

Migration

It took them about half an hour to grow, felt as if sparklers were lit and stabbed into my shoulderblades. Bone came shooting out first, sailing behind me then snapping downwards as if broken from its own weight. The joint grew around the break, and the bone shivered up and down. Soon, thick waves of skin began abandoning my back and bunching around the bone like a drenched sweater, drooping down like a sheet hung out to dry. Then scrambling across my skin I felt spider legs, pinpricks and needles as tiny, fuzzy down appeared, warm and soft like rabbit fur. Do all birds have down? At last the adult feathers came sliding out from the dunes of down, each ruffling independently, each so carefully placed I half imagined someone standing above me and sticking feathers onto the wings like a jigsaw puzzle.

Of course I had fallen to the floor as soon as it started. I felt the pressure of bone beginning to push against the back of my desk chair, and I instinctively dropped onto my stomach, clawing at my shirt. I assumed the position one might assume when executed by guillotine, head stretched, legs crimped behind. I wonder if the biologists have it wrong: what if we didn't crawl from the boiling ocean into existence? What if we really fell from the sky, birds bereft of their wings? Maybe we were plucked of feathers and clipped so we couldn't escape this Earth so easily, so we'd continue breeding and dying in these miserable conditions.

Whatever the truth may be, I somehow knew as soon as the pain began that I was growing wings. I tried to remember if I had taken anything the night before, if they were somehow the result of some new psychedelic Micah or Laura could've given me, but I was sure I had had only one drink, and couldn't imagine anything getting slipped into it. No, I thought wildly, this was something else. Not a hallucination, but maybe a true, encompassing delusion.

And then it was finished. I pushed up to my knees, and slowly backed myself into a sitting position. The wings brushed the floor and fluttered disgruntledly. I tested my shoulders, which were really no longer shoulders. Instead, the joint of my arm met the joint of my wing (I still don't quite understand the anatomy of it all). I craned my neck and saw the brilliant white feathers fanning out behind me. I pulled one out with a firm tug and it didn't feel new, didn't feel young or different or any less of me than a hair might be. Just clean, sparkingly clean.

I was home when it happened, thank God. I didn't just tip over and start sprouting feathers in front of the zoo, or they would've tagged me and stuck me in a cage. You know the first thought I had, once I was sitting up? It's terrible and crude, but I thought of this girl in my 11th grade English class who was in a wheelchair. I don't know what was wrong with her, but it seemed as if it took the fullness of her strength to just move her arm or turn a page in a book. And she endured the regular hassles: the stares, the remarks from the idiots in school. But there I was, with the wingspan of a loon, thinking of her, and thinking how I'd joined the freakshow, the bizarre, the misunderstood. Sure, some people have been pretty normal about it. But I know I'm being stared at as soon as I turn my back. You spend years in obscurity, and suddenly when people start looking your way you just want to avoid them.

I stayed in for most of the afternoon, trying to get my balance with the wings. I expected them to feel like a heavy backpack strapped to me, but they didn't at all. It was much more organic, and I got used to them as fast as it takes for a sleeping limb to wake up.

I felt like a hot air balloon tethered to the ground. I was antsy. After weeks feeling sluggish and out of sorts, the wings gave me new spring. I couldn't find anything online about spontaneous wing growth in humans, but I wasn't that worried. The world was changing, icebergs melting, countries falling apart, religions toppling, and my wings were probably of no major concern.

I remembered I was late for dinner, and headed outside for the first time that day. The wings tucked gently around my torso, tickling my stomach, so I managed to pull a sweatshirt over them. Their crowns stuck up slightly above my shoulders, giving me a bit of a hump-backed look. It was cool outside; fall was sweeping through the city, bringing with it a premonition of winter. It was Saturday, and the sidewalk was crawling with people. I didn't recognize anyone, and kept my head down and my shoulders hunched as I made my way to the noodle bar Laura preferred. It was shadowy inside, thank goodness, each couple lit by a wavering candle, and I hunched into a seat at the far end of the bar, watching the door and nursing a cup of sake.

