

Birdstrike

Word Count: 4741

Bird

I was driving home from work and watched a bird die.

I was waiting to merge onto the highway. There were two lanes, and I was stuck in the unmoving right, while the left—mocking me with its carpool diamond—was completely empty. I watched as a bird beat its wings close against the roof of the car in front of me, swooping low, wings like an airplane. As it took off towards my left, it also must've thought the carpool lane was empty; at least until a car raced past and clipped it with its windshield. The bird spun, like a twirl, macabre ballerina, curling its wings into itself, and swung over to my windshield, where it fluttered wildly for a hot second before it dived to the right and ended up in some bushes past the turnout.

I had my truck's windows rolled down because my A/C was (and still is) broke, and my stereo'd been stolen, so suddenly all I could hear was the bird chirping. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. I'd never heard a bird in pain.

I put my hazards on and pulled over to the shoulder, and traffic moved along like it was supposed to. I parked and turned my hazards off so no tow trucks would see me and pull up behind me, like they thought someone had hit me. I got my gloves out of one of the pockets of my overalls, and I crouched down and sifted through the bushes, following the noise. I must've been a helluva sight, some guy in his painter's overalls on his knees in the dirt with his hat turned backwards digging through some bushes.

#

Plane

Right after high school, I got a job working for my uncle, Alfredo, painting houses. I'd gotten into some trouble (again) tagging the bathrooms at Lake Elizabeth, so my dad said I needed to find some way to use my "artistic talents" in a "constructive way." I thought I was being pretty constructive; graffiti helped me work through shit. But I wasn't interested in college, none of my work was getting accepted into art galleries or being commissioned or whatever (I'm probably the worst at trying to market myself), so Uncle Fredo offered the jobs and I needed the money.

I was working all over the place. I thought I'd only be painting for rich people at first; had a bunch of assignments working in big houses on the hills of San Francisco and Oakland. But then it turned out Uncle Fredo had a bazillion connections, and I felt like I was always getting a call from him the moment I'd woken up and started sipping my coffee. Always a new job from some buddy of his.

"Hey, my buddy called, needs someone to paint some walls over at the Oakland Coliseum. Tell me, you in? I can put you in while there's a game."

"João, meu sobrinho, the Exploratorium needs some paint work done, my buddy needs a coupla guys, he can fill you in when you get there, what do you say?"

And then:

"I got something a little wild for you, João: my buddy up over at NASA is lookin for some help painting the inside of a lab."

"You want me to go to NASA?" I asked. "You payin for me to fly out to Texas or Florida or something?"

He clicked his tongue whenever he was annoyed. *Tscok*. “No, numbnuts, NASA *Ames*, it’s near Mountain View. I’ll get my buddy to do all the paperwork to get you in. You’re in, right? Of course you’re in; it’s *NASA!*”

When I got there, Uncle Fredo told me I was re-painting a whole lab, and that he’d be working in some other building. We drove through a couple guard gates with our freshly printed visitor badges, and when I first walked into the building he dropped me off at, I was expecting to see a bunch of rockets everywhere, maybe some astronaut suits I could check out when I was on my breaks. There was nothing like that: an open lobby with a couple monitors on the wall to the right; some models of planes and helicopters and the space shuttle in a big display case on a wall to the left; and some weird looking model of a machine in a smaller display case between the two monitors. Various framed awards lined the walls.

Uncle Fredo’s buddy, Santiago, met me at the door and walked me through some of the building. “This is the Vertical Motion Simulator,” he said. “The VMS. You’re gonna be painting inside one of their control rooms.”

“Control *rooms*? Like, multiple?” I asked. “Isn’t it just on a screen?”

“It moves,” he replied. When we finally went up the stairs, following a blue line on the floor to a viewing room, I saw what he meant: a white box looking thing—a cab, they called it—sitting on a cone on a giant metal beam. It could angle itself and move around once someone was in there, flying. He didn’t tell me how *huge* the place was; I found out later it was a ten-story building, and the control rooms were on the third floor. I’d learn more from the engineers, about how the VMS was run by a division at Ames called SimLabs, that SimLabs had other simulators like FFC and CVSRF, would I like some stickers; and I remember thinking that NASA had a bunch of two things: acronyms and stairs.

