

fitting into another, each one making plain inarguable sense, a goat or even a senator could easily understand the sentences and their implications, and there's no shouting, no persuasion, no eloquent pirouetting, no pronouncements and accusations, no sermons or homilies, just calm clean clear statements one after another, fitting together like people holding hands.

Then an odd paragraph, this is a most unusual and peculiar essay, for right here where you would normally expect those alpine Conclusions, some Advice, some Stern Instructions & Directions, there's only the quiet murmur of the writer tiptoeing back to the story he or she was telling you in the second and third paragraphs. The story slips back into view gently, a little shy, holding its hat, nothing melodramatic, in fact it offers a few gnomic questions without answers, and then it gently slides away off the page and off the stage, it almost evanesces or dissolves, and it's only later, after you have read the essay three times with mounting amazement, that you see quite how the writer managed the stagecraft there, but that's the stuff of another essay for another time.

And finally the last paragraph. It turns out that the perfect nature essay is quite short, it's a lean taut thing, an arrow and not a cannon, and here at the end there's a flash of humor, and a hint or tone or subtext of sadness, a touch of rue, you can't quite put your finger on it but it's there, a dark thread in the fabric, and there's also a shot of espresso hope, hope against all odds and sense, but rivetingly there's no call to arms, no clarion brassy trumpet blast, no website to which you are directed, no hint that you, yes you, should be ashamed of how much water you use or the car you drive or the fact that you just turned the thermostat up to seventy, or that you actually have not voted in the past two elections despite what you told the kids and the goat. Nor is there a rimshot ending, a bang, a last twist of the dagger. Oddly, sweetly, the essay just ends with a feeling eerily like a warm hand brushed against your cheek, and you sit there, near tears, smiling, and then you stand up. Changed.

DAVID JAMES DUNCAN

Cherish This Ecstasy

FROM *The Sun*

THE PEREGRINE FALCON was brought back from the brink of extinction by a ban on DDT, but also by a peregrine falcon mating hat invented by an ornithologist at Cornell University. If you can't buy this, Google it. Female falcons had grown dangerously scarce. A few wistful males nevertheless maintained a sort of sexual loitering ground. The hat was imagined, constructed, then forthrightly worn by the ornithologist as he patrolled this loitering ground, singing *Chee-up! Chee-up!* and bowing like an overpolite Japanese Buddhist trying to tell somebody goodbye. For reasons neither scientists nor fashion designers entirely understand, this inspired the occasional male falcon to dive onto the ornithologist's head, fuck the hat, and fire endangered sperm into the hat's hidden rubber receptacle. The last few females were then artificially inseminated so that their chicks could be raised in DDT-free captivity. The young produced in this way saved the peregrine from extinction — a success story from the annals of human meddling, one as rare as debacles like DDT are common.

The same year that I was researching a novel about birds entering extinction while my first marriage was doing the same, I wrote a long, intimate letter to the Cornell ornithologist. That he was a stranger perhaps explains the intimacy, strangers being preferable to friends when things as personal as marriages are falling to ruin. That he'd managed to save a species explains my blind trust. It's been decades since I wrote the letter, and I didn't keep a copy. Memory fixates on times of intense passage, but also mythologizes them. Allowing for this paradox, here is everything I remember about my letter to the ornithologist:

I got right to it, asking if he would be so kind as to use the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope to send me a diagram of his unimaginable hat or, better, a photo of said hat with his head in it, enduring furious, wing-beating coitus. I explained that I was a novelist and bird lover, promised that my interest was sincere, and said that no detail of his work could be too inconsequential for my purposes. I asked, for instance, whether, in addition to the Buddhistic bowing, he had to walk in a suggestive manner to lure down the hat's, so to speak, opposite sex. And if so, I added, could he describe this walk to me so that, should occasion arise, I could reproduce it in the vicinity of a wife who'd grown dangerously scarce.

Though this kind of praise may at first seem a stretch, I confessed to the ornithologist, I want you to know that I admire you not only because you've helped save a magnificent species but because I, far more than most, know what it is to have a wild bird achieve orgasm on my head. *Listen*, my letter and I whispered: A few evenings ago I was sitting on a lonely, moss-covered veranda I'd once considered a sort of sexual loitering ground, hurting, but praying, but hurting, but praying (perhaps you know the drill), when a lust-crazed male red-shafted flicker chased a female under an eave not four feet over my head, mounted her, and pierced her so profoundly that her wings went limp and hung down toward me like two exquisite garments she was compelled by passion to remove. She went so limp she couldn't fly. Do you see the beauty in this? She relinquished her defining power. She hung, beak open, eyes open, cheeks crimson, passion-shattered, till I was reminded of the too-great-for-Catholics saint Meister Eckhart. *The greater the nudity, the greater the union*, he preached to Christ-impassioned Rhine Valley women by the thousands, scaring Rome's crimson-beaned finest so christless they waited till the *meister* had died, then invaded the Rhine, clubbed and dissected his still-living sermons, silenced or burned Christ's profoundly pierced lovers, and excommunicated the nudity and wings.