Laura appeared, dragging herself down the alley between the crowded tables, trailing scarves and a flute case and a bag heavy with the latest books she would begin to read and never

finish. She called something to me as she approached, but I couldn't quite hear it. The restaurant was crowded, and the new cold air outside made everyone feel the need to speak piercingly loud. I shook my head and smiled at her.

She reached my end of the bar, took a gulp from my glass of sake, and spent a few minutes unloading herself of all her baggage. I watched, waiting for her to notice the large arches across my back. She pulled apart her coverings, revealing a light satiny shirt underneath, cut with kitchen scissors so that the cleavage dipped dangerously low; it was one of those shirts that could distract me for a whole evening, as the tip of her bra slid in and out of my view. I wanted her at the moment with a boiler room intensity, and the wings shivered with excitement.

“What did you say? What were you yelling at me about?” I asked.

She shook her head, and her face shimmered in and out of the trembling shafts of light, crimson and brushed by the cold. “Oh Gabe. Nothing important.”

We ordered, and spoke of her day mostly. She didn't mention my back, and I settled into listening. She told me about the book she might write, a sort of memoir of her development as a musician. As she spoke, I watched the idea change in her words--a memoir to a philosophical thesis to a psychological study spanning multiple social experiments. It was a good idea, like all her ideas, an idea she was completely unequipped to see through. She would tuck this idea in with the rest of the projects she planned on finishing before “settling with a half-baked straight man and chaos raging in my womb,” as she described her domestic future. Men, to her, as I had quickly learned from the growing sexual infidelity of the past month, were tools. She told me the first time we fucked that if I didn't make her come, she would never sleep with me again. I guess I did, because we spent the rest of the weekend in bed, until she left to pick up Micah at the bus station. Even with the odor of bok choy clinging to every corner of this restaurant, I caught her scent with hunger.

“Did you hear the song Micah wrote last night? It's got all these layers, I'm amazed he can write something like that when he's high. Thank God we remembered to video it, or he'd kill himself for forgetting the lyrics.”

“What were the lyrics again?” I asked as I spooned the murky broth into my mouth, my tongue testing the vegetables, trying to determine what they might be. She laughed and

shook her head; she had a habit of doing that.

“Oh, I think they were about us, as usual. ‘Jumping off the bridge, rocks sharpened to an edge, do you know the way back home?’ ” She sang the last bar, a lilting tune that moved upwards vacantly. “He said it was about that bridge out by his grandparents where we skinny-dipped for the first time.”

“What a night last night was, huh?” I said, shrugging the wings until the stitches on my sweatshirt began to stretch. She shrugged back. “Any idea what might’ve caused these?” I baited her again, casually pointing behind me. She leaned over our bowls suddenly, her necklaces sliding from her shirt, the Franciscan cross dangling dangerously close to the oily surface of my soup, and lifted the collar of my sweatshirt to peer down my back.

“I wouldn’t worry about them,” she whispered into my ear, and nipped at my cheek. I turned into her, and she brushed her lips against my chin. She wrinkled her nose, and leaned back into her stool.

“You need to shave, Gabe. Your stubble can be so cumbersome.”

“And those things on my back? You don’t think they’ll get in the way?”

Again, her usual shrug. “We all go through stages like this. You’ll grow out of them.”

I knew she was speaking off the top of her head, and hadn’t a clue what a man with wings might mean, but nevertheless I felt more reassured. I slid a hand onto her thigh, and squeezed it firmly.

“Oh, so you want to go home, huh?” She teased, and glanced about for the waitress. She always worked our sexual excursions that way, making me the instigator. I didn’t mind. I knew it lifted the guilt off her, let her think that our sneaking around behind Micah’s back was more me than her. I guess I didn’t mind so much about that either. Laura was the only girl I had felt comfortable having sex with in a few years; the rest wanted to please me so much, it felt embarrassing. Most of them would be pick-ups after a gig, someone Micah would no doubt push my way. But Laura used me, she wanted more than she gave.

The next morning, I woke to her on the phone with Micah. Since his mother’s cancer had started to get worse, he was spending most of his weekends back and forth. I didn’t know how he managed, and felt guilty for not helping more. He kept our gigs going, kept writing, and still

was back in his parent's house helping with his little brother every week. Of course, this meant Laura and I were together more, and I woke up most Sunday mornings with her in bed next to me.