Santiago stopped our little tour in a room leading to the catwalk to get to the cab, between the two different control rooms. He looked in each one to see if anyone else was around.

He pointed to my right. “That’s where they do motion,” he said. “I’m painting in there.”

He pointed to my left. “That’s where they do visuals and system stuff. You’re in there.”

I turned to look but he grabbed my shoulder and got in close, real serious.

“Don’t mess anything up in there.”

I left it at that and got my supplies.

#

Superman

I was a senior in high school, tagging the bathrooms at Lake Elizabeth, when I first met Stevie. I was creating a piece (that’s what Stevie liked to call the process) where a skeletal hand holds a phone, and through the phone’s screen you can see it’s taking a picture of a red splotch on a wall.

Stevie came over and set up nearby, and I kind of nodded when I realized I didn’t have to run—he wasn’t gonna call the cops or anything. And after a while, just took stock. Stevie liked to start creating a piece by actually sketching it out, pencil and everything. I just used what I had in my notebook for reference, but Stevie was always the real deal; he sketched things out and erased them and drew all over the wall in pencil, so light you almost couldn’t see it. His work never got painted over until he actually sprayed it, but the pencil sketches were there for months, hidden unless you knew to look for them.

It was abstract, what he was working on. Bunch of different shapes interlocking and spinning from some point in the center, what looked like a person. It was huge, though, took up nearly the whole wall in front of the stall door I was working on. I felt a little ridiculous, shaking

my spray can while he scribbled with a pencil. When I made out the image of a wing or a tree branch, I finally went over and said, “This is real good.”

He eyed me and said nothing. Just kept painting. He looked over at mine and asked, “What are *you* working through?”

And just like that, we got each other.

I mean, we weren’t able to talk much before some cops showed up and busted me. My first offence. Stevie hid in the stall. I probably shouldn’t have gone back to tag at Lake Elizabeth, but Stevie’s memory and his work was always gonna be there.

I still remember him like he’s alive.

#

Bird

When I finally found the bird, it started chirping even louder, and I was doing my best to move branches from the bushes out of the way. I kept thinking I wanted it to be comfortable. It was brown with a white chest. I don’t really know bird types. But it saw me, and it started flapping wildly, chirping louder and louder, its chest heaving up and down. I’d never looked into a bird’s eyes before. Lot of firsts.

I leaned back on my haunches and whistled, and I thought maybe that’s what I should do, just be here a while, a body to fight the loneliness. I sat down and crossed my legs and just whistled, little chirps of my own. We were watching each other. It chirped and I whistled. The bird stopped chirping. I stopped whistling. Eventually it stopped doing anything.

I thought it’d be rude to poke it to see if it was alive, so I whistled again and got no response. I still had my gloves on, so I carefully reached out to pick it up. It didn’t move when I cupped my hands around it, and it made no noise when I lifted it really gently.

#

Plane

The people in the control room were real nice to me. They knew I was just there to paint, so if I had to move something out of the way it wasn't a huge deal. The timing could've been better; when I was there, they were running simulations for an accident investigation. A plane crashed, and people with money wanted to know who was at fault: was it the pilots? Training? What went wrong and how could they prevent it? That's the goal, of course, making sure a plane doesn't crash into some houses again, but when a bunch of guys in suits argued loudly around me it just felt like a bunch of people trying to be blameless and point fingers.

I liked jobs like these, where I'd be in the background while everything moved around me, like a sponge in a bowl of soapy water left in the sink. At some of the houses I painted, I got stock advice; advice about women; advice about men; I heard about a wife's boyfriend getting as needy as her husband; and the going rates of sand on the Dark Web (not a euphemism for drugs—literal *sand*). Here was no different. I took my time painting the wall, and Santiago would come in and talk to me in Spanish, and I'd reply in Portuguese, and we sort of danced our way through conversations, like how my immigrant grandparents watch Telemundo.

The simulation engineers talked to each other plenty, and I picked up more details as I painted, getting behind computer monitors and carefully moving desks. After the plane left Bellingham International Airport, a flock of Canadian Geese flew into the engines, which would explain why the engine blew up at such a low altitude. Apparently, all the remains of birds are called "snarge," and they have to be sent to the Smithsonian to be identified. An analysis was still being done on what they could find of the engines, and the VMS was running simulations to

see if there were any other actions the pilots could have taken, because I guess before the flock of geese there might've been turbulence or something wrong with the rudder or—who knows.

