

My Bird Problem

By Jonathan Franzen

"My Bird Problem" began as an essay for the August 8, 2005, issue of The New Yorker and became Jonathan Franzen's autobiographical exploration into the origins of his love affair with bird-watching, the environment, political climates and, not least of all, the nature of relationships.

FEBRUARY 2005, South Texas: I'd checked into a roadside motel in Brownsville and was getting up in the dark every morning, making coffee for my old friend Manley, who wouldn't talk to me or leave his bed until he'd had some, and then bolting the motel's free breakfast and running to our rental car and birding nonstop for twelve hours. I waited until nightfall to buy lunch food and fill the car with gas, to avoid wasting even a minute of birdable daylight. The only way not to question what I was doing, and why I was doing it, was to do absolutely nothing else.

At the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, on a hot weekday afternoon, Manley and I hiked several miles down dusty trails to an artificial water feature on the far margin of which I saw three pale-brown ducks. Two of them were paddling with all deliberate speed into the cover of dense reeds, affording me a view mainly of their butts, but the third bird loitered long enough for me to train my binoculars on its head, which looked as if a person had dipped two fingers in black ink and drawn horizontal lines across its face.

"A masked duck!" I said. "You see it?"

"I see the duck," Manley said.

"A masked duck!"

The bird quickly disappeared into the reeds and gave no sign of reemerging. I showed Manley its picture in my *Sibley*.

"I'm not familiar with this duck," he said. "But the bird in this picture is the one I just saw."

"The stripes on its face. The sort of cinnamony brown."

"Yes."

"It was a masked duck!"

We were within a few hundred yards of the Rio Grande. On the other side of the river, if you traveled south—say, to Brazil—you could see masked ducks by the dozens. They were a rarity north of the border, though. The pleasure of the sighting sweetened our long tramp back to the parking lot.

While Manley lay down in the car to take a nap, I poked around in a nearby marsh. Three middle-aged white guys with good equipment asked me if I'd seen anything interesting.

"Not much," I said, "except a masked duck."

All three began to talk at once.

"A masked duck!"

"Masked duck?"

"Where exactly? Show us on the map."

"Are you sure it was a masked duck?"

"You're familiar with the ruddy duck. You do know what a female ruddy looks like."

"Masked duck!"

I said that, yes, I'd seen female ruddies, we had them in Central Park, and this wasn't a ruddy duck. I said it was as if somebody had dipped two fingers in black ink and—

"Was it alone?"

"Were there others?"

"A masked duck!"

One of the men took out a pen, wrote down my name, and had me pinpoint the location on a map. The other two were already moving down the trail I'd come up.

"And you're sure it was a masked duck," the third man said.

"It wasn't a ruddy," I said.

A fourth man stepped out of some bushes right behind us.

"I've got a nighthawk sleeping in a tree."

"This guy saw a masked duck," the third man said.

"A masked duck! Are you sure? Are you familiar with the female ruddy?"

The other two men came hurrying back up the trail. "Did someone say nighthawk?"

"Yeah, I've got a scope on it."

The five of us went into the bushes. The nighthawk, asleep on a tree branch, looked like a partly balled gray hiking sock. The scope's owner said that the friend of his who'd first spotted the bird had called it a lesser nighthawk, not a common. The well-equipped trio begged to differ.

"He said lesser? Did he hear its call?"

"No," the man said. "But the range—"

"Range doesn't help you."

"Range argues for common, if anything, at this time of year."

"Look where the wing bar is."

"Common."

"Definitely calling it a common."

The four men set off at a forced-march pace to look for the masked duck, and I began to worry. My identification of the duck, which had felt ironclad in the moment, seemed dangerously hasty in the context of four serious birders marching several miles in the afternoon heat. I went and woke up Manley.

"The only thing that matters," he said, "is that we saw it."

"But the guy took my name down. Now, if they don't see it, I'm going to get a bad rep."

"If they don't see it, they'll think it's in the reeds."

"But what if they see ruddies instead? There could be ruddies and masked ducks, and the ruddies aren't as shy."

"It's something to be anxious about," Manley said, "if you want to be anxious about something."

I went to the refuge visitor center and wrote in the logbook: *One certain and two partially glimpsed MASKED DUCKS, north end of Cattail #2*. I asked a volunteer if anyone else had reported a masked duck.

"No, that would be our first this winter," she said.

The next afternoon, on South Padre Island, in the wetland behind the Convention Center, where about twenty upper-Midwestern retirees and scraggly-bearded white guys were pacing the boardwalks with cameras and binoculars, I saw a pretty, dark-haired young woman taking telephoto pictures of a pair of ducks. "Green-winged teals," I mentioned to Manley.

The girl looked up sharply. "Green-winged teals? Where?"

I nodded at her birds.

"Those are wigeons," she said.

"Right."

I'd made this mistake before. I knew perfectly well what a wigeon looked like, but sometimes, in the giddiness of spotting something, my brain got confused. As Manley and I retreated down the boardwalk, I showed him pictures.

"See," I said, "the wigeon and the green-winged teal have more or less the same palette, just completely rearranged. I should have said wigeon. Now she thinks I can't tell a wigeon from a teal."

"Why didn't you just tell her that?" Manley said. "Just say that the wrong word came out of your mouth."

"That would only have compounded it. It would have been protesting too much."

"But at least she'd know you know the difference."

"She doesn't know my name. I'll never see her again. That is my only conceivable consolation."

There is no better American place for birds in February than South Texas. Although Manley had been down here thirty years earlier, as a teenage birder, it was a wholly new world to me. In three days, I'd seen fetchingly disheveled anis flopping around on top of shrubs, Jurassic-looking anhingas sun-drying their wings, squadrons of white pelicans gliding downriver on nine-foot wingspans, a couple of caracaras eating a road-killed king snake, an elegant trogon and a crimson-collared grosbeak and two exotic robins all lurking on a postage-stamp Audubon Society tract in Weslaco. The only frustration was my No. 1 trip target bird, the black-bellied whistling-duck. A tree nester, strangely long-legged, with a candy-pink bill and a bold white eye ring, the whistling-duck was one of those birds in the field guide which I couldn't quite believe existed—something out of Marco Polo. It was supposed to winter in good numbers on Brownsville's urban oxbow lakes (called *resacas*), and with each shoreline that I scanned in vain, the bird became that much more mythical to me.

Out on South Padre, as fog rolled in off the Gulf of Mexico, I remembered to look up at the city water tower, where, according to my guidebook, a peregrine falcon often perched. Sure enough, very vaguely, I saw the peregrine up there. I set up my spotting scope, and an older couple, two seasoned-looking birders, asked me what I had.

"Peregrine falcon," I said proudly.

"You know, Jon," Manley said, his eye to the scope, "the head looks more like an osprey."

"That is an osprey," the woman quietly affirmed.

"*God*," I said, looking again, "it is *so hard* to tell in the fog, and to get a sense of scale, you know, way up there, but you're right, yes, I see it. Osprey, osprey, osprey. Yes."

"That's the great thing about fog," the woman remarked. "You can see whatever you want."

Just then the dark-haired young woman came by with her tripod and big camera.

"Osprey," I told her confidently. "By the way, you know, I'm still totally writhing about saying 'teal' when I meant 'gadwall.'"

She stared at me. "*Gadwall*?"

Back in the car, using Manley's phone to avoid betraying my own name via caller ID, I called the visitor center at Santa Ana and asked if "people" had been reporting any masked ducks on the refuge. "Yes, somebody did report one yesterday. Down at Cattails."

"Just one person?" I asked.