"You'd make a nice painting, just like this," she said to me as she tossed the phone to the end of the bed. I was lying on my stomach to accommodate the wings.

"Aren't I just the most beautiful bird you've ever seen? Like a swan?" I teased her lazily, wiggling my ass in a mockery of tail-feathers. She shook her head.

"I never went for swans. Crows, crows are my favorite birds. All one solid color, no messing around with frivolity."

I scowled at her, and the wings spread up and out smugly, rending the air. She laughed and ducked.

"Careful!" She yanked at the blankets, diving on top of me.

We parted ways on the sidewalk, she on her way to a life-drawing class and me to my niece's drum lesson. I liked driving out to my sister's house, liked how I could flee the city once a week and come see the two of them. Gloria was growing up faster than I ever imagined. Nine years old, christ. With wisdom far beyond her, a strange understanding of this saturated world. Thinking back on the nine years since she was born, it seemed as if I boxed them up and delivered them to someone else, someone who would make better use of them. It's pathetic really, but what have I got to show for almost a decade of my life? I'm a drummer in a second-hand city, playing gigs in the back of pubs, and fucking around with my best friend, who's dating my other best friend. And these wings, I guess. I have these wings, but I don't know what good they are.

Getting in the car was a little difficult. I had to put the seat into an almost lying-down position, and then straighten my back perfectly and keep myself upright over the bumps and curves down the dirt road. Years on a drum stool made good posture difficult. I wondered if Gloria would endure the same sort of downturned neck, the crinkling spine.

Shard's road led me into the pale shattered light of the backwoods, the type of woods my sister and I grew up in. We followed each other around life, going to the same university, playing music in the same small circle of young folk-icon wannabes. Then she disappeared into

the woods and Gloria appeared. Talking with Laura was like talking to my sister; she always knew exactly what I was trying to say, but never bothered to agree or disagree. The conversation moved away from everything relevant in the most amiable of ways.

My sister met me at the door when I pulled up, and appraised the wings sticking out of the top of my jacket. “Those look like they need some air,” she mentioned as I stepped into the small, ramshackle cabin she flung together over the years. I nodded, and gratefully unzipped, letting the wings spring free. I had cut two holes in my t-shirt that morning, and Laura had fed the wings through them carefully. I had asked her if they were ugly, if she liked them, but she ducked the questions, telling me only that they were a part of my body like my eyebrows or masher-teeth. That’s what she always called molars, and spoke of teeth constantly. “Oh, Gabe,” Laura shook her head, and I wanted to slap her for it. Never a straight answer, never.

My sister showed the same amount of indifference to the wings. I tried to remember if I had wings as a kid, or if she had. I was pretty sure I hadn’t, but the possibility floated in the periphery of my memory. I was an odd child, and we used to imagine ourselves as superheroes, riding the glider across the backyard. My sister's favorite bird was a cardinal, vivid and prominent. I always thought they were vain and self-righteous, and every time Finkle caught one I cheered him on. I liked the ravens. Smart and conniving, and self-sufficient. But here I was with the wings of who knows what, bones creaking as they knocked against the coatrack and dropped loose feathers around the floor.

“Sorry!” I cried, trying to pull them into my body and be as inconspicuous as possible. My sister just smiled and offered me tea. It was then Gloria came peeking out from her bedroom. Her mother was facing away from us at the sink, staring into the woods and wondering about some impossible future. I smiled at Gloria and wiggled my eyebrows. Her usual response would have been to pop her nose and stick out her tongue, but instead she frowned viciously and turned away into her room.

“Well, I’m not here to cause a ruckus in the kitchen, eh?” I told her mother, and pulled my drumsticks from my pocket, following Gloria around the corner.

Gloria's room had five sides and stood as the center of the cabin, bordering each of the other rooms in the house. Her bed hung from the ceiling as a sort of loft, with a rope ladder

descending to the floor. I remembered watching her mother put the room together, envious that I had never had such an adventurous space when I was a kid, and didn't have one now. Gloria's drumset was set up opposite the door, and she sat in position, arms crossed, sticks poking up from her little hands, observing me.

