

The Heron

by Jack Swenson

Bob and his wife are not on speaking terms. Once again he knows she will win the standoff because he can't stand the silence.

He dawdles on the sidewalk this morning after his wife heads off to work. He hasn't yet gird up for the day, put on his armor so to speak, a T-shirt and his dirty jeans. He is wearing his red bathrobe.

He watches his Mrs. drive off, heading across town for the bridge. She works at a clinic in the other side of the bay. Bob's wife is a nurse.

Bob stretches, peers up at the sky to get an inkling of what kind of day it is going to be. Then he looks for the heron. A dirt field across the street, below the East Bay hills, is the bird's morning hunting grounds. He stands stock still and lets his breakfast come to him. Bob assumes it's a him; he doesn't know much about birds. The heron is a big fellow. A large gray-blue bird.

Bob spots the motionless bird in the shadow of the hills. The sun has not yet climbed above the crest. Bob wonders what the bird eats. Mice, voles, gophers maybe.

It is chilly, and Bob turns his back on the field and goes inside. He gets a refill on his coffee and takes it with him as he heads for the back of the house to shave. As he peers in a mirror and scrapes the whiskers from his face with a safety razor, Bob's thoughts drift back to bird, the solitary creature in the field, dignified, unhurried, waiting. Bob wonders where he goes; surely he will move on when spring gives way to summer.

That's the ticket, Bob thinks. Move around. When it gets hot, move to more temperate climes. Birds are smart. They go south for

the winter, north for the summer. Other animals stay put and pay the price.

After his shave, Bob splashes cold water on his face, then dries himself with a hand towel. He fishes a T-shirt, shorts, and sox out of his underwear drawer in the closet. His suitcase and duffels are parked on the closet shelves at eye level. He grins. Naw, he thinks.

After breakfast Bob goes outside and works in the yard. He rakes leaves and trims suckers from the lemon and apricot trees. He gets a saw and his miter box and cuts two chunks of wood from a redwood two by four. The wood blocks are for a sprinkling system that his wife put in for the shrubs and plants in the backyard. She needs the blocks to finish the project, and she has been after him all week to help her out.