Santiago let me know that even though the “public hours” were posted as being Monday through Friday—and most employees in the building only worked those five days—I'd have to work the weekend. I just had to show my visitor badge and driver's license and I'd be let right in.

That was fine by me. Another advantage of watching and asking questions here and there was that I could memorize how to get the system running, how everything operated—at least from a really basic level, just enough to start a simulation with just the visuals and be able to reset it.

The weekend rolled around and Santiago left the motion control room for the day—“Okay, João, I got things to do. Voy a janguear con mis panas, nos vemos.”—and I continued with my work.

After checking and double-checking the hallway outside, I pressed the buttons I'd memorized and got things set up. I'd never been inside the cab before, and it was surreal, especially once I closed the door behind me. I sat in the pilot's chair and took it all in, all of the buttons and blinking lights and the runway stretched out in front of me. The computer monitors showing the images and models were behind some kind of warped glass panes. They added depth perception, so it really felt like if I could open one of the panes up, I could reach my hand out and feel the breeze, maybe stick my head out as the plane took off.

I grabbed the headset resting on the dashboard and put it over my ears. No turning back now. I'd heard them talk about this in the control room. There was a list of people who could listen to the Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) while the simulation ran, and it was a small list. They'd recovered the black box—which is a dumb name, because the box was orange—from the

plane, some device I'd never heard of before that seemed to be important. I also had to look up the acronyms they kept slinging around. The black box had the Flight Data Recorder (FDR), so they knew what control inputs the pilots made, and it had the CVR, so they knew what the pilots were saying. The researchers had to listen to the crew's last recorded audio and watch as the controls moved inside the cab, while the visuals changed in perfect parallel.

Now that was all kept securely locked, and I'm not saying I knew where they kept the keys or that I'm pretty okay at picking locks—I was just curious is all.

#

Superman

I was real curious about Stevie's piece. He didn't talk about it much, but we had easy conversation, me and Stevie, and we ended up meeting regularly, comparing artwork we'd scribbled and stuffed in binders and giving each other feedback. Every Friday after school we'd meet up at Country Way, or The Kebab Shop, or some other place in Fremont that had food and let us chill for a bit and talk.

I finally asked him about the piece one night when we went out for discount Thursday wings at Buffalo Wild Wings. We'd decided to splurge a bit on an appetizer for happy hour, so we were digging into some chips and queso.

He said, "I don't think I captured it right."

"I feel you," I replied. We kept going back to touch our pieces up, add something new, maybe change something.

"They're similar," he said, motioning to me with his glass of water. Since we were splurging on the chips and queso, we couldn't really afford the soda we normally got. "They're both about death, y'know?"

“How’d you know?” I asked.

He laughed. “Dude. It’s literally a phone capturing blood on a wall. It ain’t hard.”

I laughed too.

I told him about this video I’d seen, where this guy films himself killing an old man with a pistol. You only ever saw the killer’s feet and hands. The killer said he’d do it again.

“I saw that.” Stevie’s eyes got wide. “People were hella mad at YouTube after that, right? Letting him get away with live-streaming the whole thing and keepin it up until they got hella complaints tellin them to take it down?”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

“The YouTube Killer.”

“Creative name.”

He chuckled.

I shook my head. “Old dude looked like my avô.” A questioning look. “My grandfather.”

“Oh shit. What if we get more of *that*?” he asked. “Not just some kinda message about the fact that it was online, but more about the fact that it coulda been your grandpa?”

“But it *mattered* that it was online,” I replied. “It *mattered* that someone could just Tweet about it and I saw it. That I could just watch death.”

Stevie finished his water and started crunching on the ice cubes. We ate more chips mostly in silence while we waited for our wings. He got like that sometimes, when he was thinking things over, almost like he was ignoring you. When the waiter came back to drop off a pitcher of water, Stevie filled his glass and took a big swig and he told me his cousin died a couple months ago.