"Yes. I wasn't here. But somebody did report a masked duck."

"Fantastic!" I said— as if, by sounding excited, I could lend after-the-fact credibility to my own report. "I'll come look for it!"

Halfway back to Brownsville, on one of the narrow dirt roads that Manley liked to direct me down, we stopped to admire a lushly green-girdled blue *resaca* with the setting sun behind us. The delta in winter was too beautiful to stay embarrassed in for long. I got out of the car, and there, silent, on the shadowed side of the water, floating nonchalantly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world— which is, after all, the way of magical creatures in enchanted places— was my black-bellied whistling-duck.

It felt weird to return to New York. After the excitements of South Texas, I was hollow and restless, like an addict in withdrawal.

It was a chore to make myself comprehensible to friends; I couldn't keep my mind on my work. Every night, I lay down with bird books and read about other trips I could take, studied the field markings of species I hadn't seen, and then dreamed vividly of birds. When two kestrels, a male and a female, possibly driven out of Central Park by the artist Christo and his wife, Jeanne-Claude, began showing up on a chimney outside my kitchen window and bloodying their beaks on fresh-killed mice, their dislocation seemed to mirror my own.

One night in early March, I went to the Society for Ethical Culture to hear Al Gore speak on the subject of global warming. I was expecting to be amused by the speech's rhetorical badness—to roll my eyes at Gore's intoning of "fate" and "mankind," his flaunting of his wonk credentials, his scolding of American consumers. But Gore seemed to have rediscovered a sense of humor. His speech was fun to listen to, if unbelievably depressing. For more than an hour, with heavy graphical support, he presented compelling evidence of impending climate-driven cataclysms that will result in unimaginable amounts of upheaval and suffering around the globe, possibly within my own lifetime. I left the auditorium under a cloud of grief and worry of the sort I'd felt as a teenager reading about nuclear war.

Ordinarily, in New York, I keep a tight rein on my environmental consciousness, confining it, ideally, to the ten minutes per year when I write my guilt-assuaging checks to groups like the Sierra Club. But Gore's message was so disturbing that I was nearly back to my apartment before I could think of some reasons to discount it. Like: wasn't I already doing more than most Americans to combat global warming? I didn't own a car, I lived in an energy-efficient Manhattan apartment, I was good about recycling. Also: wasn't the weather that night *unusually cold* for early March? And hadn't Gore's maps of Manhattan in the future, the island half-submerged by rising sea levels, all shown that the corner of Lexington and Eighty-first Street, where I live, would stay high and dry in even the worst-case scenario? The Upper East Side has a definite topography. It seemed unlikely that seawater from Greenland's melting ice cap would advance any farther than the Citarella market on Third Avenue, six blocks to the south and east. Plus, my apartment was way up on the tenth floor.

When I went inside, no kids came running to meet me, and this absence of kids seemed to clinch it: I was better off spending my anxiety budget on viral pandemics and dirty bombs than on global warming. Even if I had had kids, it would have been hard work for me to care about the climatic well-being of their children's children. Not having kids freed me altogether. Not having kids was my last, best line of defense against the likes of Al Gore.

There was only one problem. Trying to fall asleep that night, mentally replaying Gore's computer images of a desertified North America, I couldn't find a way not to care about the billions of birds and thousands of avian species that were liable to be wiped out worldwide. Many of the Texan places that I'd visited in February had elevations of less than twenty feet, and the climate down there was already almost lethally extreme. Human beings could probably adapt to future changes, we were famously creative at averting disasters and at making up great stories when we couldn't, but birds didn't have our variety of options. Birds needed help. And this, I realized, was the true disaster for a comfortable modern American. This was the scenario I'd been at pains to avert for many years: not the world's falling apart in the future, but my feeling inconveniently obliged to care about it in the present. This was my bird problem.

For a long time, back in the eighties, my wife and I lived on our own little planet. We spent thrilling, superhuman amounts of time by ourselves.

In our first two apartments, in Boston, we were so absorbed in each other that we got along with exactly one good friend, our college classmate Ekström, and when we finally moved to Queens, Ekström moved to Manhattan, thereby sparing us the need to find a different friend.

Early in our marriage, when my old German instructor Weber asked me what the two of us were doing for a social life, I said we didn't have one. "That's sweet for a year," Weber said. "Two years at the most." His certainty offended me. It struck me as extremely condescending, and I never spoke to him again.

None of the doom criers among our relatives and former friends, none of these brow-furrowing emotional climatologists, seemed to recognize the special resourcefulness of our union. To prove them wrong, we made our aloneness work for four years, for five years, for six years; and then, when the domestic atmosphere really did begin to overheat, we fled from New York to a Spanish village where we didn't know anybody and the villagers hardly even spoke Spanish. We were like those habit-bound peoples in Jared Diamond's *Collapse* who respond to an ecosystem's degradation by redoubling their demands on it—medieval Greenlanders, prehistoric Easter Islanders, contemporary SUV buyers. Whatever reserves the two of us still had when we arrived in Spain were burned up in seven months of isolation.

Returning to Queens, we could no longer stand to be together for more than a few weeks, couldn't stand to see each other so unhappy, without running somewhere else. We reacted to minor fights at breakfast by lying face down on the floor of our respective rooms for hours at a time, waiting for acknowledgment of our pain. I wrote poisonous jeremiads to family members who I felt had slighted my wife; she presented me with handwritten fifteen-and twenty-page analyses of our condition; I was putting away a bottle of Maalox every week. It was clear to me that something was terribly wrong. And what was wrong, I decided, was modern industrialized society's assault on the environment.

In the early years, I'd been too poor to care about the environment. My first car in Massachusetts was a vinyl-top '72 Nova that needed a tailwind to achieve ten miles a gallon and whose exhaust was boeuf bourguignon—like in its richness and complexity. After the Nova died, we got a Malibu wagon whose ridiculous four-barrel carburetor (\$800) needed replacing and whose catalytic converter (\$350) had had its guts scraped out to ease the flow of gases. Polluting the air a little less would have cost us two or three months' living expenses. The Malibu practically knew its own way to the crooked garage where we bought our annual smog-inspection sticker.

The summer of 1988, however, had been one of the hottest on record in North America, and rural Spain had been a spectacle of unchecked development and garbage-strewn hillsides and diesel exhaust, and after the dismantlement of the Berlin Wall the prospect of nuclear annihilation (my longtime pet apocalypse) was receding somewhat, and the great thing about the rape of nature, as an alternative apocalypse, was the opportunity it gave me to blame myself. I had grown up listening to daily lectures on personal responsibility. My father was a saver of string and pencil stubs and a bequeather of fantastic Swedish Protestant prejudices. (He considered it unfair to drink a cocktail at home before going to a restaurant, because restaurants depended on liquor sales for profits.) To worry about the Kleenexes and paper towels I was wasting and the water I was letting run while I shaved and the sections of the Sunday Times I was throwing away unread and the pollutants I was helping to fill the sky with every time I took an airplane came naturally to me.

I argued passionately with a friend who believed that fewer BTUs were lost in keeping a house at 68 degrees overnight than in raising the temperature to 68 in the morning. Every time I washed out a peanut-butter jar, I tried to calculate whether less petroleum might be used in manufacturing a new jar than in heating the dishwasher and transporting the old jar to a recycling center.

My wife moved out in December 1990. A friend had invited her to come and live in Colorado Springs, and she was ready to escape the pollution of her living space by me. Like modern industrialized society, I continued to bring certain crucial material benefits to our household, but these benefits came at an ever greater psychic cost. By fleeing to the land of open skies, my wife hoped to restore her independent nature, which years of too-married life had compromised almost beyond recognition.

