A BIRD IN HAND

No, jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle.

—*Macbeth*, I. vi.

1980

They come like apocalypse, like all ten plagues rolled in one, beating across the sky with an insidious drone, their voices harsh and metallic, cursing the land. Ten million strong, a flock that blots out the huge pale sinking sun, they descend into the trees with a protracted explosion of wings, black underfeathers swirling down like a corrupt snow. At dawn they vacate the little grove of oak and red cedar in a streaming rush, heading west to disperse and feed in the freshly seeded fields; at dusk they gather like storm clouds to swarm back to their roost. Ten million birds, concentrated in a stand of trees no bigger around than a city block—each limb, each branch, each twig and bole and strip of bark bowed under the weight of their serried bodies—ten million tiny cardiovascular systems generating a sirocco of heat, ten million digestive tracts processing seeds, nuts, berries, animal feed, and streaking the tree trunks with chalky excrement. Where before there had been leafspill, lichened rocks, sunlit paths beneath the trees, now there are foot-deep carpets of bird shit.

"We've got a problem, Mai." Egon Scharf stands at the window, turning a worn paperback over in his hand. Outside, less than a hundred feet off, ten million starlings squat in the trees, cursing one another in a cacophony of shrieks, whistles, and harsh *check-checks*. "Says here," holding up the book, "the damn birds carry disease."

A muted undercurrent of sound buzzes through the house like static, a wheezing, whistling, many-throated hiss. Mai looks up from her crocheting: "What? I can't hear you."

got to do something."

"Tut," is all she says. Her husband has always been an alarmist, from the day Jack Kennedy was shot and he installed bulletproof windows in the Rambler, to the time he found a single tent-caterpillar nest in the cherry tree and set fire to half the orchard. "A flock of birds, Egon, that's all—just a flock of birds."

For a moment he is struck dumb with rage and incomprehension, a lock of stained white hair caught against the bridge of his nose. "Just a flock—? Do you know what you're saying? There's millions of them out there, crapping all over everything. The drains are stopped up, it's like somebody whitewashed the car—I nearly broke my neck slipping in wet bird shit right on my own front porch, for Christ's sake—and you say it's nothing to worry about? *Just a flock of birds?*"

She's concentrating on a tricky picot stitch. For the first time, in the silence, she becomes aware of the steady undercurrent of sound. It's not just vocal, it's more than that—a rustling, a whisper whispered to a roar. She imagines a dragon, breathing fire, just outside the house.

"Mai, are you listening to me? Those birds can cause disease." He's got the book in his hand again—*The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Birds*—thumbing through it like a professor. "Here, here it is: histoplasmosis, it says. Wind-borne. It grows in bird crap."

She looks inexpressibly wise, smug even. "Oh, that? That's nothing, no more serious than a cold," she says, coughing into her fist. "Don't you remember Permilla Greer had it two years back?"

"Can spread through the reticulo-something-or-other system," he reads, and then looks up: "with a high percentage of mortality."

Three days later a man in a blue Ford pickup with tires the size of tank treads pulls into the driveway. The bed of the truck is a confusion of wires and amplifiers and huge open-faced loudspeakers. Intrigued, Mai knots the belt of her housecoat and steps out onto the porch.

"Well, yes, sure," Egon is saying, "you can back it over that pile of fence posts there and right up under the trees, if you want."

A young man in mirror sunglasses is standing beside the open door of the pickup. He nods twice at Egon, then hoists himself into the truck bed and begins flinging equipment around. "Okay," he says, "okay," as if addressing a large and impatient audience, "the way it works is like this: I've got these tapes of starling distress calls, and when they come back tonight to roost I crank up the volume and let 'em have it."

"Distress calls?"

The man is wearing a T-shirt under his jacket. When he pauses to put his hands on his hips, Mai can make out the initials emblazoned across his chest—KDOG—red letters radiating jagged orange lightning bolts. "Yeah, you know, like we mike a cage full of starlings and then put a cat or a hawk or something in

one up, then we set the reels rolling."

Egon looks dubious. Mai can see him pinching his lower lip the way he does when somebody tells him the Russians are behind high fertilizer prices or that a pack of coyotes chewed the udders off twenty dairy cows in New Jersey.

"Don't worry," the man says, a thick coil of electrical cord in his hand, "this'll shake 'em up."