"What's up, sport?" I asked her, setting the chair I had stolen from the kitchen down next to her, and glancing across the drumset my sister bought after they had seen me play a gig and Gloria begged her for lessons. I knew she expected Gloria to grow bored of it, knew she expected and half wanted her to react to a drum-set like any other nine year old girl might, but of course Gloria didn't because she wasn't.

"Well, aren't you going to explain?" she asked me right away. Gloria had been the first to directly ask such a question. The same way she told me where my sister had fallen on the ridge, the same way her first word was "forgiven," and the same way my heart tremored whenever Gloria laid her steady little hand in mine. I guess we always knew, my sister and I, that she wasn't a child, not simply a child. I never knew who or where her father came from; my sister only said he descended on the cabin from the woods, and left the same way. And there was Gloria, inside her, already speaking to her.

I considered the question. I had gotten a look from my waitress the night before, and when the wings started to poke out of my sweatshirt at the gas station the guy in the truck in front of me had looked at me like I was a flaming drag queen, but no one bothered to ask that question.

"Explain what? My bad haircut?" She shook her head. "My bad breath?"

"Uncle Gabe," she pointed at the wings with the plastic tips of her sticks, "this is serious."

Gloria was right, obviously, and I sobered up pretty quickly. The wings seemed to hover over us like an umbrella, casting shadows over her dress. It took me a while to really decide what to say. She was only nine, the wings were very personal, even if they're so obvious. It was hard for me, but I decided to tell her. From the beginning. Up to my ungraceful entrance to her home, and my continued astonishment in her powers of interrogating the world.

She looked away. I licked my lips a little, and stared into her, but she didn't respond.

She absently tapped her fingers across the snare. Finally, she turned back, and placed a hand deep into the thick of my right wing, feeling it to the down. It tickled me, and the wings thrashed wildly against the wall for a moment, then forward, knocking over the hi-hat with a tremendous crash. She watched as I scrambled around to pick everything up, ducking as the wings soared around her.

“Well, have you flown yet?” she asked, as I slid the pedal of the hi-hat back under her foot. I shook my head meekly.

“I dunno if I really know how.”

She nodded. “Yes, that would make sense. We don’t know yet what type of bird you are. What if you’re a roadrunner, right? Or a chicken?”

“A white chicken?”

She nodded vigorously. “Or a dove. I asked mum if we could adopt some doves.”

“Who says I’m really a bird at all, right? They could just be costume wings. They could just be for show.”

“Well, are they?”

I shrugged. She considered the wings again, petting them lightly as if she was touching a waterfall.

“They need to go. You can’t keep them, Uncle Gabe.”

“Why not?” She looked me up and down, not bothering to answer such a frivolous question.

“I will be ready for you in three days, Uncle Gabe. I am prepared to do what is necessary.” The word hung between us. “Necessary and right.” We eyed each other warily, the wings sending down lazy wafts of warm air from above. Her eyes were green and her hair was breezy, as tangled as the forest that she grew up in.

At last, she turned forward again, and placed a stick lightly against the rim of the drum in front of her. I leaned forward in my regular anticipation.

“You’ve been working on the rolling, right?” The room filled with the whirring of the drum set, rigid little notes in rigid little lines marching resolutely into the echoing, empty woods.

After our lesson, the wings were heavier. They didn't seem to like the air pressure, and sagged. It was raining when I got back into the city, and I spent at least an hour trying to roll about on my back to dry them. Laura didn't text me, so I knew Micah must be home.

Micah picked me up Wednesday, with Laura humming to herself in the backseat. We were on our way south, to a little restaurant we visited once a month, to play in the corner of their parlor. We had a small following in that area, mostly hairy hippies and high schoolers who knew if they brought their guitars they may have a chance to play a tune with us. Laura brought her flute, and her saxophone, and her violin, and her melodica. But it was her voice we wanted. We would let her dally and solo on a few instrumental tunes, while Micah gingerly plucked the bass as if each note were a new surprise to his fingers, and I reveled in the ordered chaos of a swinging, 4/4 jazz beat. But most of the time she was crooning, her voice creamy, unapologetically young and right. Micah would lend his soft alto behind her occasionally, and I would listen reverently, trying so hard to go unnoticed, tucked into the beautiful realm that they created together. By the end of the night, the audience was silent, leaning back into chairs and watching Micah and Laura fall in love again. It happened every time we played together. It was amazing what a bit of singing could do to the two of them, washing them of everything that had come before. I envied them for it. Laura and I had always been static, nothing had changed with us, but every time we played a gig, Micah and Laura became something new to each other. We finished our set quietly, and got quiet, satisfied applause. I received a few comments about the wings from our audience, how they liked the costume addition and why didn't we play The Byrds, or "Stairway to Heaven?"