She rented a pretty apartment on North Cascade Avenue and sent me excited letters about the mountain weather. She became fascinated with narratives of pioneer women—tough, oppressed, resourceful wives who buried dead infants, watched freak June blizzards kill their crops and livestock, and survived to write about it. She talked about lowering her resting pulse rate below thirty.

Back in New York, I didn't believe we'd really separated. It may have become impossible for us to live together, but my wife's sort of intelligence still seemed to me the best sort, her moral and aesthetic judgments still seemed to me the only ones that counted. The smell of her skin and the smell of her hair were restorative, irreplaceable, the best. Deploring other people—their lack of perfection—had always been our sport. I couldn't imagine never smelling her again.

The next summer, we went car-camping in the West. I was frankly envious of my wife's new Western life, and I also wanted to immerse myself in nature, now that I'd become environmentally conscious. For a month, the two of us followed the retreating snow up through the Rockies and Cascades, and made our way back south through the emptiest country we could find. Considering that we were back together 24/7, sharing a small tent, and isolated from all social contacts, we got along remarkably well.

What sickened and enraged me were all the other human beings on the planet. The fresh air, the smell of firs, the torrents of snowmelt, the columbines and lupine, the glimpses of slender-ankled moose were nice sensations, but not intrinsically any nicer than a gin martini or a well-aged steak. To really deliver the goods, the West also had to conform to my wish that it be unpopulated and pristine. Driving down an empty road through empty hills was a way of reconnecting with childhood fantasies of being a Special Adventurer—of feeling again like the children in Narnia, like the heroes of Middle-earth. But house-sized tree pullers weren't clear-cutting Narnia behind a scrim of beauty strips. Frodo Baggins and his compatriots never had to share campgrounds with forty-five identical Fellowships of the Ring wearing Gore-Tex parkas from REI. Every crest in the open road opened up new vistas of irrigation-

intensive monoculture, mining-scarred hillsides, and parking lots full of nature lovers' cars. To escape the crowds, my wife and I took longer hikes in deeper backcountry, toiling through switchbacks, only to find ourselves on dusty logging roads littered with horse manure. And here—look out!—came some gonzo clown on his mountain bike. And there, overhead, went Delta Flight 922 to Cincinnati. And here came a dozen Boy Scouts with jangling water cups and refrigerator-sized backpacks. My wife had her cardiovascular ambitions to occupy her, but I was free to stew all day long: Were those human voices up ahead? Was that a speck of aluminum foil in the tree litter? Or, oh no, were those human voices coming up *behind us*?

I stayed in Colorado for a few more months, but being in the mountains had become unbearable to me. Why stick around to see the last beautiful wild places getting ruined, and to hate my own species, and to feel that I, too, in my small way, was one of the guilty ruiners? In the fall I moved back East. Eastern ecologies, specifically Philadelphia's, had the virtue of already being ruined. It eased my polluter's conscience to lie, so to speak, in a bed I'd helped to make. And this bed wasn't even so bad. For all the insults it had absorbed, the land in Pennsylvania was still riotously green.

The same could not be said of our marital planet. There, the time had come for me to take decisive action; the longer I delayed, the more damage I would do. Our once limitless-seeming supply of years for having kids, for example, had suddenly and alarmingly dwindled, and to dither for even just a few more years would be permanently ruinous. And yet: what decisive action to take? At this late date, I seemed to have only two choices. Either I should try to change myself radically—devote myself to making my wife happy, try to occupy less space, and be, if necessary, a full-time dad—or else I should divorce her.

Radically changing myself, however, was about as appetizing (and likely to happen) as volunteering for the drab, homespun, post-consumerist society that the "deep ecologists" tell us is the only long-term hope for humans on the planet. Although I talked the talk of fixing and healing, and sometimes I believed it, a self-interested part of me had long been rooting for trouble and waiting, with calm assurance, for the final calamity to engulf us. I had old journals containing transcripts of early fights which read word-for-word like the fights we were having ten years later. I had a carbon copy of a letter I'd written to my brother Tom in 1982, after I'd announced our engagement to my family and Tom had asked me why the two of us didn't just live together and see how things went; I'd replied that, in the Hegelian system, a subjective phenomenon (e.g., romantic love) did not become, properly speaking, "real" until it took its place in an objective structure, and that it was therefore important that the individual and the civic be synthesized in a ceremony of commitment. I had wedding pictures in which, before the ceremony of commitment, my wife looked beatific and I could be seen frowning and biting my lip and hugging myself tightly.

But giving up on the marriage was no less unthinkable. It was possible that we were unhappy because we were trapped in a bad relationship, but it was also possible that we were unhappy for other reasons, and that we should be patient and try to help each other. For every doubt documented in the fossil record, I could find an old letter or journal entry in which I talked about our marriage with happy certainty, as if we'd been together since the formation of the solar system, as if there had always been the two of us and always would be. The skinny, tuxedoed kid in our wedding pictures, once the ceremony was over, looked unmistakably smitten with his bride.

So more study was needed. The fossil record was ambiguous. The liberal scientific consensus was self-serving. Maybe, if we tried a new city, we could be happy? We traveled to check out San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, Santa Fe, Seattle, Boulder, Chicago, Utica, Albany, Syracuse, and Kingston, New

York, finding things to fault in each of them. My wife came back and joined me in Philadelphia, and I borrowed money at interest from my mother and rented a three-story, five-bedroom house that neither of us could stand to live in by the middle of 1993. I sublet a place for myself in Manhattan which I then, out of guilt, handed over to my wife. I returned to Philadelphia and rented yet a third space, this one suitable for both working and sleeping, so that my wife would have all five of the house's bedrooms at her disposal, should she need them, on her return to Philly. Our financial hemorrhaging in late 1993 looked a lot like the country's energy policy in 2005. Our determination to cling to unsustainable dreams was congruent with—maybe even identical to—our drive to bankrupt ourselves as rapidly as possible.

Around Christmastime, the money ran out altogether. We broke our leases and sold the furniture. I took the old car, she took the new laptop, I slept with other people. Unthinkable and horrible and ardently wished-for: our little planet was ruined.

A staple of my family's dinner-table conversation in the mid-seventies was the divorce and remarriage of my father's boss at the railroad, Mr. German. Nobody of my parents' generation in either of their extended families had ever been divorced, nor had any of their friends, and so the two of them steeled each other in their resolve not to know Mr. German's young second wife. They exhaustively pitied the first wife, "poor Glorianna," who had been so dependent on her husband that she'd never even learned to drive. They expressed relief and worry at the Germans' departure from their Saturday-night bridge club, since Mr. German was bad at bridge but Glorianna was now left without a social life. One night my father came home and said he'd almost lost his job that day at lunch. In the executive dining room, while Mr. German and his subordinates were discussing how to assess a person's character, my father had found himself remarking that he judged a man by how he played a bridge hand. I wasn't old enough to understand that he hadn't really almost lost his job for this, or that condemning Mr. German and pitying Glorianna were ways for my parents to talk about their own marriage, but I did understand that dumping your wife for a younger woman was the sort of despicable selfish thing that a chronic overbidder might do.

A related talk staple in those years was my father's hatred of the Environmental Protection Agency. The young agency had issued complicated rules about soil pollution and toxic runoff and riverbank erosion, and some of the rules seemed unreasonable to my father. What really enraged him, though, were the enforcers. Night after night he came home fuming about these "bureaucrats" and "academics," these high-handed "so-and-sos" who didn't bother to hide how morally and intellectually superior they felt to the corporations they were monitoring, and who didn't think they owed explanations, or even basic courtesy, to people like my father.

