



Looking Up

Ann Stapleton

I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this: To glorify things just because they are.

Czeslaw Milosz

Richard Adams wrote that the 'radical novelty of modern science lies precisely in the rejection of the belief, which is at the heart of all popular religion, that the forces which move the stars and atoms are contingent upon the preferences of the human heart'. They are not. Alas. And of course. And good thing, too. Whoever you believe is in charge of the Here Below, one long moment's look into the heavens will convince you straightaway that it isn't you. And yet, you will be needed nonetheless; there is a call for eyes like yours. The stars will require your talent for gazing. And the daylit sky. And in your looking up, not always the easiest of occupations, the most likely thing to distract you from the weightlessness of the immensity above you and the burden of your own insignificance below will be a small pair of wings, a body in progress, that arrow of yearning shot from the dark under your feet toward the highest attainable light. Birds can lift the downcast eye and carry its blindness away with them. When it is laid up or shut in or stock-still, your soul can find comfort in their ability to leave; and they will show you when you are lost how simple it can be to come back. They are the welcome committee of the morning and our emissary to the twilight. They are caught with us in the stars' fine nets, and they know the Fisherman as well as we, and yet somehow they seem to go free. They are an impossible-to-work-out gladness and an otherness that follows the river back to our lives. They are perpetually going on a trip across the sky, and they do not mind taking us along, and heavy as we are, we find our lightness in their grasp.

Brown Bird

There was a bird in the berry bushes once, down below a house, his tail feathers caught on a thorn. The day was cold and bright and the wind was tossing him upward, over and over, but not changing anything. He would swing up and stop, then drop back down; heaven was

what he hoped for. Just short of a complete rotation he would lose the way, still gripped by what, he couldn't have known. The day was drooping in its wings. A man weeping in the window had thought he was alone. By the hand that worked its feathers free, the bird held onto him. The world was going down by then, its blue light setting all the caught ones free. The little bird was brown. The man freed its feathers from the thorn; thus both did make it home. How the bird looked as it flew away was what the man wished could stay.

Bluebirds

Someday you may need to ask yourself, what can be built from failure and blue sky? If the power company knocks a bird nest to the ground, this, of course, changes the world. One moment the little dark structure is firmly affixed to a point in the heavens, eluding the notice of cats and raccoons and black racers on their appointed rounds, high out of the reach of curious boys, and unfazed by the caprices of thunderstorms. A pair of cupped hands is gently holding up to the light a circlet of grass and pine needles and deer hair. The mother has flown away the eggshells' broken lamp; dropped bits of light are glowing in the grass somewhere. The breeze is up a little, and inextirpable hope is tattooed into the tough skin of the world. And then come human voices, and an old and unoutwittable not knowing what we do. Only a second is needed for the day to disassemble its own work. A shadow settles on the sunlit grass, a wreath woven of all the mistakes we make.

This is how the world becomes: in the encounter between error and endurance. This is how it enters the eye of a kind man who knows better, yet still hopes. The blue of the little wings there in the light and the light blue of the man's eye are the same color. The man weighs the time it will take against the probable outcome, and sighs. But in his mind, the blue of dead things, that unturnbackable blue that slopes down purple into a darkness that does not fade. He looks down at the chicks and they look up at him. It's as simple as that he can't let it happen this way.

He retrieves the world's error in his own two hands that know how to fix things. He puts the nest in a cardboard box and drives to work with them each day on the front seat of the truck, for the chicks must be fed every few hours. He says to the other men, 'Yep, I brought the kids today,' and they all laugh, embarrassed, but somehow glad. In between the brake jobs and oil changes and fan belt replacements, he feeds them. And they want to do their part in all of this: their every movement is directed toward the sky. Every minute they are looking up.

And then one day the first one dies, a fungus probably. And then one after another, one per day, as if by prior agreement with something pitiless and implacable above that does not want them, not even for a second. Their heads grow too heavy. They can no longer eat. One by one, they drop backwards out of time. Until the box is gone from the corner; no more need. Until the heavens are blank and smooth and clean of them as stone. But if you think this is a story about failure, you have only to look up from what you cannot keep. 'We climb to heaven most often on the ruins of our cherished plans,' wrote Bronson Alcott. Their blue is urned inside the man; marked by the touch of them in his palm, buoyed by their helpless trust, anchored by their nothing weight, he moves along under the sun toward his own end (may it be in such a gentle hand). Their instinctive last resort, their place of final restlessness, he is their only means. Wings do not perish, but are bequeathed. So sayeth the wind in the leaves. See him walking out of his house each morning as if he is an ordinary earthbound man.

