

The Crane Fly Mascot

There is a certain aire about the air in southern California this March of 2020. It may be one of environmental victory. It has a lot to do with the decrease in traffic, people, and consumerism. It certainly is enhanced by the cooler temperatures, the lushness of the fescue grasses, the blossoming plethora of wildflowers, and the ripening scent of the bulbous fruits suspended from the pruned branches of the orchard trees. The crisp salty sting from wind off the ocean waves enlivens my senses. Occasionally, the warmer Santa Anna winds offer a hot, weighted updraft that easily mixes air from the lowland valleys with the air off the highest peaks of these furtive mountains. The Santa Ynez mountains cup its sloping arms around Santa Barbara and me. There is an ancient sound resonating on its slopes. It is a clear concordant echo of the condor's broad bold wings. It is offered to those who are listening. This is the air that wafted into my room as I slid open the second-floor balcony door and listened.

The air carried with it the sound of the Pacific Surfliner, the fast train that runs along the California coast. It is far enough away for its sounds of warning to seem romantic. It oddly mixes with the tiny towhee chatter. They are excitedly sending out their calls of welcome and of warning. The palm trees reach high and straight up. They serve as a tough match for the red-breasted sapsucker. Still that bird pounds against that tree sometimes so neurotically, it carves a ring around it. Is it scratching at some neurotic itch, fulfilling some cooperative synergism, or just living up to its name? In any case, it can be the tree's nemesis. I reach out over the railing to shoo it away with some trepidation that I am interfering with nature.

I scan the backyard and notice two neighborhood cats crouching in the bushes. They are as tense as me. They are slightly amused by the fluttering shadows of birds on the cement. They hear the stir of rabbit's feet in the layers of shredded bark chips underneath the flowering

viburnum. They lick their lips. The blossoming large Queen Maderia bush with its regal flowering conical clusters offers its bounty of nectar to the honey bees. The star jasmine's scent fills our nostrils with its sweet commodified familiar scent. I am enamored but the birds are not fooled or distracted, they know which plant offers them their sustenance and they go for it. They know which bush hides their predator and they veer away. With such harmony in nature and synergy with animals, the air feels more self-assuring and as light as the pale, pink-painted walls of my room. Marshmellowy and sweet, as it reflects sunlight onto my quizzical brow.

The bedroom I sleep in has a large wool rug. It clutches at things that blow in. Seeds, pieces of bark, and now a lone crane fly. I believe it is the same crane fly that visited me in the bathroom yesterday. It now lies face-up lightly attached to the prickly wool fibers of the rug. The same thick-piled rug that caresses my feet.

I was surprised to see it. I thought it had died on my bathroom floor and got brushed away behind the trash can. I went to look. It was not there. "This is the same crane fly!" I declared with a cautious enthusiasm. "How did this rug become his final resting place?" I intended to make him my mascot thru this quarantined COVID19 Coronavirus time.

Yesterday I had picked him up and honorifically placed him on the sink counter. Shortly thereafter he flew to the floor. "Ok" I thought "stay on the floor." When you die, I will pick up your body and keep you as a specimen, a curiosity, in a time when few curiosities are floating about. The Crane Fly of Southern California will be my mascot. My COVID 19 symbol of my desire for resurrection and redemption.

But there he was instead on that luxurious rug. I picked him up and set him on my shallow white Formica Design-In-Mind desk. It is a clinical looking desk and perfect for a makeshift morgue. There I could examine his simple yet divine structure. I saw how he folded

his legs inward at acute angles to create a star pattern. The two small brown spots on the ends of his gossamer wings now seemed just decorative. They would no longer fool a predator or offer disguise in the bushes. They looked like stains on his flimsy delicate wings, perfectly round brown stains. No use to him now. The long extension of his furry round torso stopped at a bulbous end, like he was carrying a cargo destined for some unknown place. He positioned his antenna: the right one up and the left one down. This was his last exertion, his final death pose.

Then one of his legs started to quiver, another extended out to its dramatic length. It tremored as well. Was he trying to send out a plea for help? Was he trying one last time to get up and fly away? I took some delight for a brief second that I was wrong in assuming he was dead. Maybe he was just sleeping there on that plush rug. Now, was he looking up at me and trying to tell me something as I peered down at him? With my grey-blue eyes, bloodshot from lack of sleep, and with eyelashes that waved in blinks at him.

I willingly became his captor. He is my pet now. Perhaps, only for a few hours. I wondered what I would feed him. How would I leash him? Would he draw other crane flies to us with the Morris Code his fidgeting seemed to tap out? In fact, was he sending out a plea for mercy?

Did he understand I meant him no harm? I meant only to keep him as a pet who lived a noticeably short life. A pet who would die before I really had time to get to know him. Truly, he was more of a fascination. Like a piece of jewelry, I could wear him as a pin on my shoulder. Or lay him on my scrunchy and he would stick there, holding on for dear life as I walk down the steps and around my backyard. I would make him frozen in fear.

Is that what he is now? Frozen in fear? Maybe. I am not certain, but I like the way he looks. I like his architecture. I like this curious creature that can fly in the air. I like what he represents to me now: freedom.

I imagine his short former life, his “bird’s eye” view of our Santa Ynez mountains. I become a crane fly. I rub my eyes redder in disbelief. I gasp at the anticipation of diving in the air and landing softly on a crisp green pittosporum leaf. These plants are the tall hedges that encircle our yard as well as many yards here in Montecito. As this crane fly, I recreate the intoxicating dizziness he gets from the scent of blooming flowers. My head spins. I sense his heart beating so fast as he dodges the beak of a cowbird. My heart flutters in unison. I dream of his meeting up with a female dragonfly to mate. I too wish to mate again. I grasp his ability to wake up from a dead sleep, perched on a palm frond and balancing with boundless buoyancy. My thighs ache at the thought of that exercise.

I lightly touch his quivering leg and wish him no harm. Crane Flies are some of the gentlest of insects here in California. They are the signs that Spring is upon us. Scientists believe that the adult Crane Fly only has love on its minds. Did my visitor Crane Fly get to fall in love, to mate? Did his last quiver send out a plea of desperation or a joyful song of gratitude for being able to pass on his lineage?

I cannot see his face with my naked eye. Is it frozen in a smile? Are his folded-up legs pointing to a direction I should take? Does his star-shaped body replicate the tattoo on my estranged daughter’s wrists so far away in Pennsylvania? Is it a sign that she is trying to reach out to me?

Did his rigor mortis set in so fast to ensure I get his message? His one long back leg is pointing to the patio door. I respond knowing he may hear, "Where can I travel when I have nowhere to go?"

When that day comes, will I too search for love, lightly and unobtrusively? Will I be able to focus, like the Crane Fly, on unrestrained love and shed this pervasive yet permeable sense of otherness that is universally gripping us in this archetypal pandemic we call COVID19? If I can do that, for the span of a Crane Fly's life, perhaps the souls that long for my love can too. We will meet in mid-air and simply caress.

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