The odd thing was how closely my father's values resembled those of his enemies. The breakthrough environmental legislation of that era, including the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts and the Endangered Species Act, had attracted the support of President Nixon and both parties in Congress precisely because it made sense to old-fashioned Protestants, like my parents, who abhorred waste and made sacrifices for their kids' future and respected God's works and believed in taking responsibility for their messes. But the social ferment that gave rise to the first Earth Day, in 1970, unleashed a host of other energies—the incivility of the so-and-sos, the pleasurable self-realizations of Mr. German, the cult of individuality—that were inimical to the old religion and ultimately won out.

Certainly I, as a self-realizing individual in the nineties, was having trouble with my parents' logic of unselfishness. Deprive myself of an available pleasure *why?* Take shorter and colder showers *why?* Keep having anguished phone conversations with my estranged wife on the subject of our failure to

have children *why*? Struggle to read Henry James's last three novels *why*? Stay mindful of the Amazon rain forest *why*? New York City, which I returned to for good in 1994, was becoming a very pleasant place to live again. The nearby Catskills and Adirondacks were better protected than the Rockies and Cascades. Central Park, under recultivation by deep-pocketed locals, was looking greener every spring, and the other people out walking in it didn't enrage me: this was a *city*; there were *supposed* to be other people. On a May night in 1996, I walked across the park's newly restored, deep-pile lawns to a party where I saw a beautiful and very young woman standing awkwardly in a corner, behind a floor lamp that she twice nearly knocked over, and I felt so liberated that I could no longer remember one single reason not to introduce myself to her and, in due course, start asking her out.

The old religion was finished. Without its cultural support, the environmental movement's own cult of wilderness was never going to galvanize mass audiences. John Muir, writing from San Francisco at a time when you could travel to Yosemite without hardship and still have the valley to yourself for spiritual refreshment, founded a religion that required a large parcel of empty backcountry for every worshipper. Even in 1880, there weren't enough parcels like this to go around. Indeed, for the next eighty years, until Rachel Carson and David Brower sounded their populist alarms, the preserving of wild nature was generally assumed to be the province of elites. The organization that Muir formed to defend his beloved Sierras was a Club, not an Alliance. Henry David Thoreau, whose feelings for pine trees were romantic, if not downright sexual, called the workers who felled them "vermin." For Edward Abbey, who was the rare green writer with the courage of his misanthropy, the appeal of southeastern Utah was, frankly, that its desert was inhospitable to the great herd of Americans who were incapable of understanding and respecting the natural world. Bill McKibben, Harvard graduate, followed up his apocalyptic *The End of Nature* (in which he contrasted his own deep reverence for nature with the shallow-minded "hobby" that nature is for most outdoorspeople) with a book about cable TV 's inferiority to the timeless pleasures of country living. To Verlyn Klinkenborg, the professional trivialist whose job is to remind *New York Times* readers that spring follows winter and summer follows spring, and who sincerely loves snowdrifts and baling twine, the rest of humanity is a distant blob notable for its "venality" and "ignorance."

And so, once the EPA had cleaned up the country's most glaring messes, once sea otters and peregrine falcons had rebounded from near extinction, once Americans had had a disagreeable taste of European-style regulation, the environmental movement began to look like just another special interest hiding in the skirts of the Democratic Party. It consisted of well-heeled nature enthusiasts, tree-spiking misanthropes, nerdy defenders of unfashionable values (thrift, foresight), invokers of politically unfungible abstractions (the welfare of our great-grandchildren), issuers of shrill warnings about invisible risks (global warming) and exaggerated hazards (asbestos in public buildings), tiresome scolds about consumerism, relies on facts and policies in an age of image, a constituency loudly proud of its refusal to compromise with others.

Bill Clinton, the first boomer President, knew a stinker when he saw one. Unlike Richard Nixon, who had created the EPA, and unlike Jimmy Carter, who had set aside twenty-five million acres of Alaska as permanent wilderness, Clinton needed the Sierra Club a lot less than it needed him. In the Pacific Northwest, on lands belonging to the American people, the U.S. Forest Service was spending millions of tax dollars to build roads for multinational timber companies that were clear-cutting gorgeous primeval forests and taking handsome profits for themselves, preserving a handful of jobs for loggers who would soon be out of work anyway, and shipping much of the timber to Asia for processing and sale. You wouldn't think this issue was an automatic public-relations loser, but groups like the Sierra Club decided to fight the battle out of public sight, in federal court, where their victories tended to be Pyrrhic; and the boomer President, whose need for love was nonsatiable by Douglas firs or spotted

owls but conceivably could be met by lumberjacks, soon added the decimation of the Northwest's old-growth forests to a long list of related setbacks—an environmentally toothless NAFTA, the metastasis of exurban sprawl, the lowering of average national vehicle fuel efficiency, the triumph of the SUV, the accelerating depletion of the world's fisheries, the Senate's demurral on the Kyoto Protocol, etc.—in the decade when I left my wife and took up with a twenty-seven-year-old and really started having fun.

Then my mother died, and I went out birdwatching for the first time in my life. This was in the summer of 1999. I was on Hat Island, a wooded loaf of gravel subdivided for small weekend homes, near the blue-collar town of Everett, Washington. There were eagles and kingfishers and Bonaparte's gulls and dozens of identical sparrows that persisted, no matter how many times I studied them, in resembling six different sparrow species in the field guide I was using. Flocks of goldfinches brilliantly exploded up over the island's sunlit bluffs like something ceremonial and Japanese. I saw my first northern flicker and enjoyed its apparent confusion about what kind of bird it was. Unwoodpeckerish in plumage, like a mourning dove in war paint, it flew dippingly, in typical woodpecker fashion, white rump flashing, from one ill-fitting identity to another. It had a way of landing with a little crash wherever. In its careening beauty it reminded me of my former girlfriend, the one I'd first glimpsed tangling with a floor lamp and was still very fond of, though from a safe remove now.

I had since met a vegetarian Californian writer, a self-described "fool for animals," slightly older than I, who had no discernible interest in getting pregnant or married or in moving to New York. As soon as I'd fallen for her, I'd set about trying to change her personality and make it more like mine; and although, a year later, I had nothing to show for this effort, I at least didn't have to worry about ruining somebody again. The Californian was a veteran of a ruinous marriage of her own. Her indifference to the idea of kids spared me from checking my watch every five minutes to see if it was time for my decision about her reproductive future. The person who wanted kids was me. And, being a man, I could afford to take my time.

The last day I ever spent with my mother, at my brother's house in Seattle, she asked me the same questions over and over: Was I pretty sure that the Californian was the woman I would end up with? Did I think we would probably get married? Was the Californian actually divorced yet? Was she interested in having a baby? Was I? My mother was hoping for a glimpse of how my life might proceed after she was gone. She'd met the Californian only once, at a noisy restaurant in Los Angeles, but she wanted to feel that our story would continue and that she'd participated in it in some small way, if only by expressing her opinion that the Californian really ought to be divorced by now. My mother loved to be a part of things, and having strong opinions was a way of not feeling left out. At any given moment in the last twenty years of her life, family members in three time zones could be found worrying about her strong opinions or loudly declaring that they didn't care about them or phoning each other for advice on how to cope with them.