Crow

A crow with a shattered wing appears at your little feeding station – just a bowl of water, renewed daily, and a strip of gravel driveway where offerings of cracked corn and peanuts and black oil sunflower seed are made. Reduced by circumstances to the level of a Two-foot, he is an anxious presence, feeding and drinking for just a moment at a time, then nervously run-hopping toward the safety of the woods. His mate visits him sometimes in his jail of light on the ground. And when she lifts off into the sky, he tries to go too, but drops back down. He stares up after her and turns his head to follow as far as he can. You come upon him one evening five feet up a pine tree at the edge of the woods, and imagine how he managed the feat, laboriously propelling himself from the first branch to the next above, a little higher up each time. His wing does not recover its function, but hangs down in perpetual extension, a black rag that can't make the world clean. He lives this way for months, carrying the loss of the sky in his body. Then one day he simply stops coming. But I do not tell you this for the grief of it.

'The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks,' wrote Tennessee Williams. Our tenderest feelings, our ludicrous sympathies that could be said to have no purpose at all, are a necessary part of the universe. For anyone looking on, for anyone watching him study the door in the sky he could not open, the violets break right through the hardness of the sentence the world imposed. His loss of the heavens was only another window by which they were

revealed. The sky was never so exquisite as how it seemed from behind his dark head looking up. The heavens just are, and would be, without a dazzled pair of eyes, without a single soul, staring up at them. But the world was wholly interactive long before the computer came to be. A tree achieves its own lightstruck perfection; yes, the leaves know well what they must do and do not need us to tell them. But what good is a tree without a finch to perch in it, without that small weight of appreciation and need that is heavy enough to quiver a branch? A bare tree is surely an achievement of nature. But a tree with a nest in its top is quite another thing: it is a hymn to all greenness, past and present, and an ingenuous prayer for life to go on. Our bodies are made of dead stars, so the scientists tell the poets, perhaps not realizing how this will affect their already moon-addled brains. And we repay that debt by looking up into the night sky and yearning toward a former life, a simpler incarnation; the poets, by writing their letters of long distance love. John Ruskin called the sky 'almost human in its passions, almost spiritual in its tenderness, almost divine in its infinity.' Almost, but not. The heavens are wholly dependent on us – not for their functioning, but for their meaning. To be seen as beautiful, to be found essential, to be *loved*, the heavens must enter a human life. They reach down to us from their failure to matter. To find their own brilliance, they must see themselves reflected in a pair of light-astonished eyes.

Buzzard

A turkey vulture, popularly called a buzzard in southeastern Ohio, is one of the most loathsome-looking creatures ever invented, with its thick, hooked beak designed for dismantling road kill, and its featherless red head, left naked so that the bacteria from the carcasses it delves into can bake off in the sun. Its song is limited to grunts and hisses. It urinates on its own legs to cool itself, and its primary defense against predators is its highly developed ability to vomit at the drop of a hat (either the predator leaves – as who could blame him? – or he is distracted by the free meal, giving the non-confrontational buzzard time to retreat). A *terrible* bird. And yet.

And yet the buzzard is one of the world's most elegant flyers, a revelation of the possible; an angel could only appear clumsy and slow by comparison. But there is more. Sometimes the buzzards will rise inordinately high into the heavens, so high that they threaten to (but do not) pass beyond human sight, to form a slow, gentle spiral, made up of a number of birds circling at different levels. When so engaged, their altitude is such as to preclude the search for food. The maneuver is not, in fact, practical. The birds are at play. This gentle,

high as the eye can go floating in the heavens is one of the most soul uplifting sights available to earthly eyes. It should be claimed as one of the 'quiet and subdued passages of unobtrusive majesty' John Ruskin alludes to in his writings about the sky, the 'deep, and the calm, and the perpetual, that which must be sought ere it is seen, and loved ere it is understood.' Though here the angels who 'work [things] out for us daily, and yet vary [them] eternally' just by being the object of our longing, are the same wretched (retching) clowns who everywhere attend mortality in their hours on the ground. It is soothing to the human imagination to know that the exquisite sky sailor up there so far away in the blue that it almost can't be followed even with the eye comes into its life (unable even to hold its head up, but already hissing) on the floor of a dark cave on the rocky surface of this world. There is a vast blue contained inside that egg's minor darkness; and there is a darkness – see that spot there at the top of the spiral? – capable of free-sailing in the highest blue. And this gives us hope for ourselves as we look up, that we may rise somehow, impossibly, and become more beautiful than we will ever be.

Wrens

A pair of Carolina wrens. In the barn, the beginnings of a nest only about four feet off the ground – the site could not have been less promising. But a wise advisor counseled that just the *chance* of life succeeding here, of a brand new pair of wings brushing against the same old sky, was worth far more than all the unbuilt nests in the world. And so we left it alone. Soon there were five wee eggs, white with rusty speckles, down in a protected cavity within a general wild sprawl of leaves and moss and dog hair. You could see right in. At night the female slept hard, head tucked, her wings spread wide across this little bit of futurity. She ferried away the bits of shell, and then the little pellets of gel-covered waste from the baby birds. They were tiny silent maws at first, their beaks outlined in light so that the parents could easily locate a drop spot for the insects they were constantly bringing. The chicks ate and slept in a little pyramid, underneath the mother at first, and then all around and eventually even on top of her, the whole arrangement rising as they grew.