For the next two weeks, at dusk, the chatter of the roosting birds is entirely obliterated by a hideous tinny death shriek, crackling with static and blared at apocalyptic volume. When the Bird Man, as Mai has come to think of him, first switches on the amplifier each night, thirty or forty starlings shoot up out of the nearest tree and circle the yard twice before settling back down again. These, she supposes, are the highstrung, flighty types. As for the rest—the great weltering black mass hunkered down in the trees like all the generations of God's creation stretching back from here to the beginning of time—they go about their business as if wrapped in the silence of the Ages. That is, they preen their wings, cackle, squawl, screech, warp the branches, and crap all over everything, as unruffled and oblivious as they were before the Bird Man ever set foot in the yard.

On this particular evening the racket seems louder than ever, the very windowpanes humming with it. Mai has not been feeling well—she's got a cough that makes her want to give up smoking, and her forehead seems hot to the touch—and she was lying down when the Bird Man started his serenade. Now she gets up and shuffles over to the window. Below, parked in the shadow of the nearest oak, the Bird Man sits in his truck, wearing a set of headphones and the sunglasses he never removes. The hammering shriek of the bird call sets Mai's teeth on edge, assaults her ears, and stabs at her temples, and she realizes in that instant that it is distressing her far more than it distresses the birds. She suddenly wants to bolt down the stairs, out the door and into the pickup, she wants to pull the plug, rake the sunglasses from the Bird Man's face, and tell him to get the hell out of her yard and never come back again. Instead, she decides to have a word with Egon.

Downstairs the noise is even louder, intolerable, as if it had been designed to test the limits of human endurance. She rounds the corner into the den, furious, and is surprised to see Ed Bartro, from the McCracken Board of Supervisors, perched on the edge of the armchair. "Hello, Mai," he shouts over the clamor, "I'm just telling your husband here we got to do something about these birds."

Egon sits across from him, looking hunted. He's got two cigarettes going at once, and he's balancing a double gimlet on his knee. Mai can tell from the blunted look of his eyes that it isn't his first.

"It worked in Paducah," Ed is saying, "and over at Fort Campbell too. Tergitol. It's a detergent, like what you use on your dishes, Mai," he says, turning to

Then you get them wet—if it rains, so much the better; if not, we'll have the fire department come out and soak down the grove—and they freeze to death in the night. It's not cheap, not by a long shot," he says, "but the country's just going to have to foot the bill."

"You sure it'll work?" Egon shouts, rattling the ice in his glass for emphasis.

"Nothing's for certain, Egon," Ed says, "but I'm ninety-nine and nine-tenths sure of it."

The following night, about seven o'clock, a pair of helicopters clatter over the house and begin circling the grove. Mai is hand-mashing potatoes and frying pork chops. The noise startles her, and she turns down the flame, wipes her hands on her apron, and steps out onto the porch to have a look. Angry suddenly, thinking, *Why must everything be so loud?,* she cups her hands over her ears and watches the searchlights gleam through the dark claws of the treetops. Gradually, she becomes aware of a new odor on the damp night air, a whiff of soap and alcohol undermining the sour ammoniac stench of the birds. It's like a dream, she thinks, like a war. The helicopters scream, the spray descends in a deadly fog, the pork chops burn.

An hour later the firemen arrive. Three companies. From Lone Oak, West Paducah and Woodlawn. The sequence is almost surreal: lights and shouts, black boots squashing the shoots in the garden, heavy-grid tires tearing up the lawn, the rattle of the pumps, coffee for thirty. By the time they leave, Mai is in bed, feeling as if she's been beaten with a shoe. She coughs up a ball of phlegm, spits it into a tissue and contemplates it, wondering if she should call the doctor in the morning.

When Egon comes in it is past midnight, and she's been dozing with the light on. "Mai," he says, "Mai, are you asleep?" Groggy, she props herself up on her elbows and squints at him. He is drunk, trundling heavily about the room as he strips off his clothes, "Well, I think this is going to do it, Mai," he says, the words thick on his tongue. "They knocked off six million in one shot with this stuff over at Russellville, so Ed tells me, and they only used half as much."

She can't make out the rest of what he says—he's muttering, slamming at a balky bureau drawer, running water in the bathroom. When she wakes again the house is dark, and she can feel him beside her, heavy and inert. Outside, in the trees, the doomed birds whisper among themselves, and the sound is like thunder in her ears.