Whoever imagined that LOVE YOUR MOTHER would make a good environmental bumper sticker obviously didn't have a mom like mine. Well into the nineties, tailing Subarus or Volvos outfitted with this admonition and its accompanying snapshot of Earth, I felt obscurely hectored by it, as if the message were "Nature Wonders Why She Hasn't Heard from You in Nearly a Month" or "Our Planet *Strongly* Disapproves of Your Lifestyle" or "The Earth Hates to Nag, But ...". Like the natural world, my mother had not been in the best of health by the time I was born. She was thirty-eight, she'd had three successive miscarriages, and she'd been suffering from ulcerative colitis for a decade. She kept me out of nursery school because she didn't want to let go of me for even a few hours a week. She sobbed frighteningly when my brothers went off to college. Once they were gone, I faced nine years of

being the last handy object of her maternal longings and frustrations and criticisms, and so I allied myself with my father, who was embarrassed by her emotion. I began by rolling my eyes at everything she said. Over the next twenty-five years, as she went on to have acute phlebitis, a pulmonary embolism, two knee replacements, a broken femur, three miscellaneous orthopedic surgeries, Raynaud's disease, arthritis, biannual colonoscopies, monthly blood-clot tests, extreme steroidal facial swelling, congestive heart failure, and glaucoma, I often felt terribly sorry for her, and I tried to say the right things and be a dutiful son, but it wasn't until she got a bad cancer diagnosis, in 1996, that I began to do what those bumper stickers admonished me to do.

She died in Seattle on a Friday morning. The Californian, who had been due to arrive that evening and spend some days getting acquainted with her, ended up alone with me for a week at my brother's vacation house on Hat Island. I broke down in tears every few hours, which I took as a sign that I was working through my grief and would soon be over it. I sat on the lawn with binoculars and watched a spotted towhee scratch vigorously in the underbrush, like somebody who really enjoyed yard work. I was pleased to see chestnut-backed chickadees hopping around in conifers, since, according to the guidebook, conifers were their favored habitat. I kept a list of the species I'd seen.

By midweek, though, I'd found a more compelling pastime: I began to badger the Californian about having children and the fact that she wasn't actually divorced yet. In the style of my mother, who had been a gifted abrader of the sensitivities of people she was unhappy with, I gathered and collated all the faults and weaknesses that the Californian had ever privately confessed to me, and I showed her how these interrelated faults and weaknesses were preventing her from deciding, right now, whether we would probably get married and whether she wanted to have children. By the end of the week, fully seven days after my mother's death, I was sure I was over the worst of my grief, and so I was mystified and angered by the Californian's unwillingness to move to New York and immediately try to get pregnant. Even more mystified and angered a month later, when she took wing to Santa Cruz and refused to fly back.

On my first visit to the cabin where she lived, in the Santa Cruz Mountains, I'd stood and watched mallards swimming in the San Lorenzo River. I was struck by how frequently a male and a female paired up, one waiting on the other while it nosed in the weeds. I had no intention of living without steak or bacon, but after that trip, as a token of vegetarianism, I decided to stop eating duck. I asked my friends what they knew about ducks. All agreed that they were beautiful animals; several also commented that they did not make good pets.

In New York, while the Californian took refuge from me in her cabin, I seethed with strong opinions. *The only thing I wanted* was for her and me to be in the same place, and I would gladly have gone out to California *if only she'd told me up front* that she wasn't coming back to New York. The more months that went by without our getting closer to a pregnancy, the more aggressively I argued for living together, and the more aggressively I argued, the flightier the Californian became, until I felt I had no choice but to issue an ultimatum, which resulted in a breakup, and then a more final ultimatum, which resulted in a more final breakup, and then a final final ultimatum, which resulted in a final final breakup, shortly after which I went out walking along the lake in lower Central Park and saw a male and a female mallard swimming side by side, nosing in the weeds together, and burst into tears.

It wasn't until a year or more later, after the Californian had changed her mind and come to New York, that I faced medical facts and admitted to myself that we weren't just going to up and have a baby. And even then I thought: Our domestic life is good right now, but if I ever feel like trying a different life with somebody else, I'll have a ready-made escape route from my current one: "Didn't I always say I

wanted children?" Only after I turned forty-four, which was my father's age when I was born, did I get around to wondering why, if I was so keen to have kids, I'd chosen to pursue a woman whose indifference to the prospect had been clear from the beginning. Was it possible that I only wanted kids with this one particular person, because I loved her? It was apparent, in any case, that my wish for kids had become nontransferable. I was not Henry the Eighth. It wasn't as if I found fertility a lovable personality trait or a promising foundation for a lifetime of great conversation. On the contrary, I seemed to meet a lot of very boring fertile people.

Finally, sadly, around Christmastime, I came to the conclusion that my ready-made escape route had disappeared. I might find some other route later, but this route was no more. For awhile, in the Californian's cabin, I was able to take seasonal comfort in stupefying amounts of aquavit, champagne, and vodka. But then it was New Year's, and I faced the question of what to do with myself for the next thirty childless years; and the next morning I got up early and went looking for the Eurasian wigeon that had been reported in south Santa Cruz County.

My affair with birds had begun innocently—an encounter on Hat Island, a morning of sharing binoculars with friends on Cape Cod. I wasn't properly introduced until a warm spring Saturday when the Californian's sister and brother-in-law, two serious birders who were visiting New York for spring migration, took me walking in Central Park. We started at Belvedere Castle, and right there, on mulchy ground behind the weather station, we saw a bird shaped like a robin but light-breasted and feathered in russet tones. A veery, the brother-in-law said.

I'd never even heard of veeries. The only birds I'd noticed on my hundreds of walks in the park were pigeons and mallards and, from a distance, beyond a battery of telescopes, the nesting red-tailed hawks that had become such overexposed celebrities. It was weird to see a foreign, unfamous veery hopping around in plain sight, five feet away from a busy footpath, on a day when half of Manhattan was sunning in the park. I felt as if, all my life, I'd been mistaken about something important. I followed my visitors into the Ramble in agreeably engrossed disbelief, as in a dream in which yellowthroats and redstarts and black-throated blue and black-throated green warblers had been placed like ornaments in urban foliage, and a film production unit had left behind tanagers and buntings like rolls of gaffer's tape, and ovenbirds were jogging down the Ramble's eroded hillsides like tiny costumed stragglers from some Fifth Avenue parade: as if these birds were just momentary bright litter, and the park would soon be cleaned up and made recognizable again.

Which it was. By June, the migration was over; songbirds were no longer flying all night and arriving in New York at dawn, seeing bleak expanses of pavement and window, and heading to the park for refreshment. But that Saturday afternoon had taught me to pay more attention. I started budgeting extra minutes when I had to cross the park to get somewhere. Out in the country, from the windows of generic motels, I looked at the cattails and sumac by interstate overpasses and wished I'd brought binoculars. A glimpse of dense brush or a rocky shoreline gave me an infatuated feeling, a sense of the world's being full of possibility. There were new birds to look for everywhere, and little by little I figured out the best hours (morning) and the best places (near some water) to go looking. Even then, it sometimes happened that I would walk through the park and see no bird more unusual than a starling, literally not one, and I would feel unloved and abandoned and wronged. (The stupid birds: where were they?) But then, later in the week, I'd see a spotted sandpiper by the Turtle Pond, or a hooded merganser on the Reservoir, or a green heron in some dirt by the Bow Bridge, and be happy.

Birds were what became of dinosaurs. Those mountains of flesh whose petrified bones were on display at the Museum of Natural History had done some brilliant retooling over the ages and could now be

found living in the form of orioles in the sycamores across the street. As solutions to the problem of earthly existence, the dinosaurs had been pretty great, but blue-headed vireos and yellow warblers and white-throated sparrows—feather-light, hollow-boned, full of song—were even greater. Birds were like dinosaurs' better selves. They had short lives and long summers. We all should be so lucky as to leave behind such heirs.