“He was still in junior high, making videos with his friends,” he said, staring at the inside of his glass. “They were doing some kind of script he wrote that they thought was funny. But they’re filming it and shit goes sideways. They were out in the hills behind East Bay’s campus, and Martin—my cousin—he’s up in a tree, and the branch breaks and he hits the ground hard, but it’s steep nearby, and he rolls, and he’s ragdolling down the hill and smashing into pretty much everything. And one of his fool friends goes and posts the video, and my family’s up in arms tryna take it down, and it takes forever cause they don’t know Martin’s passwords.”

He flexed his hands, staring at the chips and queso. He took off his five-panel hat and rubbed his shaved head. “He’d asked me to come film for him. I said no. And I don’t know.” He put his hat back on, scratching at his neck. “Maybe I woulda still let him go up there.”

“That what you were painting about?” I asked.

He shrugged with his whole body, palms up shoulder-height and everything. “This. That. Some other things. I’m just tryna capture.”

I nodded.

“I watch it. Sometimes.” He was suddenly very still. “It’s easy to find. Nothin ever really leaves the Internet. Like watching ghosts.”

I thought about the old man. “Yeah, ghosts.”

“He had a SoundCloud and a blog,” Stevie said. “He had somethin, maybe. It still updates, without him. He had shit scheduled to go. Smart kid. I was subscribed.”

“So you just...get emails like it’s him?”

“Yuh.” He sighed. “It’s almost like a conversation. But it’s not.”

Our wings showed up and we started eating. Even though we’d had the chips it felt like I hadn’t eaten in years.

Stevie asked, “Hey, João, you ever think about Van Gogh?”

“Sure,” I replied.

“He ate paint, you know that?”

“Yeah. Gross.”

He held a wing in his hand, rotating it. “You think his work was only good because he was sad?”

I thought about that. Chewed on it along with my food. “I think art isn’t sadness. It can be. But it’s mostly healing.”

“Healing,” he said. Not a question, not a statement.

I’ve thought about this conversation a lot. You try to grab at anything you can. It’s all you can do for a while. I think about whatever wasn’t said. Usually we just talked art. Our inspirations, the shit we hated. I didn’t know. Was it only that? Were there other things on his mind? In his life?

The last time I was supposed to meet up with him, I ended up waiting an hour before I tried to call, and it went straight to voicemail. I found out from his mom like a week later. I went to his house because he hadn’t been answering me. She cried when she told me. I cried when I listened. We had a long conversation. He’d seemed fine.

I drew on some of his works. Not on walls or trains or anything like that, out in the world. Just doodles from his sketchbooks. I never drew on the real deal. I made copies and I tried to finish them, or add to them, or remove something. I tried really hard to change them. And when that didn’t work I traced them.

I gathered up all his sketches and my scans and I put them all in a big folder and I stuffed them in a cardboard box in my closet and I let it gather dust.

Life went on and I started working some odd paint jobs after high school, and two years later, I got a notification about him on Facebook.

#

Bird

I didn't know what else to do now that the bird was most definitely dead in my hands, so I set it down and started digging, there in the dirt between the bushes, and I made a small hole. I picked the bird up and placed it neatly in the hole and put the dirt back over it. I thought about saying some words but couldn't really think of any. I whistled at it again, for whatever reason.

I stood up and took off my gloves and put them in my pockets and the whole world started to turn under me, rotating up to my face, and I felt it approaching just like houses, like people, and when I'd landed on my knees I thought about the simulation I'd just left and how much I didn't want to go back to work the next day. I started walking back to my truck and then turned around and scrambled back and I stood at the fresh little mound of dirt, and I was leaning on one leg and then the other, shifting my weight back and forth.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help, man," I was able to stutter out before I started sobbing.

#

Plane

The simulation started and the pilots talked to each other about the latest basketball game in between their takeoff communications.

The pilot: "Thrust SRS, runway."

I watched the controls move on their own, switches getting flipped and buttons being pressed. The visuals changed, and now the plane was turning, and I held onto my seat. I heard the engines growl louder.

The co-pilot: "You got throttles."

The pilot: "Eighty knots, thrust blue. V one. Rotate. V two. V two plus ten."

The co-pilot: "Positive rate, gear up please."

