

On Display Among the Lesser

by Carol Emshwiller

Those who look to the clouds ... those who swear by the moon ... those who say they understand the stars ... That's not us. We're here, in the land of the far, far, far ... east of some and west of others. It's we who know the world, from north to south to middle. We see it all spread out. We live above, and soar. All others are our meals. Not a one that isn't. We, cliff dwellers, baskers in the sun, dancers, keepers of the seasons and of time and of all the directions.

How ride the sky grid? How ride the thermals? How be the one on the top of every pinnacle? Be us. It's the only way.

We're known for our beauty, and I, the largest and most beautiful even of my own kind. Always a sharp intake of breath when I spread my wings. Who could help it? My red, my black and white, my iridescence

What is there to fear for creatures such as we? Masters of the air? And I, the largest.

What's to fear—that is, except the mobbers? Only the mob of the small and irrelevant ever forces us out of the sky, all the way down to where we have no choice but to hop and limp. Flutter. They're experts at blows to the head but they're too small to kill.

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I had left the perches of our precipice. But first I'd hopped about the dance platform for no reason than for joy. I had flapped and strutted. (I had no mate yet though I had my choice of all of them. Who would have what it takes to be my consort? So far there was not a one equal to me.)

Then I'd soared away, cried out good-bye ... to no one ... to everyone.

My first meal that morning was poisonous snake.

After that I thought to get myself a lookout from among the lesser before she could call the alarm, but she was quick. I raised a whirlwind of dust for nothing.

Then I thought eggs—little speckled brown ones.

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It's a long time since I felt fear. I remember it from when I was a chick. I pushed my brother out of the nest ... it had to be. Later, I fell out of the nest myself and was almost eaten by a fox. By then I was

half-fledged and, with talons and frantic fluttering, I managed to climb back to the aerie. My parents killed the fox and brought me the pieces. The last time I was afraid was when my parents forced me from the nest. I was sure I'd end up at the bottom of the cliff as I had before. But since then I've felt nothing but my power. I've matched all creatures tooth to beak, claw to talon.

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But the mobbers. A dozen ... ridiculously small. I was after their eggs. They left as soon as they got me on the ground but I didn't dare take to the air. I had blood blinding me, but I knew I wasn't going to die from their pecking. I hopped awhile but I can't cover any distance that way. I was just about to trust the air again when I got caught. Not by the mob this time, but by a net.

I know all about nets, and being a slave or being made into stew. There's not a parent among us doesn't warn the newly fledged.

It's shameful for one such as I to be captured by the lesser dirt-dwellers. I won't go quietly. When they come for me they'll be in shreds if I have anything to say about it.

I'll be tough eating. I'm past the tender age. At least they won't enjoy me. But I suppose it's only fair they should. I've been grateful for dirt-dwellers that were tender and sweet. You'd think those that live in burrows wouldn't taste good.

I'll wait my chance to kill and eat my furry little masters. My kind is generally too large and vicious, and too smart for any of them. They do have a zoo, though I doubt any such as I could be in it. I'd be given a prime display among creatures that are our meals. But huddled in a cage. Handed scraps—on the end of stick for fear of me. I, dancer, flap-flapper, flip-flopper, leaper, dropper from the sky at astonishing speeds. I do as well upside down as in any other direction.

I know their strategy. They'll leave me here all day, wait until I'm exhausted with the effort of trying to escape, come for me when I'm too tired to fight.

I nip apart bits of the net, but I know better than to struggle. I eat three mob members caught along with me. There are several others, but those are the only ones I can reach. They're making quite a racket. Their fellow mobbers come and babble back at them. I can't understand a single chirp ... nor the reason for it. What good will it do?

Night comes. They all quiet down. Still our captors haven't come for us. Perhaps they forgot. Or, rather, if they're smart, they'll wait till morning.

I doze but I don't dare sleep. Here on the ground, and unable to move my head much or flap my wings, even a creature as insignificant as an owl ... even a bat or rat might nip at me.

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In the morning the chittering dirt-dwellers come. They kill the little birds and put them in bags, but they keep a safe distance from me. More come, all standing up as if on guard, crowding each other, whispering as though I might understand their squeaking, but we've never wanted to know the language of our meals.

Yet more come and with a thicker net and a cart. They don't remove the net I'm caught in, they just add the heavier one on top of it and pull them both tight around me. They have a contraption to lift me onto the cart. They don't want to get close even now that I'm tied in two nets. They're careful—as though I were precious—as though every bruise would diminish my value. I'm wondering what they want me for that they need me so pristine.