The more I looked at birds, the more I regretted not making their acquaintance sooner. It seemed to me a sadness and a waste that I'd spent so many months out West, camping and hiking amid ptarmigans and solitaires and other fantastic birds, and had managed, in all that time, to notice and remember only one: a long-billed curlew in Montana. How different my marriage might have been if I'd been able to go birding! How much more tolerable our year in Spain might have been made by European waterfowl!

And how odd, come to think of it, that I'd grown up unscathed by Phoebe Snetsinger, the mom of one of my Webster Groves classmates, who later became the most successful birder in the world. After she was diagnosed with metastatic malignant melanoma, in 1981, Snetsinger decided to devote the remaining months of her life to really serious birding, and over the next two decades, through repeated remissions and recurrences, she saw more species than any other human being before or since; her list was near eighty-five hundred when she was killed in a road accident while chasing rarities in Madagascar. Back in the seventies, my friend Manley had come under Snetsinger's influence. He finished high school with a life list of better than three hundred species, and I was more interested in science than Manley was, and yet I never aimed my binoculars at anything but the night sky.

One reason I didn't was that the best birders at my high school were serious potheads and acid users. Also, most of them were boys. Birding wasn't necessarily nerdy (nerds didn't come to school tripping), but the scene associated with it was not my idea of galvanic. Of romantic. Tramping in woods and fields for ten hours, steadily looking at birds, not communicating about anything but birds, spending a Saturday that way, was strikingly akin, as a social experience, to getting baked.

Which itself may have been one reason why, in the year following my introduction to the veery, as I began to bird more often and stay out longer, I had a creeping sense of shame about what I was doing. Even as I was learning my gulls and sparrows, I took care, in New York, not to wear my binoculars on a strap but to carry them cupped discreetly in one hand, and if I brought a field guide to the park, I made sure to keep the front cover, which had the word birds in large type, facing inward. On a trip to London, I mentioned to a friend there, a book editor who is a very stylish dresser, that I'd seen a green woodpecker eating ants in Hyde Park, and he made a horrible face and said, "Oh, Christ, don't tell me you're a twitcher." An American friend, the editor of a design magazine, also a sharp dresser, similarly clutched her head when I told her I'd been looking at birds. "No, no, no, no, no, no," she said. "You are *not* going to be a birdwatcher."

"Why not?"

"Because birdwatchers—*ucch*. They're all so—*ucch*."

"But if *I'm* doing it," I said, "and if I'm not that way—"

"But that's the thing!" she said. "You're going to *become* that way. And then I won't want to see you anymore."

She was talking in part about accessories, such as the elastic harness that birders attach to their binoculars to minimize neck strain and whose nickname, I'm afraid, is "the bra." But the really disturbing specter that my friend had in mind was the undefended sincerity of birders. The nakedness of their seeking. Their so-public twitching hunger. The problem was less acute in the shady Ramble (whose recesses, significantly, are popular for both daytime birding and nighttime gay cruising); but in highly public New York places, like on the Bow Bridge, I couldn't bear to hold my binoculars to my eyes for more than a few seconds. It was just too embarrassing to feel, or to imagine, that my private transports were being witnessed by better-defended New Yorkers.

And so it was in California that the affair really took off. My furtive hour-long get-togethers gave way to daylong escapes that I openly spent birding, wearing the bra. I set the alarm clock in the Californian's cabin for gruesomely early hours. To be juggling a stick shift and a thermos of coffee when the roads were still gray and empty, to be out ahead of everyone, to see no headlights on the Pacific Coast Highway, to be the only car pulled over at Rancho del Oso State Park, to already be on site when the birds were waking up, to hear their voices in the willow thickets and the salt marsh and the meadow whose scattered oaks were draped with epiphytes, to sense the birds' collective beauty imminent and findable in there: what a pure joy this all was. In New York, when I hadn't slept enough, my face ached all day; in California, after my first morning look at a foraging grosbeak or a diving scoter, I felt connected to a nicely calibrated drip of speed. Days passed like hours. I moved at the same pace as the sun in the sky; I could almost feel the earth turning. I took a short, hard nap in my car and woke up to see two golden eagles arrogantly working a hillside. I stopped at a feed lot to look for tricolored and yellow-headed blackbirds amid a thousand more plebeian birds, and what I saw instead, when the multitude wheeled into defensive flight, was a merlin coming to perch on a water tower. I walked for a mile in promising woods and saw basically nothing, a retreating thrush, some plain-Jane kinglets, and then, just as I was remembering what a monumental waste of time birding was, the woods came alive with songbirds, something fresh on every branch, and for the next fifteen minutes each birdlike movement in the woods was a gift to be unwrapped—western wood-pewee, MacGillivray's warbler, pygmy nuthatch—and then, just as suddenly, the wave was gone again, like inspiration or ecstasy, and the woods were quiet.

Always, in the past, I'd felt like a failure at the task of being satisfied by nature's beauty. Hiking in the West, my wife and I had sometimes found our way to summits un-ruined by other hikers, but even then, when the hike was perfect, I would wonder, "Now what?" And take a picture. Take another picture. Like a man with a photogenic girlfriend he didn't love. As if, unable to be satisfied myself, I at least might impress somebody else later on. And when the picture-taking finally came to feel just too pointless, I took mental pictures. I enlisted my wife to agree that such-and-such vista was incredible, I imagined myself in a movie with this vista in the background and various girls I'd known in high school and college watching the movie and being impressed with me; but nothing worked. The stimulations remained stubbornly theoretical, like sex on Prozac.

Only now, when nature had become the place where birds were, did I finally get what all the fuss was about. The California towhee that I watched at breakfast every morning, the plainest of medium-small brown birds, a modest ground dweller, a giver of cheerful, elementary chipping calls, brought me more pleasure than Half Dome at sunrise or the ocean shoreline at Big Sur. The California towhee generally, the whole species, reliably uniform in its plumage and habits, was like a friend whose energy and optimism had escaped the confines of a single body to animate roadsides and back yards across thousands of square miles. And there were 650 other species that bred in the United States and Canada, a population so varied in look and habitat and behavior—cranes, hummingbirds, eagles, shearwaters,

snipe—that, taken as a whole, they were like a companion with an inexhaustibly rich personality. They made me happy like nothing outdoors ever had.

My response to this happiness, naturally, was to worry that I was in the grip of something diseased and bad and wrong. An addiction. Every morning, driving to an office I'd borrowed in Santa Cruz, I would wrestle with the urge to stop and bird for "a few minutes." Seeing a good bird made me want to stay out and see more good birds. Not seeing a good bird made me sour and desolate, for which the only cure was, likewise, to keep looking. If I did manage not to stop for "a few minutes," and if my work then didn't go well, I would sit and think about how high the sun was getting and how stupid I'd been to chain myself to my desk. Finally, toward noon, I would grab my binoculars, at which point the only way not to feel guilty about blowing off a workday was to focus utterly on the rendezvous, to open a field guide against the steering wheel and compare, for the twentieth time, the bill shapes and plumages of Pacific and red-throated loons. If I got stuck behind a slow car or made a wrong turn, I swore viciously and jerked the wheel and crushed the brakes and floored the accelerator.

