

*For the Good*

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*of All, Do*

FLOOD EDITIONS

*Not Destroy*

CHICAGO

*the Birds*

*I*n bird guise, the ancient Egyptian god Thoth has the head of an African sacred ibis. His slim male form ends dramatically in a sharply curved scythe-like beak. His hair is a stylized helmet of feathers. He knows many secrets: the meaning of death, the mystery of writing. As H. D. puts it, “remember, it was Thoth / with a feather // who weighed the souls / of the dead.” Though the ibis evokes privileged wisdom and things hieratic, my first association with the word was mundane, common, and comfortable. A blacktop-and-bicycle feeling. It conjured the pocket-sized freedom and magical inventiveness we experience when childhood’s desires metamorphose into young-adult Eros. We tug at the tether of the parental home, stretching it nigh unto breaking.

You see, when I was a girl, “ibis” was not the name of a sacred bird, but of a street. A street located at the lip of the Mission Hills neighborhood of San Diego, just west of Hillcrest, where I grew up. About ten minutes by ten-speed. On the corner of Ibis and Ft. Stockton there was a small grocery made of white stucco with an Art Deco façade called the Ibis

Market. It was a good place to stop for candy or gum. And it was only one block from Jackdaw Street. A jackdaw is a kind of small crow, but when I was standing high on the pedals of my old, battered yellow bike, pulling up on the rise handlebars to lift the front tire off the ground, turning in circles, coasting, watching, Jackdaw was not a bird at all, but the name of a sleepy little street where a humble bungalow housed a boy named John Brockley, his very old mother, and his chihuahua Olivia. I, along with most of the seventh-grade class of Roosevelt Junior High School—girls and boys alike—had a crush on John Brockley. He was very tall and slim and had taut pink skin and a strong nose. He could sketch cartoons and was funny in a way that made you laugh, even when you suspected yourself the butt of his jokes. Desire infused the word “Jackdaw” with the subterfuge of surrender. I would ride past John Brockley’s bungalow hoping I might be—though I hadn’t the faintest idea how it might come about—undone.

Alphabetically ordered, these bird-named cross streets were the railroad ties that linked my bedroom to the untapped acquisitive desires hidden behind the doors of other people’s homes. A migratory route to a newfound breeding ground that began with the Albatross and ran out at the Lark. Before hitting Hawk, Ibis, Jackdaw and Kite, there was Brant, Curlew, Dove, Eagle, Falcon, and Goldfinch.

Most of these birds are not native to the region. But even had they been, would I have paid it any mind, blinded as I was by the mating instinct? Unaware of the slew of misfortunes that would hurtle toward me in years ahead, I did not appreciate that Albatross—the street on which I lived, first in one house, and then in another, from the age of five until eighteen—was the name of a bird of great literary and mythic import. And to my young self, “Curlew” conjured not the image of a sleek shorebird with a curved beak, but a perilously steep, snake-like road that dipped down from Robinson Street into the basin of Reynard Way, which eventually led to the sea. Curlew street *curled*. It was a hazardous gauntlet down, and an arduous, almost impossible climb back. Halfway down Curlew, a right turn onto the even steeper W. Pennsylvania led down to the canyon of Dove Street.

When I was very little, we sometimes went to Dove Street to visit the Beers. They were friends of my parents and had a daughter my older brother’s age named Linda. Their house was unlike any I’d ever been in: contemporary, with a large rectangular pool of tranquil water over smooth rocks in the living room and a mezzanine all around leading into the bath- and bedrooms. Their house did not smell like carpet and yeast, but rather of concrete and ginger. There was another, even steeper climb out of Dove at its northern

end, leading up to the Safeway supermarket. When I was an adolescent, Dove Street was home to rough characters. A bad girl named Anita who smoked, had acne, and made out with boys. Another territory, a different gang. That this notorious street was named for a symbol of peace was wholly inoperative on the day I came home from hanging out with the Dove Street toughs. Attempting to emulate the Wilson sisters from the band Heart, I had put on my embroidered jeans and a black halter top printed with red roses. A solid half-moon of powdery dark blue shadowed my blush-colored eyelids. “You look like a prostitute,” my mom said, her voice shaking as she slammed down the Bisquick. The accusation was so out of character that I have never forgotten it.

Though hardly “down the length of two continents”—which is how Fred Bodsworth describes the Eskimo curlew’s migratory journey in *Last of the Curlews*—as a girl on a bike the decision to head down Curlew to Dove streets was not taken lightly, for the journey back was arduous. Often it defeated me into dismounting and walking my bike the remainder. Nobody wanted that paper route. According to Bodsworth, the migratory curlew doesn’t make a decision, he only knows that “once again an irresistible inner force was pressing him to move.” Yet Bodsworth allows that “even the curlew’s simple brain sensed vaguely” that his migratory journey “was a long, grim gantlet of storm, foe and

death.” Was this the same vague sense of doom I had when Anita took me to the flat of an older hippie whom she asserted would give us pot? He was unkempt but weirdly proprietary, clamping his arm around her neck.