They pick up every lost feather and wear them behind their ears. I think they'll pull out more so everybody can have one and I won't be able to fly, but they don't.

I can't believe how they chitter. They never stop. I haven't seen a single mouth that isn't moving.

Even my stare doesn't stop them, though they glance away quickly so as not to be caught by my eyes.

I'm carted off on a bumpy ride—dozens of them pulling. I'm bounced along over ground I've only seen from the air. It looks uninteresting. Dirty. Full of obstacles I never knew were obstacles.

Finally they put me in a cage hardly as wide as my wingspan and hardly taller than my head. They cut away the nets. I try to hack at the creatures but they're careful. I only get in one good bite—tear off a chunk of leg and eat it. Sweet and tender as they usually are, but that only makes me hungrier.

Another of my kind is caged across from me, looking bedraggled and gloomy. Worse than gloomy: hopeless. She's missing the largest and most spectacular of her feathers. She doesn't look at me. I was about to squawk a greeting, but I let her be—lost in whatever daydream of flying she might be conjuring up.

She looks as if she hasn't preened in a long time. She must have once been quite presentable. Now who would look at her? I wonder if she can still fly with most of her longest feathers gone. My feathers are a mess, too, and, as she is, I'm too confined to straighten myself out.

They give me water but nothing to eat. I've had nothing but that bite of one of them. They feed her, but I can see the food is dead and smells rotten.

We're under a kind of lean-to. There's a roof, but it's open to the elements on one side.

We spend the night with fleas, mice, and rats.

In the morning I want to speak to her, but she so obviously doesn't want me to—or doesn't care—about anything.

Later that same morning there's a celebration—because of me. A great tootling and stamping and squeaking. Long lines of them come just to look at me. I hadn't known there were so many. They must spend most of their time out of sight underground. There's pointing ... squealing. It might be singing, but it sounds like squealing. They feed me, finally, and exclaim at my way of eating—as I turn my meal head out so, fur or feathers, it'll slip down easily—and then gulp it in one gulp.

Through all this the other of my kind—the female—hunches lower until her beak is almost on the ground. If she had a place to hide she'd go there. So would I.

At night, when the crowd has left, I speak to her. ("When? How long? What will they do with us?") But she only lowers her head even more. Hunched as she is, and though she still has her stripes and her red here and there, she looks more like a vulture than one of us. I say, "We can help each other," though I can't think how.

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But she helps me, and without a word. They starve me, all the while feeding her. Dead things, already beginning to smell. When she realizes what they're doing, she hides half her food in the back of her cage and gives it to me after they've left at night. She tosses bits through the bars to me. Never misses. She's still got her skills.

I bow and thank each time. And each time I ask her if she knows what will happen to me, but she always turns away. Then I talk and talk—for no reason than to reassure. I speak softly. I want to bring back hope. I want her to lift her head, to look at me. I want to bring back the hypnotic glare to her glance. I tell her I'll get us out of here. I suppose I need to reassure myself as much as her.

By the fourth day of little food, and all of it rotten, my head and neck are becoming more like hers, curving halfway to the floor. That night when she throws in bits of her food again, I say I know she's half-starving herself so that I won't completely starve. I bow and thank again. Then I plead with her again, if she knows what will happen, or if she knows what they want us for, to tell me. "Is it just to keep us here? On display? And if so, why starve us?"

Finally she tries. She finds it hard to get words out. First she says, "Dance." Her voice sounds more like an angry jay than one of us.

"Dance? How can that be?"

"For no reason . . . than the dance."

"Why?"

"They like it." She finally finds her voice though she leaves out half the words. "Watch out when the live food comes. Wing," she says. "Be careful"

I bow and thank and bow and thank. I say again, "I'll get us out of here."

"No. Worry when the food comes. Wing. Worry wing."

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And food does come, a day later—and for the first time, since that day when they watched me eat, live food.

She calls, "Don't be tricked."

There's three ... still squirming foods ... still crying out. Finally what I'm used to. They wave the creatures back and forth in front of me. I can't help myself, I lunge. This way and that. While she, across from me, keeps calling, "Stop." They tease and tempt until, finally, they let me catch them. I don't realize until too late that, as I lunge and gnash, they've clipped one of my wings.

I rage. I know it won't help but I do it anyway. I lose several feathers by flapping about in such a confined space. She, too, has lost so many ... certainly she has also raged, and she tries, now, to stop me. When I finally exhaust myself, those that don't already have a feather behind their ears come and pick one up.

