compost pile. One of them opens large wings to swoop away.

As I follow its flight, I see motion at the pond. It's from something that blends perfectly with the silver gray environment until it moves. Then it becomes something large and gray, something ancient and unlikely, a visitor from Jurassic Park.

"Steve," I say to my husband. "The heron's here."

He mumbles into his pillow and rolls over. He's not a morning person, either. I get dressed and go downstairs, sneaking out onto our deck where I can get a better look.

Great Blue Herons are fairly common in our country neighborhood. Most of the people who live here have ponds, and there's a good balance of open field and wooded land all around the scattered houses. We've often seen them flying overhead, but they only started visiting our land a month ago, after we filled in the pond. The first heron to stop by is forever joined in my mind with how I got to write this book, and why I'll be going to the Bird Paradise later today.

What happened was this: I was pulling out of my driveway one Saturday in August, on my way to the grocery store. As I looked down the sparsely traveled road—checking for wandering dogs and cats as much as cars—I saw what looked like a large bird standing on the grassy verge a few yards away. I stopped, peered, pulled my car back into the driveway and turned it off, then walked over to investigate.

Standing there, looking rather forlorn, was a Great Blue Heron, about three feet tall. A juvenile, I figured, since adults are about a foot taller, and have more marked plumage. When I approached, she ducked her head shyly and backed up, but didn't fly away. A neighbor's truck went by, and she still didn't take off. I went and got Steve.

"Huh," he said when he came back with me. "Look at that. Must be a fledgling."

"She's not flying," I said.

"How do you know it's a she?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't. But I know she's not flying, so something must be wrong."

He sensed my tendency to intervene. "Let it be," he advised. "It—okay, *she* knows what to do."

A little reluctantly, I went on my way to the store. When I returned, and the bird was still there, I approached her again. She didn't seem sick or wounded. Just very still. "Listen," I said. "If you need help, come to the yard, okay?"

I went back into the house, and within half an hour when I looked out the window, there she was, standing quietly in our strawberry bed.

"Look," I told Steve. "We have to do something."

"Call Pete," Steve suggested. "Get his advice."

Pete Dubacher was my go-to guy for all the frequent bird events I've had in the last fifteen years or so. Since my first trip to his sanctuary, I'd been back many times, sometimes bringing my college students to work, sometimes just for my own pleasure. I'd also done some radio interviews with Pete around my novel, *These Dreams*, which has as one of its settings a bird sanctuary loosely based on his.

When I got hold of him and told him about the heron, he said, "Oh, yeah. Juvenile herons. I had one of those recently. Tangled up in fishing line. Maybe this one got kicked out of the nest because something's wrong with it, or maybe it left too soon. Either way, it probably doesn't know how to feed itself. You'll have to get food into it quick or it'll starve. Might be too late already. But just get a blanket over it, then bring it in. Do you have any fish? Mush it up, and stuff some right down the throat. Don't just put it in the mouth. Get it in the throat. They swallow whole trout, y'know? Oh—wear safety goggles. If they're scared they go right for the eyes."

I reported that un reassuring advice to Steve, and we went outside to stare at the heron. She was pitiful, all hunched up, a lost little girl.

"We don't have to try," Steve said. "You know how you'll feel if it—she—dies."

I sat on my deck and thought about that. I did know how I'd



feel, because I'd felt that way every time I had a failed bird rescue, and in fact, all my bird rescues failed. Often I felt like a kind of Charon, my job only to ferry birds across the River Styx to the underworld. One after another, they hopped into my life, stayed briefly, and died. I'd never had the chance to witness that flight away which should be the culmination of a rescue effort. And every death felt worse than the one before, an accumulation of failures that weighed heavily on my heart.

I also felt that way every time I got a rejection on a book or story, in spite of all the ones that have gotten published. No failure was ever anything to me except personal and deeply felt. My emotional barometer recognizes no other setting for these things.

And lately I'd been thinking that maybe it was time to stop trying quite so hard, for birds and books, for many things. I was at a crossroads in my career. A teaching job I'd loved was closed down by administrative fiat, a series of books I'd been working on were proving difficult. I sought something new for my life.