In the morning, as the sun fires the naked fingers of the highest branches, the flock lifts up out of the trees with a crash of wings and a riot of shrieks and cackles. Mai feels too weak to get out of bed, feels as if her bones have gone soft on

later by the slam of the front door and the pounding of footsteps below. There is the sound of Egon's voice, cursing softly, and then the click-click-click of the telephone dial. "Hello, Ed?" The house is still, his voice as clear as if he were standing beside her. A cough catches in her throat and she reaches for the bottle of cough syrup she'd fished out of the medicine cabinet after the firemen had left.

". . . nothing at all," her husband says below. "I think I counted eighty-six or -seven birds . . . uh-huh, uh-huh . . . yeah, well, you going to try again?"

She doesn't have to listen to the rest—she already knows what the county supervisor is saying on the other end of the line, the smooth, reasonable politician's voice pouring honey into the receiver, talking of cost overruns, uncooperative weather, the little unpleasantries in life we just have to learn to live with. Egon will be discouraged, she knows that. Over the past few weeks he's become increasingly touchy, the presence of the birds an ongoing ache, an open wound, an obsession. "It's not bad enough that the drought withered the soybeans last summer or that the damned government is cutting out price supports for feed corn," he'd shouted one night after paying the Bird Man his daily fee. "Now I can't even enjoy the one stand of trees on my property. Christ," he roared, "I can't even sit down to dinner without the taste of bird piss in my mouth." Then he'd turned to her, his face flushed, hands shaking with rage, and she'd quietly reminded him what the doctor had said about his blood pressure. He poured himself a drink and looked at her with drooping eyes. "Have I done something to deserve this, Mai?" he said.

Poor Egon, she thinks. He lets things upset him so. Of course the birds are a nuisance, she'll admit that now, but what about the man with the distress calls and the helicopters and firemen and all the rest? She tilts back the bottle of cough syrup, thinking she ought to call him in and tell him to take it easy, forget about it. In a month or so, when the leaves start to come in, the flock will break up and head north: why kill yourself over nothing? That's what she wants to tell him, but when she calls his name her voice cracks and the cough comes up on her again, racking, relentless, worse than before. She lets the spasm pass, then calls his name again. There is no answer.

It is then that she hears the sputter of the chainsaw somewhere beyond the window. She listens to the keening whine of the blade as it engages wood—a sound curiously like the starling distress call—and then the dry heaving crash of the first tree.

1890

An utter stillness permeates the Tuxedo Club, a hush bred of money and privilege, a soothing patrician quiet insisted upon by the arrases and thick damask

Schiefflin, dilettante, portraitist, man of leisure, and amateur ornithologist, sits before the marble fireplace, leafing through the *Oologist Monthly* and sipping meditatively at a glass of sherry. *The red-eyed vireo,* he reads, *nests twice a year, both sexes participating in the incubation of the eggs. The eggs, two to four in number, are white with brown maculations at the larger extremity, and measure 5/16 by 2/3 of an inch. . . .* When his glass is empty, he raises a single languid finger and the waiter appears with a replacement, removes the superfluous glass, and vanishes, the whole operation as instantaneous and effortless as an act of the will.

Despite appearances to the contrary—the casually crossed legs, the proprietary air, the look of dignity and composure stamped into the seams of his face—Eugene is agitated. His eyes give him away. They leap from the page at the slightest movement in the doorway, and then surreptitiously drop to his waistcoat pocket to examine the face of the gold watch he produces each minute or so. He is impatient, concerned. His brother Maunsell is half an hour late already—has he forgotten their appointment? That would be just like him, damn it. Irritated, Eugene lights a cigar and begins drumming his fingertips on the arm of the chair while the windows go gray with dusk.

At sixty-three, with his great drooping mustache and sharp, accipiter's nose, Eugene Schiefflin is a salient and highly regarded figure in New York society. Always correct, a master of manners and a promoter of culture and refinement, a fixture of both the Society List and the Club Register, he is in great demand as commencement speaker and dinner guest. His grandfather, a cagey, backbiting immigrant, had made a fortune in the wholesale drug business, and his father, a lawyer, had encouraged that fortune to burgeon and flower like some clinging vine, the scent of money as sweet as jasmine. Eugene himself went into business when he was just out of college, but he soon lost interest. A few years later he married an heiress from Brooklyn and retired to hold forth at the Corinthian Yacht Club, listen to string quartets, and devote himself to his consuming passions—painting, Shakespeare, and the study of birds.