Those two flickers so smote me that, late the same night, while my wife was out dancing, two dream flickers flew into my room and fused like a feathered halo o'er my head, and though not a wing or talon touched me, their passion poured in and in and in till it summoned, from some lost chasm of bliss miles inside me, the most ec-

static nocturnal emission of my life. I awoke, I told the ornithologist, passion-shattered in blackness, sensing wings. And suddenly knew: *I am never alone*. Knew, to be as scientific as I can about this, that *I am loved*. With no one and nothing there to show it. This invisible, ecstasy-producing, neither-avian-nor-human love then gave me the strength, right there in the blackness, to relinquish the defining power of marriage and accept my wife's wish to leave me.

So I can't help but wonder, I wrote the ornithologist: *Have you felt it?* This unspeakable, more-than-human love? Transfixing you via a magnificent male falcon during a nighttime visitation perhaps? Or out in the field, singing and bowing in your preternaturally receptive hat?

In Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, I told the ornithologist, Father Zossima tells Alyosha, "All is an Ocean. All flows and connects so powerfully that if, in this life, you manage to become more gracious by even a drop, it is better for every bird, child, and animal your life touches than you will ever know. Start praying to birds in an ecstasy! Cherish this ecstasy, however senseless it may seem to people!" So I do. In a desolate, even life-threatening time, a pair of love-inflamed flickers transpierced and remade me as surely as your *chee-ups!* and Buddhist bowing and hat have remade the peregrine. I'll thank wild birds, and you too, forever for that. I trust that you now see why a small photo of the hat, in this time of personal passage and great gratitude, would serve as a kind of holy icon for me.

The Cornell ornithologist never answered my letter. And he was wise, it turned out, not to do so: for into the vacuum created by his lack of an answer wild birds flew, and have never stopped answering. Like the forty-three Vaux's swifts that dropped like dead leaves from an autumn dusk into my cold black chimney, grew still, but then thrummed in their sleep, close by the astonished ear I kept putting to the stove vent, as only eighty-six swift-wings can thrum, nonstop through the night. Or like the small black hole in the ice of a desolate, frozen river at which I happened to be gazing when out popped a lone water ouzel who, after a single deep knee-bend, burst into ecstatic, desolation-defying song.

Or like the still-smaller black hole in a leafless, frost-blasted cottonwood against which a heartbroken friend, Max, happened to

lean on a Montana winter's walk, and out of which burst, like bees from a June hive, more than a hundred pygmy nuthatches, bequeathing Max, just that fast, an acceptance of heartbreak from which grace, like honey, began to flow. Or like the fourteen Hungarian partridges my rancher friend Tom flushed from buckbrush after a blizzard in twenty-below, who half circled a gulch so frigid Tom feared they'd freeze in midair, only to slam headfirst, wings tight to their bodies, thirty miles an hour, into a fresh snowdrift a hundred yards above him, *ffufuf!fuff!fuff!uf!fuf!uff!*, to spend the night tucked in twenty-above powder, bequeathing Tom, like a love poem the next day, fourteen tiny snow caves, the insides of which shone with the cold's own luminous blue.

Or like the lone female loon who mistook a wet, moonlit interstate for water and crash-landed on the truck-grooved pavement of the fast lane; loon to whom I sprinted, as a convoy of eighteen-wheelers roared toward her, throwing my coat over her head so she wouldn't stab me, pulling her to my chest as I leapt from the concrete; loon who, when she felt this blind liftoff, let out a full, far-northern tremolo that pierced, without stabbing, my coat, ribs, heart, day, life. All is an Ocean, she and Father Zossima and the avian choir keep singing as into black holes in trees, truck routes, river ice, frigid hearts, ecstatic birds keep dropping. Till even alone and in darkness, with no special hat, clothes, or wings to help me fly up and feel it, I find myself caught in the endless act of being loved.

PATRICIA HAMPL

The Dark Art of Description

FROM *The Iowa Review*

I WAS COMING DOWN the last lap of my most recent book, a memoir about my mother and father, and I was painfully aware of just how specific every bit of writing is, full of choices and chances, not theoretical at all, not the business of sweeping statements or smart ideas about "form" or "genre" or anything remotely theoretical. Just subject-verb-object and the hope of meaning.

Two nights away from the finish of my book, I was working late. I looked away from the computer screen for a moment and there was my dog staring at me intently. She was on the verge of speech. I could see it. *Come to bed.* Her eyes said this clearly. It was almost two A.M. and for the past four hours I'd been changing commas to dashes and then back again to commas with the obsessive focus only a fanatic can sustain.

You've become a crazy person again, I said right out loud. The dog padded away.

The great short story writer J. F. Powers was once stopped by a colleague in the corridor at their university. The man asked him how things were going. Powers allowed that it had been a tough day — "I spent the morning trying to decide whether to have my character call his friend 'pal' or 'chum,'" he said.

That's where I often find myself — thinking how important the choice of "pal" or "chum" is, how whatever truth writing lays claim to resides in a passion for just such quite mad distinctions. This monomania is what a friend of mine calls the six-hundred-pound gorilla of a book. Once the six-hundred-pound gorilla gets hold of you, you're his (or hers). "Those last weeks of finishing a book are