And what, after all, was the point of beating myself up? All current wisdom says that you should follow your bliss, not your pain. That you'll know when something's right because it will come easily. Though I was raised Catholic and spoon-fed a philosophy of suffering for the greater good, lately I'd been trying hard to embrace a more New Age attitude of manifesting what you want in material reality, following points of least resistance rather than banging my head into walls.

I could make a good start by letting this bird go. The local coyotes would put an end to her story, and I wouldn't have to bear witness. Nature would do what it does, and I could get on with my day.

But staring at the young heron, her sadly hunched shoulders, her beak tucked to one side and her eyes half closed, I felt something important stirring within me. Some essential message about my own authentic nature.

This is a sad bird, and she needs comfort, regardless of your neuroses, the message said. And you are someone who tries. That's who you are. That's what you do. You might as well get on with it.

I sighed. Deeply. "I can't leave her," I said to Steve.

Steve sighed just as deeply. "Yeah," he said. "I know."

We got a blanket, and easily caught the bird, who made no struggle against us. We brought her inside and set up a place in the cellar where she could rest quietly, with a blanket under her, and surrounded by a large tomato cage partly covered with another blanket. I microwaved my best frozen flounder, and as Steve held the bird, I got a goodly amount down her throat.

We went down later in the night and repeated the proceedings, and once again before we went to sleep. By the second feeding, she seemed more interested, a little more perky in receiving her food. The thing with feathers, which Emily Dickinson calls *Hope*, took up a perch in our souls. We went to sleep feeling it stir.

And when we got up in the morning to check on our visitor, she was a huddle of feathers in a nest of cloth. She'd died in the night.

I felt all the old pain of failure, of frustration, of longing. My heart ached for what would not be. Steve, just as sad, patted my shoulder and tried to give comfort when he needed it just as much. She was a beautiful bird, and we both longed to see her grow up, spread those great wings and take to the sky. And I had no one to blame for how I felt except myself. I'd taken this on knowing the possible consequences, and here they were. *Hope* flitted off its perch and moved on.

I laid her body to rest with all due ceremony, grieved my grief, and thanked her for the visit, apologized for my failure. I told her I wished I could have done better by her.

I was shaken up by the incident, and that night I went to sleep saying small prayers to whatever angels watch over the spirits of birds, wishing her a good journey. I also said a few prayers for myself, to whatever gods look out for fools. Send me on the path that's right for me, I asked. Send me in the direction of what I truly love.

The next morning, I woke to a call from Pete Dubacher, who told me he'd just had a conversation with an editor. She was interested in a book about the Berkshire Bird Paradise.

"You know me," Pete said. "I can't sit still long enough to write a grocery list much less a book. But I told her I know someone



who can write it. She wants you to call her." He gave me her name and phone number, and thus, this book project was born.

Later that day, for the first time, an adult heron soared to a majestic stop at our pond, and has been visiting regularly ever since.

Granted, I have a long history of strange interactions with wild birds aside from my failed rescues. There was an owl that led me home when I was writing a fantasy novel about a group of people being led by an owl. There was a flock of bluebirds that once followed me home from a neighbor's house, after I told them I wished they'd come to my yard and visit. And there's much more, too strange to be called coincidence. But this conjunction of events was a bit much even for me. Still, at least one of my prayers had been answered, because I do love birds, and was glad of the opportunity to explore that interest further. The Berkshire Bird Paradise, which I associate with even stranger synchronistic events, seemed the perfect place to start.

I had many questions about the connections between humans and birds in general. It's easy enough to say you love birds, but why? Because they sing? So do iPods. Because they're pretty? So are Ferraris. I wanted particulars. I also wanted to know more about why Pete chose his peculiar path, how he manages to sustain it both financially and emotionally, because if I'm born to try, Pete is born to try harder. Much harder, and seemingly with a great deal more faith than I have. Also with a great deal more success where birds are concerned. The thing with feathers seems to perch eternally in his soul.

