

Brasita de Fuego

by Kipp Wessel

I still picture her waving her bare arms and hands into the purple bellied clouds above the trees, her crooked smile, the spiraling silver maple seeds cascading soft circles around her determined reach, as though the very tree limbs shaping the sky above her head leaned forward in celebration, releasing helicopter spun confetti to praise her soft place in the world and the beautiful vermilion flycatcher she released into sky.

It's the single moment that keeps lifting to the surface of memory all these years later: Daphne walking to the center of that maple lined field with the basket housing her favorite songbird from that summer at the nursery, a small, soft black and red shape visible through the basket slats. She wandered into the center of the field as the rest of the nursery volunteers formed a semi-circle around her. She set the basket on the grass and kneel beside it. She leaned in and said something to the flycatcher, soft words that carried our way in indecipherable murmurs. She reached in and with both hands cupped around her bird, she steepled her arms above her head and opened her hands. The flycatcher, his crimson cap and breast bright in the sun, paused and then lifted finally and forever into sky.

I walked to her through the spiral of maple seeds. She lowered her gaze and arms from the clouds, and the tears beneath her dark sunglasses ran two straight lines down her cheeks. With her face wet and her purple sundress puckering the breeze, she asked me: "It's impossible for this not to be okay, then, isn't it?" before she turned again to the sky her solitary wayward flycatcher last disappeared.

None of us ever could figure out how that flycatcher made its way nearly a thousand miles from its typical species migration. Brought to us in a shoe box from a young woman who found the featherless infant in storm-strewn backyard laundry, its downy crown and breast slowly bloomed soft shades of crimson in the weeks following before our resident ornithologists determined its species, one so rarely

seen this far north, central Michigan, it was deemed an “accidental species.”

I barely knew Daphne then, had only been introduced to her weeks before when she had been asked to train me in at the nursery, herself a repeat volunteer from the previous summer. Dark coffee eyes, pixie haircut, blue suede Doc Martins, southern Louisiana drawl, she stood out in our avian nursery nearly as much as her beloved flycatcher. In her smiling, gentle way, she taught me how to hold songbirds in the soft of one hand, how to press lightly with finger and thumb and part their beaks for the syringes of protein formula, tipped past the glottis, how to hold crows and rock doves by first wrapping their warm bodies in towels, how to feed mourning doves with seed tubes, orioles with chunks of fruit, chimney swifts with plunged crickets and mealworms, how to wrap tissue paper nests, all while engaging me with lucid stories of her Louisiana home and the pecan trees that lined her lawn and the fierce storms that blew pecans to earth like hail, her grandmother sweeping storm-blown pecans into piles, candying them into pralines for Daphne and her little brother.

While mixing insect-omnivore diet, chopping fruit and sifting waxworms from meal, I couldn't stop picturing Daphne as the young girl she told me about, running through cypress swamps in search of crayfish, shelled creatures with clasping pincers she would lift toward the sun to reveal their secrets, each segment of flesh and spiraling, cold blooded vein.

Pretty quickly I fell for her. The night she burst through the nursery door, bird book in hand, parted down the center, to show me a drawing of the flycatcher's courtship flight, the male hovering above the trees with fluttering wings, feathers tufted as fat as a hedgehog, the parachute plunge to a lower perch, was the night I knew I was sunk.

“And do you know what else?” she exclaimed. “Its nickname is *brasita de fuego*. It means little coal of fire, bright red crown and breast through the low forks of mesquite trees in Argentina and Mexico, a little bird of flame.”

Sometimes I wondered if Daphne didn't simply love our flycatcher as much as she did because it made her feel less alone, no longer the only one so many miles north of home, no longer our only accidental species.

I had begun my volunteer summer at the avian nursery, the University Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, to help bolster my grades, myself then on the biology track. I assumed Daphne was a student, as well. Maybe she had been. But it turned out she was more of an intermittent patient at the University hospital.

She gave simple and informative lessons on bird feeding. She held forceps and a jar of mealworms soaked in emeraid, and then plunged her hand into a cage of huddled swallows — barn, cliff and tree swallow fledglings that watched her dive mealworms into their open beaks, something she termed “the Tao of swallow feeding — imagining yourself as a diving insect.” But I was more caught up in her stories of her far away Louisiana home, imagining Daphne, pigtails maybe and braces, running through the tallow trees and swamp chestnut oak, the cypress and honey locust, the tupelo gum and loblolly pine, to notice any signs of the bipolar disorder she was rumored to be struggling with, huge sweeps of emotion I could only later imagine, inverted electrical storms, the splitting of stars across your very own heart, as she was told to have described it.

I was taken then merely by the exuberance, her bursting through the doorway, smiling at each bird, how she lifted each one in the palm of her hand, and softly hummed, the way she leaned into you as she spoke, her words sometimes running into one another like bumper locked syllables.