They hood me, then let me out. I try to fly. I think to escape even if I can't see, but I'm lopsided. There's no possible way I can fly. And I'm already exhausted, as they know. After jumping, fluttering and losing more feathers, I let myself be led. And then the hood is taken off and I'm on a dancing platform. Not a very good one. I almost don't recognize it.

They're gathered around—hundreds of them.

They know how we say, "Dance." They know how we call it out, loud and like a happy song. The way they try to say it, it's garbled but I know what they mean. Most likely they also know it's our call for females to come dance with us. They call that now. I'm shocked ... that I'd be here alone and called to dance, and on this lumpy platform—called by creatures that usually are my meals. I won't do it.

But they have ways. Slap at my feet until I'm dancing just to avoid the slats they poke me with. They clack their teeth. That's what they do when they like what I'm doing. I try to be more awkward but they like that even better. How I must look with only half a wing and hopping up and down to avoid sticks.

But they've brought me here exhausted. I stagger. I fall several times. They don't mind. They clack their teeth all the more. Whatever I'm doing, they love it. No doubt they like seeing an exhausted, dilapidated creature make a fool of himself. One who swoops down and carries away their little ones—one who makes all their days precarious. No doubt I'm the very one who carried off some of their own beloved.

Finally I fall and can't get up. They keep on slapping at me but I can't move. They stop, flop me into the cart and bounce me back to the cage. They don't bother with the hood; they know I'm too worn out to fight back. They leave me on the floor of my cage. They don't even give me fresh water. What I have is dusty and warm and has bugs in it, but I drink it anyway.

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Now it's the female's turn to talk—and keep on talking—trying to raise my spirits. Now her head is up while mine is low. Talking has given her a reason to hope. She could have said, "I told you so. I told you beware," but she doesn't.

She talks most of the night. As I did to her. The same sorts of things that I said. "You'll fly again. The feathers will grow. You'll find a way to break free. They'll get careless. Imagine the damage we could do together. We could stand back to back and slash. Don't despair. And you're so large—so beautiful and large." (Even in my sorry state she says it.) "You can take on crowds of the dirt-dwellers." Then, "Think of cliffs. Think of the home sky." After that, "I come from the blue valley. We sweep down from the rocks, down onto the sand. Wheeling, wheeling, rising ... Think of sunshine. My name is Sunshine. When you're feeling better ... and you will feel better ... you'll tell me your name."

I must have helped her with my talking or she wouldn't be doing it for me. I sleep, to the sound of her voice going on and on. I hardly listen to the meanings. How did she manage, going through this all by herself? No wonder she was in such despair. I, at least, have her.

I had thought I'd never tell such a one as she my name ... such a one ... so unworthy. I don't think she ever was large and impressive. But I hate to be "The Grand" in front of her who never could have been grand. I think to make up a simpler name. Cliff perhaps, or Blue or Air. Yes, I'll tell her Air.

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Dance for your supper. Dance even for a drink of fresh cool water. Now, again, all the food is dead. Now not dancing for a mate ... perhaps never dancing for a mate ... never even see a possible mate ... never one worthy of my size and beauty and ability to dance. Dance, now, only to entertain creatures who are merely food.

They can't imagine legs so sprightly, such back and forth and in and out. My leaps, higher than three times their heads. Their music, banging, tootling, isn't to my taste, but I have to dance anyway, feathers flying off. (It's the diet of the dead, causes that.)

(I see each of my feathers traded for three bowls of acorns.)

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Sunshine and I often talk now, but not anymore as we did those first nights and never about the joy of being us, nor the joy of our way of life, and especially not of the joy and meanings of the dance.

We talk of the here and now, fleas and dirty water, dead food. And then we talk of cold mountain streams and where we'll drink when we get free. And whether her favorite drinking place is better than mine. We depend on each other for hope. I grow to like her. My being here has saved her from having to dance. We worry about what will happen now that she isn't dancing. We worry if she'll go for food. We wonder what I could do to save her when they come for her.

But later she asks the question that I dread. "Would you dance with me ... for me?"

Of course I wouldn't, but what can I say? I say, yes. I don't even hesitate. She needs that answer, and who knows what's going to happen. Perhaps we'll never leave here, or she might die—she looks

draggled enough. We both look as if all we need do is wish for death and death would come.

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As I get used to dancing for them I begin to do my best. It can't be very good, anyway, with only one real wing. But they're moved. They cry. At first I wonder why—why cry for their worst enemy, and then I know—because of beauty and skill. I have some left. I'm not like I used to be, but they can't tell the difference. Still ... There must be some spark ... some little glow of appreciation of true art.

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But now something new. I no sooner get to the dance platform than they bring out Sunshine. Are we to dance with each other? It's outrageous! I can't move. I won't.