We all went back to my place that night, feeling good and high on our music. I kept the lights off, and we played with flashlights like little children. Micah had that way about him, that laugh of purity and that mind for joy. I knew I was half in love with him, and half in love with Laura, and both were so closely out of reach. Laura was excited by a new art project: this new method of tilt-cam video, where the real world could look like a toy world, and everything looked contrived. She was entranced. I forgot all about the wings, except for one moment where they reached around all three of us and we swept into each other. We laughed and shooed them away, where they lay silent.

As Micah went downstairs to pull the car around the block, Laura knelt in front of me where I lay on the couch, and pressed her forehead against my own.

“We love you, Gabe.” I nodded, feeling my cheeks burn against her cool touch.

“It’s why we can’t do what we’re doing. Micah, you, me, we’re a unit. Like a family.” She laughed softly, but in the dark, I couldn’t distinguish her expression. Her hand cradled my face. “You’re like our son, Gabe, we love you so much.”

And then she was gone. It was a conversation we had almost weekly. I knew I was an addiction she wanted to eradicate from her body. I knew I had a responsibility to remove myself. But I also knew that out there, waiting above the orb of warmth and vigor of Laura, was a wide world in a moonless night. Lying there with the blankets bunched on my feet and the wings swaddling me almost like a cocoon, I wondered if this was the end of the arc, if life would ever change after this.

Gloria called at the stroke of midnight. She must have stayed up staring at the clock illuminated on her wall, waiting patiently to make the call on schedule. Her mother was deep asleep, because my sister's morning always started at 5a.m with the cow Gloria named Cream. She must’ve snuck into the kitchen, and stretched the cord out through the front door. I could hear her shivering as she sat in her pajamas on the granite step in front.

“Uncle Gabe?”

“What’re you doing, calling so late?”

“What do you mean? It’s time, remember?”

The wings gently tugged at my back, and a ripple of pain scrawled out from them as if the blood vessels were standing on edge.

“Listen, I don’t know if I can come. I don’t know if it’s such a good idea, now.”

“But you have to! Don’t be stupid, Uncle Gabe. This is the right thing to do.”

She was earnest. I heard the quickening in her breath. The wings were nervous. I felt a tightening across my back and an excruciating pain. Welts had grown where my skin had stretched, and they were flaring and bleeding as if they wanted to reclaim their lost covering.

“Uncle Gabe, I’m telling you as one who knows. They are not yours to keep. You must do what is clear.”

The wings fluttered in rebellion and my body was in open war; Gloria spoke of something she had read in a book of fairy tales once, about a man who mistook himself for an eagle, about having the wings torn from him by a ravenous pack of coyotes. The wings swung wildly about the room, knocking lamps off tables. I hung up on her, pulled the wings into submission, and stepped outside.

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Gloria started suddenly, forehead twitching up from the cool stone step. Above her, the stars had shifted position, Pegasus now closer to the ink treeline: a couple of hours had passed since she had spoken with her uncle.

She started again. There was a noise from the barn, a not-cat not-cow not-hen clatter. Human. She stood, yanking her wide-lipped rubber boots back into place around her heel.

The barn door moved on a well-oiled track, a large panel of wall recessing to the side by about twelve feet. She grasped the chilled metal handle, and carefully drew the long door completely open. Next to the entrance hung a lightswitch connected to the four ceiling floods. Below that, a large, square, high-powered flashlight. She chose the flashlight.

"Laura," someone moaned. The spotlight revealed the expected marble eyes of Cream, steam rising from her nostrils, and the nesting hens, unhappy with the invasive glare. And, surrounded by a stonehenge crossword of broken glass, her uncle Gabriel, seated on the floor, wiping blood from a gash across my forehead.