What I hadn't measured were the days she disappeared, sometimes weeks at a time, absences I accepted as part of the mystery, the eternal, mesmerizing draw Daphne had become to me, much like her stories of the strange names of dishes her family regularly consumed — green and crawfish okra gumbos, tomato catfish stew, alligator sauce piquante, whole meals steeping in deep bellied kettles, ladled into shallow bowls, seeping in muddy, spicy

gravies with side dishes of eggplant dressing and smothered green beans.

Daphne once rattled off the different versions of crayfish her grandmother served: courtboullion, étouffée, bisque, boulettes and masque choux. She might as well have been telling me about a menu of meals prepared on the other side of the moon.

Maybe I became as drawn to her as I did because she seemed so different — imaginative current and breath circumnavigating her bones and veins. Daphne seemed hemispheres — stars, moons and all apart from anyone I before met.

When she told me about the places she explored growing up, I felt as though I was listening to bed-time stories of make-believe, a distant bayou world of wet, matted vines tangled into the highest reaches of water-leaning trees, the fluttering purr of beetle and cicada wings and chirping pickerel and cricket frogs, the reflected flash of alligator eyes illuminated by shooting stars and yellow moons emerging through humid shifting clouds.

Even when I was away from the nursery, I found myself daydreaming of Daphne, remembering the way she tested flight muscles of chimney swifts, dipping her hand in their aquariums and plunking out a single swift, holding it gently in her hand and hoisting it the air three times before letting go to lift-off — the haphazard patterns they flew around the room like little drunken pilots and how she shushed them, and whispered, “there, there, there,” as she plucked them from the window screens where they often landed and stared, momentarily, at the wide world spread before them on the other side.

I wondered simple details — what she sounded like in her sleep, whether she laughed out loud at movies, what her kneecaps looked like; were they pronounced or submerged into the knee? Were they scarred from careless flights down stairs? I pictured the soft small of her back, the inward slope of smooth, warm skin and imagined pressing soft kisses, as light as dragonfly wings, between her shoulder blades, through the light hairs on the back of her neck.

Often I found myself staring off into space at the bookstore I worked, a row of customers lined in front of me like cattle in a chute, and my heart losing track, my eyelids falling into the pretty weight of Daphne.

Sometimes I daydreamed whole escapades Daphne and I could embark on, imagined adventures far from the sanctuary of orphaned birds: Daphne and I winging past the gates of Disneyland, huddled together in the twirling Dumbo rides, caught in a shower of mouse ear shaped fireworks, cascading char landing on our shoulders and eyelashes as we dashed through it. I dreamed of us riding gondola trams up the alpine slopes of Switzerland, breathing in cold, sweet air, the taste of wildflower, currant and sun-warmed grass, the two of us yodeling through mountain passes, guzzling from canvas skins, racing whole wheels of Swiss cheese downhill. I saw us climbing the Eiffel Tower with berets drooped over our eyes and long loaves of bread in the crooks of our arms. Daphne and I snuck into the Sun Valley Resort hotel rink and skated patterns of swans and fishes into the soft ice; Daphne's wraparound skirt flared purple and orange as I twirled her gently and she brought her knee in, gaining speed, her face beaming between the blur of white earmuffs. We placed bets at the craps table at Monte Carlo, me clowning with poker chips lodged in my eye sockets. We perched ourselves on the bluffs of San Juan Capistrano and waited for the cliff swallows to arc into the mission eaves.

In my soft imagination, we fell and spiraled into each other's soft arms. In each separate scene, I imagined the two of us walking slowly to our hotel room after our day of adventure, her small head tilting against my shoulder, softly humming, her arm sloped around my waist. The stars burned bright, phosphorous patterns across the night sky and lasted through dawn.

Weeks into summer, I overheard Daphne discussing the future of the vermilion flycatcher with the director of the nursery. Daphne

was making the case for release, and our director was cautioning the same.

"There's the risk he's too far afield from a migration path he'll survive."

"But I thought all birds get released every fall. That's what we've done." Daphne's voice was strained.

"We mostly have, Daphne. But some we keep when we have to."

"In cages?"

"In the flight rooms."

"But why would we do that?"

"If we release him and he can't migrate..."

"You're keeping him here because of all the interest and the profile of the nursery."

"There's a real chance he wouldn't survive the flight."

"He has a right to try," exclaimed Daphne. "Like all the rest do."

"Okay, calm. We're still sorting it out. Let's get him healthy and strong first, okay?"

Daphne turned the corner, spotted me and stopped. Tears ran the length of her chin.

"It's not right to keep that bird," she said, and I nodded. "You saw the drawings of that hovering dance they do."

I had never seen her overcome with emotion. The director watched over her shoulder and caught my glance.