I worried about my problem, but I couldn't stop. On business trips, I took whole personal days for birding, in Arizona and Minnesota and Florida, and it was here, on these solitary trips, that my affair with birds began to compound the very grief I was seeking refuge from. Phoebe Snetsinger, in her pointedly titled memoir, *Birding on Borrowed Time*, had described how many of the great avian haunts she'd visited in the eighties were diminished or destroyed by the late nineties. Driving on new arteries, seeing valley after valley sprawled over, habitat after habitat wiped out, I became increasingly distressed about the plight of wild birds. The ground dwellers were being killed by the tens of millions by domestic and feral cats, the low fliers were getting run down on ever-expanding exurban roads, the medium fliers were dismembering themselves on cellphone towers and wind turbines, the high fliers were colliding with brightly lit skyscrapers or mistaking rain-slick parking lots for lakes or landing in "refuges" where men in boots lined up to shoot them. On Arizona roads, the least fuel-efficient vehicles identified themselves with American flags and bumper-sticker messages like IF YOU CAN'T FEED 'EM, DON'T BREED 'EM. The Bush Administration claimed that Congress never intended the Endangered Species Act to interfere with commerce if local jobs were at stake—in effect, that endangered species should enjoy federal protection only on land that nobody had any conceivable commercial use for. The country as a whole had become so hostile to the have-nots that large numbers of the have-nots themselves now voted against their own economic interests.

The difficulty for birds, in a political climate like this, is that they are just profoundly poor. To put it as strongly as possible: they subsist on bugs. Also on worms, seeds, weeds, buds, rodents, minnows, pond greens, grubs, and garbage. A few lucky species—what birders call "trash birds"—cadge a living in urban neighborhoods, but to find more interesting species it's best to go to sketchy areas: sewage ponds, landfills, foul-smelling mudflats, railroad rights-of-way, abandoned buildings, tamarack swamps, thornbushes, tundra, weedy slashes, slime-covered rocks in shallow lagoons, open plains of harsh sawgrass, manure pits on dairy farms, ankle-turning desert washes. The species that reside in and around these bird ghettos are themselves fairly lucky. It's the birds with more expensive tastes, the terns and plovers that insist on beachfront housing, the murrelets and owls that nest in old-growth forests, that end up on endangered-species lists.

Birds not only want to use our valuable land, they're also hopelessly unable to pay for it. In Minnesota, north of Duluth, on an overcast morning when the temperature was hovering near ten, I saw a clan of white-winged crossbills, a flock of muted reds and golds and greens, crawling all over the apex of a snowy spruce tree. They weighed less than an ounce apiece, they'd been outdoors all winter, they were flashy in their feather coats, the spruce cones were apparently delicious to them, and even as I envied

them their sociability in the snow I worried for their safety in the for-profit future now plotted by the conservatives in Washington. In this future, a small percentage of people will win the big prize—the Lincoln Navigator, the mansion with a two-story atrium and a five-acre lawn, the second home in Laguna Beach—and everybody else will be offered electronic simulacra of luxuries to wish for. The obvious difficulty for crossbills in this future is that crossbills don't *want* the Navigator. They don't *want* the atrium or the amenities of Laguna. What crossbills want is boreal forests where they can crack open seed cones with their parrot-of-the-northland bills. When our atmospheric carbon raises global temperatures by another five degrees, and our remaining unlogged boreal forests succumb to insects emboldened by the shorter winters, and cross-bills run out of places to live, the "ownership society" isn't going to help them. Their standard of living won't be improvable by global free trade. Not even the pathetic state lottery will be an option for them then.

In Florida, at the Estero Lagoon at Fort Myers Beach, where, according to my guidebook, I was likely to find "hundreds" of red knots and Wilson's plovers, I instead found a Jimmy Buffett song playing on the Holiday Inn beachfront sound system and a flock of gulls loitering on the white sand behind the hotel. It was happy hour. As I was scanning the flock, making sure that it consisted entirely of ring-billed gulls and laughing gulls, a tourist came over to take pictures. She kept moving closer, absorbed in her snapshots, and the flock amoebically distanced itself from her, some of the gulls hopping a little in their haste, the group murmuring uneasily and finally breaking into alarm cries as the woman bore down with her pocket digital camera. How, I wondered, could she not see that the gulls only wanted to be left alone? Then again, the gulls didn't seem to mind the Jimmy Buffett. The animal who most clearly wanted to be left alone was me. Farther down the beach, still looking for the promised throngs of red knots and Wilson's plovers, I came upon a particularly charmless stretch of muddy sand on which there were a handful of more common shorebirds, dunlins and semipalmated plovers and least sandpipers, in their brownish-gray winter plumage. Camped out amid high-rise condos and hotels, surveying the beach in postures of sleepy disgruntlement, with their heads scrunched down and their eyes half shut, they looked like a little band of misfits. Like a premonition of a future in which all birds will either collaborate with modernity or go off to die someplace quietly. What I felt for them went beyond love. I felt outright identification.

The well-adjusted throngs of collaborator birds in South Florida, both the trash pigeons and trash grackles and the more stately but equally tame pelicans and cormorants, all struck me now as traitors. It was this motley band of modest peeps and plovers on the beach who reminded me of the human beings I loved best—the ones who didn't fit in. These birds may or may not have been capable of emotion, but the way they looked, beleaguered there, few in number, my outcast friends, was how I felt. I'd been told that it was bad to anthropomorphize, but I could no longer remember why. It was, in any case, anthropomorphic only to see yourself in other species, not to see them in yourself. To be hungry all the time, to be mad for sex, to not believe in global warming, to be shortsighted, to live without thought of your grandchildren, to spend half your life on personal grooming, to be perpetually on guard, to be compulsive, to be habit-bound, to be avid, to be unimpressed with humanity, to prefer your own kind: these were all ways of being like a bird. Later in the evening, in posh, necropolitan Naples, on a sidewalk outside a hotel whose elevator doors were decorated with huge blowups of cute children and the monosyllabic injunction smile, I spotted two disaffected teenagers, two little chicks, in full Goth plumage, and I wished that I could introduce them to the brownish-gray misfits on the beach.

A few weeks after I heard Al Gore speak at the Ethical Culture Society, I went back to Texas. According to my new AviSys 5.0 bird-listing software, the green kingfisher that I'd seen in the last hour of my trip with Manley had been my 370th North American bird. I was close to the satisfying

milestone of four hundred species, and the easiest way to reach it without waiting around for spring migration was to go south again.

I also missed Texas. For a person with a bird problem, there was something oddly reassuring about the place. The lower Rio Grande Valley contained some of the ugliest land I'd ever seen: dead flat expanses of industrial farming and downmarket sprawl bisected by U.S. Route 83, which was a jerry-rigged viaduct flanked by three-lane frontage roads, Whataburgers, warehouses, billboards suggesting VAGINAL REJUNVENATION and FAITH PLEASES GOD and DON'T DUMP ("Take your trash to a landfill"), rotten town centers where only the Payless shoe stores seemed to be in business, and fake-adobe strip malls so pristinely bleak it was hard to tell if they were still being built or had already opened and gone bankrupt. And yet, to birds, the valley was a Michelin three-star destination: Worth a Journey! Texas was the home of President Bush and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, neither of whom had ever been mistaken for a friend of the environment; its property owners were famously hostile to federal regulation; and yet it was the state where, with some serious driving, you could tally 230 species of bird in a single day. There were thriving Audubon Societies, the world's biggest birding-tour operator, special campgrounds and RV parks for birders, twenty annual birding festivals, and the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, which snaked for twenty-one hundred miles around petrochemical installations and supertanker hulls and giant citrus farms, from Port Charles to Laredo. Texans didn't seem to lose much sleep over the division between nature and civilization. Even ardent bird lovers in Texas referred to birds collectively as "the resource." Texans liked to use the oxymoron "wildlife management." They were comfortable with hunting and viewed birding as basically a nonviolent version of it. They gave me blank, dumbfounded looks when I asked them if they identified with birds and felt a kinship with them, or whether, on the contrary, they saw birds as beings very different from themselves. They asked me to repeat the question.