I've been wondering why that's so for him. Upbringing? Genetics? Good nutrition? The stars? He says he has a special birthday, June 21st, the longest day of the year. When he tells me this, I laugh and say, "Certainly the longest for your mother," and he agrees.

He was the firstborn, and at the time his father was working out of Honolulu Airport, as a chef for United Airlines. The year was 1948, and Hawaii had not yet achieved statehood, nor was the area as built up as now. He lived with his mother and father on the Wilder Estate, where they rented what was called the servant's quarters. That, he says, was way out in the wilderness back

then, with no neighbors except animals and birds. He was the only child for the first eight years of his life, and for entertainment, he went exploring.

The estate was filled with flowers, unusual birds, waterfalls—all the flora and fauna a curious young boy could want. He remembers being fascinated by a particular kind of lizard that would detach its tail when you grabbed it, a built-in escape hatch that continued to wiggle on the ground after the lizard fled. He'd go looking for them, not just to pull their tails but also to watch them lay their eggs, watch the eggs hatch, and watch the tiny lizards scuttle away.

On occasion the family would go to the beach and comb the shore for shells, for life of all kinds. "I think we all have that inherent desire to explore, whether you're walking a path in the woods or a city street or a beach," Pete says. It's an impulse that never left him.

When he was eight, his mother had another son, and less than a year after that his father was transferred to New Jersey. It was, Pete says, a difficult transition. New baby, new home, new school. After the balmy weather and wilderness of Hawaii, he was now acclimating to Jersey winters. Later, another brother and sister were born and the family moved to Long Island, but they also purchased a summer home in Grafton, New York, where there were horses and chickens and gardens and woods. Peter always preferred that kind of environment to the city, which had too much noise, too much jarring motion for his tastes.

His urge to explore continued, though, and he planned to go to Europe after high school to pursue the same career in cooking he'd seen his father practice all his life. But in 1967 the draft was in effect, and young men of draft age weren't allowed out of the country without a lot of fuss, so Pete decided to use the system rather than fight it. In November of that year, he joined the army.

"I just went down to the recruiter and said I want to join," he tells me. "I figured I might as well get it over with. The recruiter almost had a heart attack. In those days, most guys were trying like hell to avoid the draft."



He remembers his father telling him, "Don't be a dead hero." Realizing he might get himself killed, he decided the only thing to do was make the most of his experience, whatever it was. He did what he continues to do. He paid attention, studied his surroundings, and performed to the best of his ability. As a result, during his basic training an officer approached him and asked what his educational background was.

"Sir," he said, "I only have a high school diploma."

"Only?" the officer said. "Most guys here don't have that. You're a leader."

So he was sent to take courses in leadership. Similar to officer candidate school but for noncommissioned soldiers, he remembers it as hard work, with lots of spit and polish. He emerged from the program as a sergeant, in charge of a platoon of mostly black and many illiterate young men.

"It was quite an experience," Pete says. "Here I was, nineteen years old and telling these guys my own age what to do. And you had to be careful. Lots of these guys had short fuses."

Yes, I thought, and they had guns. Quite an experience for a recent high school graduate. He was apparently up to the task and was sent to cooking school as well, then ultimately assigned to a unit in Panama, at the headquarters for Southern Command. The base overlooked Panama City but was surrounded by open land and rainforest. Nearby was a tunnel into a mountain where radar equipment was kept and classified work went on.

There he spent some time cooking in a mess hall, until word got around that he was doing very well. Then a general interviewed him to work on his staff, and he ended up as a Specialist 5 in the signal corps, which handled communications.

"That's where they sent all the smart people," Pete says. "I remember one kid who came in with a 4.0 GPA out of college. He was a genius. They did all this crypto work. The stuff they kept quiet."

He says the position was kept quiet as well. He was almost like a civilian, which was good, but also an eerie feeling. People would ask him what he did, and he couldn't say. But Panama was a good place to get his exploration fix, both in the rainforest surrounding the base camp and in Panama City itself, where he had

his first experiences with bird rescues. At the open-air markets, among the sold fruits and vegetables, he'd see cages of parrots, finches, and other birds he couldn't name, for sale at a quarter apiece. Since the average person there earned two dollars on a good day, this was a pretty substantial business.