At the end of Albatross Street there was a rudimentary roundabout marked by a central ring of shrubbery. It gave egress onto another steep branch of W. Pennsylvania off of which Brant spoked to the left. Brant was a small street that dead-ended in a canyon where my friend Tracy lived in a large white Spanish-style house. “Brant” is a word that doesn’t sound like a bird, but is. A small goose with a black neck and a white collar, migratory like the curlew. Though Tracy and her brother outnumbered their single mother by one, their house never felt like a place where kids lived. The interior was dramatically decorated and spare. In it I felt wary that I might be confronted by something I was not prepared for. This perilous adult ambiance leant edge to the game of spin-the-bottle we played one night in the sequestered basement bedroom of Tracy’s brother Scott. Afterwards, I floated home in the dark, the residual touch of Jim Lapp’s lips having changed the feel of my own.

“For it was a blessing of their rudimentary brains that they couldn’t see themselves in the stark perspective of reality,” Bodsworth writes of the curlew’s ignorance of the perils involved in its migration. Nor does the adolescent

brain—to the chagrin of parents—care to register the “stark perspective of reality” that is pregnancy, venereal disease, heartbreak. But what greater heartbreak than preparing for the mate that never comes? That is the narrative around which the ecological pathos of *Last of the Curlews* circles. It tells the story of a male Eskimo curlew who is, seemingly, the last of his kind. As the story begins, we watch the curlew as he secures and defends an arctic territory in the hopes of luring a female. He flies concentrically above his ground and projects his desperate mating song, but no female comes.

“The Fountain,” a poem which appeared in my 2009 book *Clampdown*, recounts the restless outdoor quest Eros compelled in me when a teen. “As a girl / I cruised like a boy,” I wrote, “in daylight and / open-air spaces.” An earlier draft lacked “in daylight,” but it is an important detail. Curfews meant covert twelve-year-old gropes took place under bright sunlight. When John Brockley finally yielded, I had a bad cold. We walked down the pebbly alleyway behind my house holding hands. We paused against a garage. I opened my mouth and allowed his tongue in.

When the Eskimo curlew finds a lone female on the northern leg of his migratory journey, he proffers her a snail. Taking the mollusk in her beak seals their bond. Though I let John and others kiss me freely, there was no magic key nor ritual offering assuring their return. The curlews will

not be parted except by a bullet. They are the last of their species because they were shot down by the hundreds in the nineteenth century, trusting and fleet and fearing no predator. I had plenty of willing mates. Yet every opportunity felt precarious and desperate. As “The Fountain” has it, regret grows from the kiss unstolen, the flesh uncaressed, the loneliness unabated. The poem culminates in a night spent suffering “passively” in a sleeping bag next to a boy I desired. Coyness, as Marvell knew, is a crime that colludes with patience, and it is no friend of youth.

Birds court, but are they coy? The male Eskimo curlew stops often before the female to “strut like a game cock . . . with his throat puffed out and tall feathers expanded into a great fan over his back.” The female responds, “by crouching, her wings aquiver,” begging for food “like a young bird.” The male offers nourishment and their beaks touch. Our lips are soft and moist, while beaks are hard and dry. Yet many birds’ lovemaking includes something that looks like kissing: face to face, beaks scissoring and clacking. Albatross touch their beaks together in a gesture that resembles sword play, but of a sweet, syncopated nature. It is cheering to look upon. The meaning of “cheer”—I learn from an Ann Lauterbach poem—was once “the face, the countenance, especially as expressing emotion.” Do I anthropomorphize by referring to bird countenances, kissing beaks?

The albatross is endangered, the ibis is making a tentative comeback, but the Eskimo curlew is gone. There have been a few sightings of lone specimens, but they are unconfirmed and perhaps wishful. The bird-named streets of my childhood remain, though the friends they housed have long ago left. I would hazard that a similar ragtag group of horny teens has taken our place, but these San Diego neighborhoods have become so expensive that I doubt such as us could live there again. Single mothers like Tracy's or John Brockley's could not afford the quaint bungalows on Jackdaw, Ibis, Curlew, or Brant as they could in the nineteen-seventies. And Albatross Street, once rather unkempt and overgrown, feels opulent and closed. One definition of "growing up," claims "The Fountain," is "learning / to loathe what's cheap / and what's free." On those bird streets the possibility of Eros was free, if somehow still just out of reach. But compared with real impossibility, a missed opportunity is a feeble tragedy. How would I have borne my baffling hunger had I ridden my bike along those bird streets vaguely sensing that there were no boys left in all the known world?