I flew into McAllen. After revisiting the refuges I'd hit with Manley and bagging specialties like the pauraque (No. 374), the elf owl (No. 379), and the fulvous whistling-duck (No. 383), I drove north to a scrap of state land where the black-capped vireo (No. 388) and golden-cheeked warbler (No. 390), two endangered species, were helpfully singing out their locations. Much of my best birding, however, took place on private land. A friend of a friend's friend gave me a tour of his eight-thousand-acre ranch near Waco, letting me pick up three new inland sandpiper species on wetlands that the federal government had paid him to create. On the King Ranch, whose land holdings are larger than Rhode Island and include a hundred thousand acres of critical coastal habitat for migrating songbirds, I paid \$119 for the opportunity to see my first ferruginous pygmy-owl and my first northern beardless-tyrannulet.

North of Harlingen, I visited other friends of friends' friends, a pediatric dentist and his wife who had created a private wildlife refuge for themselves on five thousand acres of mesquite. The couple had dug a lake, converted old hunting blinds to nature-photography blinds, and planted big flower beds to attract birds and butterflies. They told me about their efforts to reeducate certain of their landowning neighbors who, like my father in the seventies, had been alienated by environmental bureaucrats. To be Texan was to take pride in the beauty and diversity of Texan wildlife, and the couple believed that the conservationist spirit in most Texan ranchers just needed a little coaxing out.

This, of course, was an axiom of movement conservatism—if you get government off people's back, they'll gladly take responsibility—and it seemed to me both wishful and potentially self-serving. At a distance, in New York, through the fog of contemporary politics, I probably would have identified the dentist and his wife, who were Bush supporters, as my enemies. But the picture was trickier in close-up. For one thing, I was liking all the Texans I met. I was also beginning to wonder whether, poor though birds are, they might prefer to take their chances in a radically privatized America where

income distribution is ever more unequal, the estate tax is repealed, and land-proud Texan ranchers are able to preserve their oak mottes and vast mesquite thickets and lease them out to wealthy hunters. It certainly was pleasant to bird on a private ranch! Far away from the picnickers and the busloads of schoolkids! Far from the bikers, the off-roaders, the dog walkers, the smoochers, the dumpers, the partyers, the bird-indifferent masses! The fences that kept them out were no impediment to thrushes and wrens.

It was on federal property, though, that I got my four-hundredth species. In the village of Rockport, on Aransas Bay, I boarded a shallow-draft birding boat, the *Skimmer*, which was captained by an affable young outdoorsman named Tommy Moore. My fellow passengers were some eager older women and their silent husbands. If they'd been picnicking in a place where I had a rarity staked out, I might not have liked them, but they were on the *Skimmer* to look at birds. As we cut across the bay's shallow, cement-gray waters and bore down on the roosting site of a dozen great blue herons—birds so common I hardly noticed them anymore—the women began to wail with astonishment and pleasure: "Oh! Oh! What magnificent birds! Oh! Look at them! Oh my God!"

We pulled up alongside a very considerable green salt marsh. In the distance, hip-deep in salt grass, were two adult whooping cranes whose white breasts and long, sturdy necks and russet heads reflected sunlight that then passed through my binoculars and fell upon my retinas, allowing me to claim the crane as my No. 400. One of the animals was bending down as if concerned about something in the tall grass; the other seemed to be scanning the horizon anxiously. Their attitude reminded me of parent birds I'd seen in distress elsewhere—two bluejays in the Ramble fluttering in futile, crazed rage while a raccoon ate their eggs; a jittery, too-alert loon sitting shoulder-deep in water by the side of a badly flooded Minnesota lake, persisting in incubating eggs that weren't going to hatch—and Captain Moore explained that harm appeared to have befallen the yearling child of these two cranes; they'd been standing in the same place for more than a day, the young crane nowhere to be seen.

"Could it be dead?" one of the women asked.

"The parents wouldn't still be there if it had died," Moore said. He took out his radio and called in a report on the birds to the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge office, which told him that the chief crane biologist was on his way out to investigate.

"In fact," Moore told us, stowing the radio, "there he is."

Half a mile away, on the far side of a shallow salt pool, keeping his head low and moving very slowly, was a speck of a human figure. The sight of him there, in stringently protected federal territory, was disconcerting in the way of a boom mike dipping into a climactic movie scene, a stagehand wandering around behind Jason and Medea. Must humankind insert itself into *everything*? Having paid thirty-five dollars for my ticket, I'd expected a more perfect illusion of nature.

The biologist himself, inching toward the cranes, alone in his waders, didn't look as if he felt any embarrassment. It was simply his job to try to keep the whooping crane from going extinct. And this job, in one sense, was fairly hopeless. There were currently fewer than 350 wild whooping cranes on the planet, and although the figure was definitely an improvement on the 1941 population of 22, the long-term outlook for any species with such a small gene pool was dismal. The entire Aransas reserve was one melted Greenland ice cap away from being suitable for waterskiing, one severe storm away from being a killing field. Nevertheless, as Captain Moore cheerfully informed us, scientists had been taking eggs from the cranes' nests in western Canada and incubating them in Florida, where there was

now a wholly manufactured second flock of more than thirty birds, and since whooping cranes don't naturally know the way to migrate (each new generation learns the route by following its parents), scientists had been trying to teach the cranes in Florida to follow an airplane to a second summering site in Wisconsin...

To know that something is doomed and to cheerfully try to save it anyway: it was a characteristic of my mother. I had finally started to love her near the end of her life, when she was undergoing a year of chemotherapy and radiation and living by herself. I'd admired her bravery for that. I'd admired her will to recuperate and her extraordinary tolerance of pain. I'd felt proud when her sister remarked to me, "Your mother looks better two days after abdominal surgery than I do at a dinner party." I'd admired her skill and ruthlessness at the bridge table, where she wore the same determined frown when she had everything under control as when she knew she was going down. The last decade of her life, which started with my father's dementia and ended with her colon cancer, was a rotten hand that she played like a winner. Even toward the end, though, I couldn't tolerate being with her for more than three days at a time. Although she was my last living link to a web of Midwestern relations and traditions that I would begin to miss the moment she was gone, and although the last time I saw her in her house, in April 1999, her cancer was back and she was rapidly losing weight, I still took care to arrive in St. Louis on a Friday afternoon and leave on a Monday night. She, for her part, was accustomed to my leavings and didn't complain too much. But she still felt about me what she'd always felt, which was what I wouldn't really feel about her until after she was gone. "I hate it when Daylight Savings Time starts while you're here," she told me while we were driving to the airport, "because it means I have an hour less with you."

As the *Skimmer* moved up the channel, we were able to approach other cranes close enough to hear them crunching on blue crabs, the staple of their winter diet. We saw a pair doing the prancing, graceful, semi-airborne dance that gets them sexually excited. Following the lead of my fellow passengers, I took out my camera and dutifully snapped some pictures. But all of a sudden—it might have been my having reached the empty plateau of four hundred species—I felt weary of birds and birding. For the moment at least, I was ready to be home in New York again, home among my kind. Every happy day with the Californian made the dimensions of our future losses a little more grievous, every good hour sharpened my sadness at how fast our lives were going, how rapidly death was coming out to meet us, but I still couldn't wait to see her: to set down my bags inside the door, to go and find her in her study, where she would probably be chipping away at her interminable e-mail queue, and to hear her say, as she always said when I came home, "So? What did you see?"