"What have you done?" She asked, approaching cautiously through the glass. Her red nightgown glinted in the refracted light in each shard.

My eyes opened with her approach. I looked above my head, and she followed my gaze to the shattered skylight above.

"I flew."

She didn't quite hear me at first, and wondered if she might have supplied the words herself, if I had simply groaned. But I said it again, slowly and deliberately. The wings rustled smugly behind me. My breath was short, uneven, forcing murmuring groans from my lips. She set her own in a firm line.

"And?"

I took her small head between my hands, sought her eyes with my own.

"I found everything. Everything I wanted was below me. Laura and Micah, laid out together. Grand homes and acres of empty woods. It was all below me, and I had it all, looking down on it." He opened his arms. "I could hold it all, from so far away." I laid back, the wings surrounding me, pressing against my bare chest, preening me, a thousand fingers who learned Laura's particular touch. "To be unhinged from the responsibility of gravity, of all the people clinging to you. Of music."

She left me in darkness, flashlight beam searching the wall. She found the glint, the teeth. She lifted the handle, molded for a hand larger than her own. It will do.

"And you, I can take you. The wings will hold us both. Or Laura. I can lift her, away, and she can sing, and Micah will wait for us, below. They'll allow a passenger, I'm sure. It will please them."

Gloria slipped out of her rubber boots, felt the familiar wood grain beneath her toes. It will be quieter this way. She circled, as her mother taught her with bow and arrow in the woods, one foot crossing the other, eye always on the unsuspecting squirrel or bird.

"If I had known Laura when I was your age, I would have just kissed her. We could have played doctor. Sex could've been an exploration, instead of this strange repetition, always wanting better, never being enough. Never being enough. Never being colors, or sounds, or pure, unabashed, snow..."

Finding her angle, Gloria clicked the flashlight off. My soliloquy, chatter of almost inebriated, rapid-chopped language, faltered. I sat up, seeking her. The wings shifted from side to side, apprehensive. She bit the pain away as glass sliced her toe. Her small gasp encouraged me.

"You understand. I know, the way you always know. Some witch must've marked you as a baby, or marked your mother's womb with a thumbprint, a tattoo. Who is your father, anyhow? You, you celestial body, you virgin birth. Fuck, my head is bleeding. Fuck, everytime they shudder, I feel, I feel so-"

The cow lowed, I turned toward her, and the blade met the joint of the left wing, first a savage hacking, a grinding, a rip and slit widening through ruptured blood and muscle to a chasm

of bone. The wings tried to fight her off, but she rode between them, focused on her mark. I, Gabriel, crawled, cawing and gasping, about the floor, then lifted, up, my niece wrapped around my back, now sawing with abandon. We lifted off the floor, man and child and blood-soaked wings, the trio lashing without knowing toward any flesh not their own. Into the air. The hens cackled and fell from their perches. The mass flapped through the rafters, cracking against walls, beating the roof. Feathers drifted to the ground like snow. The man's cries diminished, replaced by a low snarling, not connected to man or girl. A limb dropped to the ground. The arc of the flapping creature dipped suddenly, and careened toward the floor, spiraling. It hit the floor once, lifted, then dropped again, rolling to a sudden stop.

In the house, Gabriel's sister dreamt of a room filled with shards of meteors; she dipped them in and out of colored paint cans, though they all came out brown. In the city, Laura woke enough to turn her body against Micah's, spooning him, legs mingled. She didn't hear his nightly tears. Micah prayed, prayed as he did every night since his faith found him again, shifting his mother from his car to her wheelchair on their way to church one Sunday this Summer. In another city, further away from sunrise, Gloria's father read the tarot cards of a giddy teenager and her needy boyfriend, seeing all the pain they would erect against each other. A seagull hunted the empty sidewalk for pizza crusts. The Pegasus constellation disappeared. Dawn rose, opposite twin to dusk. The open barn door lilted from side to side in its tracks. Inside, something rose. Something smeared in blood, like a newborn, brushing feathers from where they clung to its skin. It walked on two feet, and uncramped its exhausted fingers. Something grounded. Something human.