Last evening the chicks had all been coaxed outside into the wild milkweed garden to begin the world again. All but one, parked in the middle of the barn floor and loudly cheeping. Nightfall was coming on and I picked him up to place him back in the nest where he might be safe until the parents returned. He clung to my finger as fiercely as if it were his own life. When I came back an hour later to check on him, he was gone. I choose to think that the parents led him

out into the twilight with the others to look up through the leaves in pure amazement, to meet the moon and stars for the first time.

Today in the morning light I saw a chick in the wet grass, my last one from the nest, I'd like to believe, hopping along the ground, bobbing up a bit into the air and then back down. Both parents attended him, consoling and urging on and persuading, until I saw him fly up about eighteen inches to a bench under the large wind chimes beside the shagbark where my father's ashes are buried. His favorite bird was the wren. The little one, undecided about all this, returned to the ground, and then, in a move that appeared to surprise him more than anyone, he lifted off again and landed three or four feet up the hickory's trunk. It was only for his own life that he did this, not for mine. But because the full force of him has taken my finger and told me how it all matters, because I keep watching the heavens for his arrival (will this little ball of instinct and something more ever make it there? the mortality rate is almost ninety percent), and because none of us can do it on our own, he is trying for the sky today. For the bluebirds who died, every one of them. And for the man who wanted so much for them to live. For my father, who loved wrens best. And for me, because I cannot go, and he will take me.

Barn Owl

Say it is a beautiful sunlit morning in Ohio, sparkling and green in the warmth of late spring. You are walking down the gravel lane on the length of grass that grows between the ruts, preoccupied with your own life and its usual smallnesses. Your head is down. Your thoughts are sunken and safe and all to yourself. And that's when it comes your way, this fierce suddenness, this almost graspable chance, this waking dream: a great barn owl with its strange heart-shaped face. You've barely had time to register the identity of the creature when it rises quite high in the sky and comes directly over you, this nothing you've ever seen before and may never again. On a direct line from your position in the lane, at maybe one hundred feet above the ground, it seems to hang for a moment, wings wide open, your blur of light the pines could not manage to contain a dapple of cream and pale caramel dots and clean browns, with the sun behind and the light pouring through the backlit feathers, looking so lovely that it does not seem an earthborn thing at all. And your impression, so strong and brief (you wish you had words for it, and you don't – that's part of the experience: the need to let go of language and enter pure being) makes you want to call out in ecstatic answer, *Oh please let this never end!* And you realize you don't know who or

what it is you're beseeching, and that what you want to go on forever is not only the owl, with its oddly human face, that will soon be past you and growing smaller and smaller until it disappears, but also the field mouse it took last night, and everyone you've ever known or will, living or already dead, and all your own endless finite days on earth. And then the owl, whose talons are empty, looks down at you, directly into your eyes, and takes you, helpless ground dweller, in, and tells you its life as well, in just a few brief seconds, as its shadow grazes the world below. It looks at you with a mild, curious, ancient expression, almost tender, almost pitying, you think, perhaps because you are rooted to your place in things and cannot move. But where a hawk gives you nothing but cold outrage (that is its gift), the owl seems to assess and possess and then absolve you, as if slightly amused, but not enough to smile; it seems to nod to you almost imperceptibly like some enchanted thing, like a person who in some other life displeased a god and was changed forever and thereby set free. So long ago that it itself cannot remember the why of it. It is only a few seconds of your life, and yet the owl casts its own silent spell: *you will never forget me until the day you forget all*. That face and those wings and the colors in the light that were given you in trade for your looking up, as humans will, in curiosity and longing, and in love. *Oh remember this*, you beg yourself: the vicarious flight, and your soul rising; time arrested, and forever passing over.

The talons were empty this time, except for you. But say they had not been. Say there had been a bit of stain and dark fur, a little blur of loss. You could not have blamed the owl any more than you would blame the prey itself. For the world has its own ways. As the poet and naturalist Gerry Cambridge has written, 'the duckling is flight to the black-backit gull.' Is flight. He does not say *food*, though that is so as well, but *flight*, which cannot be begrudged, this way into the heavens, life of the soul within the body. And the gift of looking up is sometimes this strange loss of self that goes straight to the heart of being, this dramatic shaking off of your giant-seeming slowness so that you can become a part of All. For just a moment on a spring morning in Ohio once, an owl had my life. I was the little duck with its hapless feet swaying, the gasping mortality the raptor did not cause, but let me see. And for a few breathless moments then, I saw what its prey might see. From the heavens I could see all the way into the world, into pure being, into time that had graciously ceased to exist for a few seconds to let an owl with a woman pass by. I saw my own face looking up. The day seemed beautiful and endless, and I was both laughing and crying to see us go.