Her head begins to lower. "Oh," she says, "did you lie?"

"I can't do it."

"You said you would. Have you danced with another? Some earlier time?"

"No. But I can't."

Her beak is almost on the platform. I can't add to her despair. Besides, could there ever be any other? We belong together. A bedraggled pair. No one else would have either one of us. And no one else knows what we know. No one's lived through this.

"I'll do it."

"Don't. This is for forever."

"I know."

I begin the bowing. Now she's the one who hesitates. Does a kind of sideways bow. Begins as though the whole thing depresses her even more than she already is.

But once you begin, dancing is its own reward ... its own reason for being. And in spite of her half a wing she dances well. As do I. She leaps as high as I do. I can't help but respond. I can't help but love. My love is crippled. My love is full of fleas. My love is unpreened, unwashed, unhappy ... though not right now. Easy to see what a dancer she once was. And there's something else in our dance that I've never seen in dances before. What we know, and have been through ... all goes into the dance. I've never seen such a thing. Even the lesser ones cry for us. We cry, too.

I wish I had food to give her. All I can do is pretend. I say, "If I had, I'd give."

"If you gave, I'd accept." And she pretends to take.

But then I know what to do. I say, "Put your bad wing on top of my bad wing."

She doesn't know what I mean. "The breeze is rising. Your good wing and my good wing ..."

Her eyes light up. Take on some of their compelling gleam.

"Yes!"

We're half-starved. Lighter than we used to be. It might work.

First we dance that way, practicing. Leaping even higher, our good wings flapping in unison. It will work. We won't get much height, but not much is needed.

The lesser like us all the better. They clack and whistle. They want us to mate right there in front of everybody. As if we were low creatures just like them.

"If we can catch the wind just right ... You call out the rhythm. I'll follow."

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As we rise, the dirt-dwellers cry out a terrible cry, all at the same time. It causes us to wobble even more than we do already. We almost dip down into their reaching claws.

Then we're away. We skim along just above bushes. We have trouble staying that high. Any animal large as a wolf could snap us up.

A mob finds us, but what's a bloody head after what we've been through? I hadn't thought they'd mob so low or when we're no threat to their eggs. I suppose we're an easy target and they're just having fun. Or we look like some gigantic two-headed beast, more menacing than the usual sky folk.

We'll have to land to get away. They won't stop until we do. I look for a good place. Besides, we need to rest. Neither of us has been flying for a long time. She, especially, has lost her strength and collapses the minute we set down. I realize we won't be able to go any farther today.

We let go of each other and hop to a thorny horse brush. I help her tuck herself in under the branches. "I'll get you food."

"But you can't fly by yourself."

I'd felt so free, I had actually forgotten. "You rest. I'll find a way to hunt. Perhaps a quail or some other bird that lays its eggs on the ground."

We rub necks, clack bills, coo.

As I hop away, she's already as stock-still—as if a chick who senses menace. She's an easy target, but I

have to leave her. Though I don't suppose I'll go far.

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What a way to hunt, hopping, fluttering, jumping, walking ... (I'm not made for walking.) Down here I can only see what's straight in front of my face; everything is hidden behind something else. I don't know how to sneak or skulk. My talons scrabble and slip. But I won't return without something for her.

I find three eggs in a ground nest. I'd carry them back to her but I can't without breaking them. I eat them. They're so small they only whet my appetite.

But our eggs! Our chicks! Will they have to be born on the ground? Easy eating for dirt-dwellers? Would we have to stoop to the broken-wing trick? How long does it take for feathers to grow back? Does Sunshine know?

I chase after voles and mice and don't catch them. I leap after robins. I miss. This will take some learning.

I find a flock of quail with a dozen babies, little white balls hurrying behind them. I scoop up four before they have a chance to hustle the others into their bushes.

I hop back to Sunshine with them in my beak. They're small, but she takes them as though they were large as four dirt-dwellers. With clacking and cooing we pledge ourselves to each other.

Then we make a circle of the grasses near us, and, as though in a nest, we sleep.

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And wake refreshed, though hungry.

"We'll hunt together, one to chase and one to catch and kill."

"We'll leap and flap so as to see above the sagebrush."

We do.

And leaping makes us realize that, though flightless, we really are, at last, free. Lots of those less fierce than we, are flightless and they live. Used to be we were the long-lived and the short on patience, now perhaps short-lived and long on patience. But what a sky! Even from way down here.

"Look at the sky."

"Smell the wind."

"Let's dance. For ourselves this time."

We do.

The End