

## Odd Bird

I am a bird at the seashore. You may not recognize me, because to you all birds look the same. How right you are! Yet I look the same not because you are right, but rather for being the same. Yes, I am the one and only bird you have seen all your life, with each heavenward tilt of your head, only now I am standing in the sand, stuck.

Why have you seen me before? In short, because I follow you. As the saying goes, a little bird whispered in my ear, and always has since your birth, revealing your whereabouts all the time. To those locations, I ride the wind, always one flap ahead of your feet.

You regard me like a stranger. I am not. Anyway, I am no stranger than you, who retreats into secret thoughts about a peculiar bird you believe to be following you, but don't understand why. When I was born, a human followed me. One day I addressed her.

"You are following me," I said unequivocally, although confused and less than encouraged by my conviction. That state of mind explains my strategy of remaining airborne throughout whatever conversation might arise. You see, that is the proper word.

The woman was young, with long red hair that covered her shoulders and blew gently in the breeze. First her face filled with an expression of forthcoming dialogue, but then she sneezed loudly and moistly. A visible mist of spittle sailed slowly away. That was really too much, and I felt my confrontation of her gain validity.

However, she laughed so gaily at my indignation that I too began to laugh, as if helpless against the emotion. "I'm not following you," the woman said in a conciliatory manner, "but rather fulfilling my destiny, which is to safeguard your future."

"I'm not sure I understand you," I confessed, amazed to hear myself participate earnestly in what was certainly gibberish. I vaguely suspected a magic spell at work on me, and blamed the enormous sneeze. Nevertheless, I submitted very readily.

The woman waved her hand at me, as if to dismiss any confusion as nothing to be ashamed or worried over. "How could you possibly understand yet?" she asked ingenuously. "You have seen me everywhere your whole life without letting yourself admit or enjoy it--"

"No, I enjoyed it," I interrupted, at once wondering for what purpose.

The woman smiled. Her broad teeth reflected the sun and sparkled. I had never seen her do that before. Immediately, I recognized my purpose, and felt that much lighter for it.

The breeze died down, but my ability to hover suffered no effects of the lapse. On the contrary, I needed to compensate with an improbable action--namely, to adjust my wings for higher wind velocities, despite their absolute failure to materialize. There I was, fighting a phantom gale only seven feet above the earth, almost in arm's distance of a woman whose loose summer dress documented only the slightest breeze. I ducked my beak and tilted bodily downward into a curious and unintended eye contact with the woman that seemed somehow to explain things.

"You are the substance of a dream," the woman told me. Her voice became harsh at this disclosure; her eyes betrayed fear, as if unable to stay open, but required to by some terrible punishment. "Many years ago you were born as only seconds ago I dozed off. I'm sorry," she concluded, among a loud welter of tears.

"Has there been some mistake?" I reassured her.

"Yes," she fixated on my words, "a most terrible one!"

That the woman meant me by that mistake was plainer than day, yet how was I to assume any responsibility for it when it was not my doing and to my reckoning did not directly concern me? I could sooner shed all my feathers at the cordial request of a butcher.

The women knew as much. In fact, she spoke so directly, and gave such weight to her emotions, precisely because she honored my innocence as the chief victim of our encounter. "You must release it," she said sadly, and her face sank into her hands.

"I gather you refer mainly to my ignorance, which will never shed any light, but always eclipse things," I said.

"Yes, to your ignorance too."

"But then what else? You see, my ignorance is not so willing as all that, and asserts itself boldly."

"Perhaps to nothing more," said the woman, recovering herself and wiping beneath her eyes with the back of her hand. "They must not catch me sleeping. Or now you." Then a powerful wind swept across the countryside and carried me helplessly away. I was unable to look back until passing a great distance, and at that point the woman would have been a

mere speck on the horizon. When I did look for her, she was not even that much, and I often reflect to myself that I invented her in the first place.

Rather, the sensation is not of my invention of the woman, for I am not that crafty, but of her invention for me by someone else. If anything, she invented herself. That's no mean trick. I do not pretend to understand its foundation or consequences.

Yet I do understand that here you are, and I, who now follow you as that woman once followed me, am stuck in the sand without any fear of losing track of you, and so failing in my appointment. Why then do I flaunt the unreasonableness of my position? Is it the good feeling of the sand on my webbed feet that provokes me? I admit the effect of attachment to the earth is not without its merits. Nor does the lapping of sea foam against my skinny legs conjure any restlessness in me.

On the contrary, I want to stand here and observe you nearby for as long as you allow. But how long will that be? You have your hands in your pockets, where you put them when you're bored, and soon to move. I suspect you are fiddling with your car keys, while your mind fiddles with thoughts of your car instead of using your eyes. In fact, they are downcast, and do not look upward much anymore. It's true: you never look up anymore.

Does it help you to hear that observation? How exactly do you live that way? As a bird, I must wonder, how do you live without looking at the sky?

Is it that much of an enemy to you?