I heard their voices less like they were in the cockpit with me and more like they were being funneled through a walkie-talkie. That only made it seem more real though, like in the movies when people in helicopters are talking to each other but they only hear each other through their big headsets, like the ones I was wearing. The plane soared into the air, and I put on my seatbelt despite myself. There was no motion operator, so I was running the simulation with visuals only, but I felt like I needed to be safe.

Five sets of switches flipped on their own, and I heard the clicks from my headset, perfectly timed.

We climbed, higher and higher, leaving the ground below us, and I had never been so thankful for a seatbelt before in my entire life. I put a hand onto the steering wheel that kept moving.

I heard a thump.

Something clicked.

Two more thumps.

The co-pilot said something.

The pilot: "Did you see them?"

Something snapped. I looked around wildly trying to figure out where it came from.

The co-pilot was saying something, but I couldn't hear it. There was another thump, louder this time, and then an even louder bang.

"Give it all you got, give it all you got."

Something roared, and I saw the earth tilt upwards, and the pilots were shouting at each other, and the controls were moving all around me in fast and jerky motions. The pilot said, “Oh! *Fuck.*” I tried to grab at the controls for all the good it would do me; I forgot it was just a recorded simulation. Something kept chiming, high-pitched, over and over again, more noise in the whirlwind of sound. I *really* forgot it was a recorded simulation when the buildings started to get closer and closer and someone in my ear practically shouted, “April, I want—” and then I closed my eyes right as I could make out the interior of the building we were going to crash into and then—

Everything was silent. I opened my eyes and the simulation was frozen. We were stopped in front of the building. A house. Houses. Families.

I ripped off the headset and had to physically stop myself from throwing it. I set it back on the dashboard. I hit the reset button and just like that, I was back on the runway.

I unbuckled myself and got up, shaky. It felt like I couldn’t breathe. I had to lean against the walls of the cab to support myself, make my way to the door. I opened it, slowly, worried that if I opened it too fast I would fall over. I scrambled over to the railing of the catwalk, which was a bad idea because seeing the ground three stories below me made the whole building spin and I sat down and tried to just focus on breathing.

Who were they? Ghosts in my ear.

The geese were at fault. Right? But geese are just birds. Isn’t someone supposed to make them leave the area? Doesn’t someone get rid of the geese?

Was it someone’s fault? Who was supposed to get rid of the geese? Was that me? Was I supposed to slosh chemicals around the airport and make it smell bad? Didn’t I do my best to

stop the geese from getting in Stevie's engine? Could I have done more? I'm not a professional Goose Stopper.

Things that I would spend hours looking up on my phone, scrolling in my bed. The flock of geese had just migrated near the airport, so no one had seen them recently. No one saw the flock fly upwards until the plane was already up in the air, until the plane flew right through the flock, until two or three birds were ingested by the engine and turned into snarge and the plane went down in a horrifyingly desperate attempt to swing back to the airport runway. I remember sitting on my bed sometimes the whole night, scrolling through text messages between me and Stevie. Everything had seemed okay. I thought about the chorus of men in suits asking who was to blame. You can't expect to rid the world of geese.

#

Superman

I was scrolling through the Facebook app when I got a notification about memories for the day. The usual thing: here's everything you ever posted on this part of the calendar through the years, here's posts you were tagged in, whatever, you know. Then the fun part: here's who you became friends with however many years ago today. And there was Stevie, smiling.

I'd sent him messages before. Never got a reply, obviously, but it was almost like talking.

I went to his profile. Some posts from people missing him, people I'd never met before who knew him in completely different ways, hell maybe even knew a completely different Stevie. I scrolled through some of the artwork he'd posted over the years. It was almost everything I'd ever scanned. Here he was. My hero.

I thought about his body, about going to his funeral. I wondered if there was someone who was like a coroner, but they got rid of Internet bodies. Digital bodies. Someone who logged

onto all of a person's social media sites and closed everything down, erasing their presence. I imagined someone walking through a digital hallway with a giant paintbrush drenched in white-out, strolling through endless dead forums, mountains of comments and blog posts and travel recommendations and restaurant reviews from people who no longer existed, from websites that were still up but closed down.

But Stevie was right: nothing ever really disappears from the Internet. And part of me didn't even want that, I guess. I was just nostalgic and sad and I missed Stevie while I looked through his profile, and it was almost like he was still around. But he wasn't, really. Just another ghost.

I sent him a message.