It wasn't until he was nearly fifty, however, that he had his awakening, his epiphany, the moment that brought the disparate threads of his life together and infused them with import and purpose. He and Maunsell were sitting before the fire one evening in his apartment at Madison and Sixty-fifth, reading aloud from *Romeo and Juliet*. Maunsell, because his voice was pitched higher, was reading Juliet, and Eugene, Romeo. "Wilt thou be gone?" Maunsell read, "it is not yet near day: / It was the nightingale, and not the lark, / That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear." The iambs tripped in his head, and suddenly Eugene felt as if he'd been suffused with light, electrocuted, felt as if Shakespeare's muse had touched him with lambent inspiration. He jumped up, kicking over his brandy and spilling the book to the floor. "Maunsell," he shouted, "Maunsell, that's it!"

tory noise.

"The nightingale," Eugene said, "and, and . . . woodlarks, siskins, linnets, chaffinches—and whatever else he mentions!"

"What? Who?"

"Shakespeare, of course. The greatest poet—the greatest man—of all time. Don't you see? This will be our enduring contribution to culture; this is how we'll do our little bit to enrich the lives of all the generations of Americans to come—"

Maunsell's mouth had dropped open. He looked like a classics scholar who's just been asked to identify the members of the Chicago White Stockings. "What in Christ's name are you talking about?"

"We're going to form the American Acclimatization Society, Maunsell, here and now—and we're going to import and release every species of bird—every last one—mentioned in the works of the Bard of Avon.

That was thirteen years ago.

Now, sitting in the main room of the Tuxedo Club and waiting for his brother, Eugene has begun to show his impatience. He jerks round in his seat, pats at his hair, fiddles with his spats. He is imbibing his fourth sherry and examining a table enumerating the stomach contents of three hundred and fifty-nine bay-breasted warblers when he looks up to see Maunsell in the vestibule, shrugging out of his overcoat and handing his hat and cane over to the limp little fellow in the cloakroom.

"Well?" Eugene says, rising to greet him. "Any news?"

Maunsell's face is flushed with the sting of the March wind. "Yes," he says, "yes," the timbre of his voice instantly soaked up in the drapes and rugs and converted to a whisper. "She's on schedule as far as they know, and all incoming ships have reported clear weather and moderate seas."

Any irritation Eugene may have shown earlier has vanished from his face. He is grinning broadly, the dead white corners of his mustache lifted in exultation, gold teeth glittering. "That's the best news I've heard all week," he says. "Tomorrow morning, then?"

Maunsell nods. "Tomorrow morning."

At eight the following morning, the two brothers, in top hats and fur-lined overcoats, are perched anxiously on the edge of the broad leather seat of Maunsell's carriage, peering out at the tapering length of the Fourteenth Street pier and the Cunard steamer edging into the slips. Half an hour later they are on deck, talking animatedly with a man so short, pale, and whiskerless he could be mistaken for a schoolboy. It is overcast, windy, raw, the temperature lurking just below the freezing mark. "They seem to have held up pretty well, sir," the little fellow is the hold."

"What? In the hold?" Both brothers look as if they've been slapped, indignation and disbelief bugging their eyes, mad wisps of silver hair foaming over their ears, hands clutching savagely at the brims of their hats.

" 'Loive cargo goes in the 'old,' " the little fellow says, his voice pinched in mockery, " 'and Oy'm vewy sowwy, Oy am, but them's the regelations.' " He breaks into a grin. "Oh, it was awful down there—cold, and with all those horses stamping and whinnying and the dogs barking it's a wonder any of the birds made it at all."

"It's a damned outrage," Eugene sputters, and Maunsell clucks his tongue. "How many did you say made it, Doodson?"

"Well, as you'll see for yourself in a minute, sir, the news is both good and bad. Most of the thrushes and skylarks came through all right, but there was a heavy mortality among the nightingales—and I've got just three pairs still alive. But the starlings, I'll tell you, they're a hardy bird. Didn't lose a one, not a single one."

Eugene looks relieved. In what has become a reflex gesture over the past few days, he consults his pocket watch and then looks up at Doodson. "Yes, they're a glorious creature, aren't they?"