Pete felt bad for the little creatures, trapped, caged and sold. But he also felt sorry for the people. He was in the midst of a level of poverty he'd never witnessed. He'd see children digging in garbage cans, looking for something to eat, people living without running water in shacks. Then he'd see beautiful birds dead in their cages, or looking like they wouldn't live much longer. It was difficult to know who to feel the most sorry for.

His solution was simple, and very in character. He'd make a deal with the sellers to buy a bunch of birds for a few dollars, then take them back to the rainforest areas behind camp and set them free. At his salary, redemption was a pricey hobby, and his officers told him he was out of his mind, but he couldn't stand by and do nothing. He kept buying the birds, and setting them free.

His sympathy extended to other creatures as well. One day he saw a beautiful ocelot in a bamboo cage, panting from stress and heat.

"It was hot as hell, and here's this poor ocelot, and they're such beautiful creatures, right?" he says. "So I asked the man, how much you want for that thing, and he tells me seventy dollars. I couldn't believe it. And I sure couldn't afford it."

Pete tried bargaining, but the man wouldn't budge. He didn't have anywhere near that much, so he went back to base and started asking the other men if he could borrow some money. "I told them it was a loan, and when they found out what I wanted it for everyone gave something. Then a bunch of them came with me and we bought the ocelot and set it free in back of the base. Everyone was really happy about it, you know? They all felt like they did something good. And nobody wanted their money back."

That incident taught him something that's followed him throughout his life: people, he learned, feel good when they do something good for another creature. And generosity breeds



more generosity around you. He's operated on those principles ever since.

While in Panama, he also had time to explore the more remote areas of the region. He'd go exploring on the other side of the canal, near Rio Hato, with the San Blas Indians who lived there. They called him "Jungle Boy" and thought he was a little crazy, always going after butterflies and lizards, always wanting to know about the creatures who occupied this world he'd stumbled into.

"They're small people—under five feet, mostly, but they had a wealth of knowledge. I learned a lot from them," Pete says. "They kept me out of trouble, too. I would've killed myself on my own, probably."

On one occasion he was trailing an anteater, curious about an animal he'd never see elsewhere. It started up a tree, and Pete continued after it, grabbing it by the tail. It was so strong, it started dragging him up with it, and he was willing to go, but one of the Indians grabbed his arm, shouting, "Let him go! Let him go!"

Pete was pulled back and the Indian pointed to the anteater's heavily clawed feet. "He said if that anteater grabbed you with one, it was full of bacteria, stuff that'd kill you," Pete remembers. "The guy saved my life."

Pete's time in the army was filled with those kinds of events. He saw toucans standing at the tops of trees, and huge flocks of parrots whose tattering sound could be heard for miles as they approached. He saved table scraps to feed the marmosets that came to the back of the general's house after breakfast. Later, he'd see them for sale in the market at twenty dollars apiece. As a result his memories of military service were quite different from many other Vietnam veterans.

"You gotta ask yourself sometimes why it is that you managed to survive all the craziness of life," he says of that time. "I mean, so many good people die young, so am I just a no-good bastard that I made it through? Or is there something I'm supposed to do?"

At a time when so many men faced the horror of combat, Pete ended up rescuing birds and feeding marmosets. Of all the expe-

periences he could have gotten from the army, he'd found, or been found by, the ones that would best prepare him for what he'd do when he got out. He has the wisdom to appreciate that, and he's the kind of person who wants to give back even more generously than he's received.

By the time he left Panama, he already belonged to the birds.

And for the time being, on this chilly October morning, so do I.

I'm hoping that what I learn about Pete's life will also inform my own. Maybe I'll finally figure out all those failed bird rescues, or even do better next time. Maybe I'll come to understand the strange interactions I've had with birds. Maybe I'll find other people who have had strange interactions of their own.

I toss my bags into the back seat of my car, and give another look toward the pond. The heron stretches its neck, takes long steps forward, spreads its impossible wings, and takes to the air. It seems a good omen for the day.