Maunsell directs the driver to Central Park East—Fifth and Sixty-fifth—and then settles back in the seat beside his brother. Two cabs fall in behind them, the first containing Doodson and a portion of the transatlantic aviary, the second packed to the roof with bird cages. There is the steady adhesive clap of hoofs, the rattling of the springs. Eugene glances over his shoulder to reassure himself that the cabs—and birds—are still there, and then turns to his brother, beaming, his fingers tapping at the stiff crown of the hat in his lap, an aureole of hair radiating from his head. "When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding; / Sweet lovers love the spring," he recites with a laugh, unscrewing the cap of his flask and nudging Maunsell. "I think we've really got it this time," he says, laughing again, the sound of his voice softening the cold clatter of the coach. "I can feel it in my bones."

Outwardly, his mood is confident—celebratory, even—but in fact his high hopes are tempered by the Acclimatization Society's history of failure over the course of the thirteen years since its inception. Eugene has released thrushes, skylarks, and nightingales time and again. He has released siskins, woodlarks, and common cuckoos. All have failed. Inexplicably, the seed populations disappeared without a trace, as if they'd been sucked up in a vacuum or blown back to Europe. But Eugene Schiefflin is not a man to give up easily—oh no. This time he's got a new ace in the hole, *Sturnus vulgaris,* the starling. Certainly not the

dies, and tragedies it is mentioned only once—but legitimate to the enterprise nonetheless. And hardy. Doodson's report has got to be looked upon as auspicious: *not a single bird lost in the crossing.* It's almost too good to be true.

He is musing with some satisfaction on the unexpected beauty of the bird—the stunning metallic sheen of the plumage and the pale butter pat of the beak revealed to him through the mesh of the cage—when the carriage pulls up along the curb opposite the park. Before the percussive echo of the horses' hoofs has faded, Eugene is out of the carriage and shouting directions to Doodson, the two cabbies, and Maunsell's driver. In one hand he clutches a pry bar; in the other, a bottle of Moët et Chandon. "All right," he calls, rigorous as a field marshal. "I want the cages laid side by side underneath those elms over there." And then he strikes out across the grass, Maunsell bringing up the rear with three long-stemmed glasses.

It is still cold, a crust of ice stretched over the puddles in the street, the cabbies' breath clouding their faces as they bend to negotiate the wooden cages. "Here," Eugene barks, striding across the field and waving his arm impatiently, "hurry it along, will you?" Well-tipped, but muttering nonetheless, the cabbies struggle with one cage while Doodson—his nose red with cold and excitement—helps Maunsell's chauffeur with another. Within minutes all eight cages are arranged in parallel rows beneath the elms, laid out like coffins, and Eugene has begun his customary rambling speech outlining his and the society's purposes, eulogizing Shakespeare and reciting quotations relevant to the caged species. As he stoops to pry the lid from the first cage of thrushes, he shouts out an injunction from *Hamlet*: "Unpeg the baskets on the house's top," he calls, liberating the birds with a magisterial sweep of his arm, "Let the birds fly."

The cabbies, paid and dismissed, linger at a respectful distance to watch the mad ceremony. Deliberate, methodical, the old fellow in the top hat and silk muffler leans down to remove the tops of the cages and release the birds. There is a rustle of wings, a cry or two, and then the appearance of the first few birds, emerging at random and flapping aimlessly into the branches of the nearest tree. The pattern is repeated with each box in succession, until the old man draws up to the single remaining cage, the cage of starlings. The other old fellow, the rickety one with the drawn face and staring eyes, steps forward with the glasses, and then there's the sound of a cork popping. "A toast," the first one shouts, and they're raising their glasses, all three of them, the two old duffers and the young cub with the red nose. "May these humble creatures, brought here with goodwill and high expectation, breed and prosper and grace the land with beauty and song."

"Hear, hear!" call the others, and the chauffeur as well, though he hasn't been offered any wine.

Behind the mesh of their cage, the big dull birds crouch in anticipation, stuffed like blackbirds in a pie, their voices wheezing with a sound of metal on of the trees. Then the old gentleman bends to the cage at his feet, his hair shining in the pale sunlight, and there is a sudden startling explosion as the birds stream from the opening as if propelled, feathers rasping, wings tearing at the air, a single many-voiced shriek of triumph issuing from their throats. En masse, almost in precision formation, they wheel past the spectators like a flock of pigeons, and then, banking against the sun, they wing off over the trees, looking for a place to roost.

(1981)