Daphne knelt, bit her lip white and then stood, wavering.

"Here," I said, touching her arm. "How about a walk?"

Drizzle spit the concrete across campus and we walked beneath eaves and the canopy trees to stay dry. The moist air smelled like broken flowers and sky, and I held Daphne's soft hand, the world silent but for the light rain and the sporadic clicking of bicycle spokes, the hiss of tires across wet sidewalks.

Daphne had stopped herself from crying and seemed even, again, but silent. We walked and she wiped the drizzle from her forehead with her shoulder, and I found myself stealing glances at her bare kneecaps as we ducked beneath branches, two perfect round, flat

moon-like disks set midway between her white thighs and smooth shins — now I knew.

“We'll make sure that flycatcher is released back into sky, Daphne. Don't worry.”

Daphne stopped a moment and looked me in the eyes.

“Promise me we will,” she said.

“Joan's just trying to be careful. A lot of people have taken interest in that flycatcher, and she just wants to make sure we do the right thing.”

“You know the right thing is setting him free, right?”

“Of course it is.”

“Promise me, Ben, we'll let him go.”

“I do,” I told her. “I promise we will.”

“Promise me we'll let him go even if I'm not there to help.”

“I promise,” I answered, ever wondering where Daphne may have been going she wouldn't be there to help.

Soon after I held Daphne's soft hand across the wet campus, she had disappeared. I heard the rumors but didn't want to believe them. Maybe it's impossible to guess at the invisible life that swarms other people's hearts and floods them, the swimming and arcing blue currents beneath the skin. Maybe it's even more impossible to lean in and ask.

I found myself those first weeks Daphne had disappeared from her nursery shifts thinking of her as I lifted each infant songbird in my hand, inserting i.o. diet between their beaks, each small heart thumping against my finger. After, I walked our same path across the campus. One night I walked all the way down the trail along the riverbank and through the arcing pathway through the trees, all the way to the University hospital. I stared up at the blue, phosphorescent glow of flickering television sets that bloomed through the windows like candlelight through jack-o-lantern teeth.

I circled the building slowly, moved as high as I could on a surrounding rise of hill as though I might see her through the shrouded glass, might wave a hello.

Some things most don't know about birds:

An infant crow's eyes are a deeper, softer blue than sky.

Swifts and swallows drink and bathe on the wing, sweeping over water and dipping their beaks mid-flight.

Brown-headed nuthatches often use a small swatch of bark clenched in their bills to pry other pieces of bark in search of larvae, proving the avian use of tools.

Chimney swifts use their own saliva to cement bowing, cup shaped nests inside chimneys or hollow trees.

Hummingbirds can fly as fast as 60 m.p.h.

A woodpecker's nostrils are feathered and narrowed to protect it from inhaling sawdust.

Winter wrens build extra "dummy" nests. The dummy nests are never used and ornithologists are unclear as to the reason they're built.

Things I didn't know about Daphne:

Nearly everything.

I was working at the nursery when Daphne's brother came by to collect some of her things. I could see the resemblance. He was close to her age, the same short height, same dark hair and eyes.

She had left a few of her books there, a copy of Salinger's Franny and Zooey, Daphne's underlines and markings along the margins, birds and moons, a couple purple filled stars — I had thumbed through the book only nights before. I imagined she had asked him to retrieve it.

He was on his way out the door, his coat under one arm and Daphne's books in the other, when I approached him from behind.

"I'm Ben," I said. "Daphne trained me in here."

"Hi," he said, his expression unchanged.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

"She will be."

"Where is she?"

"Just resting. Taking care of herself."

"At the hospital here?"

"No," he answered. "She's getting some help from an outpatient clinic a ways from here."

Daphne's brother answered each of my questions calmly, but I also knew he wasn't about to tell me just where his sister was at the moment.

"Did you come all the way from Louisiana?" I asked.

"Louisiana?"

"Or do you live somewhere else?"

"I live in Ann Arbor," he answered. "We're from Michigan. I'll be going to college in Portland next year."

"But I thought..."

"If Daphne told you she grew up in Louisiana, that's just something she talks about," he told me. "It's probably her favorite version of our life. Truth is we had a grandmother there we visited once when we were four and six."

"But her accent..."

"Is just Daphne's accent," he said with only the slightest trace of understanding, a tempered smile of recognition for a part of his sister he was equally charmed by and felt sad about, I imagined.

"Anyway," I said, "it's a very nice...it's a beautiful accent, no matter where it came from."

Her brother paused a moment. "I'll tell her you said hi, Ben," he said and turned.

"Wait." I moved past him. "We're going to release most of our birds in a few weeks. Your sister had as much to do with their survival as anyone, especially one in particular. Is there any way she could join us for that?"

He nodded. "Let's try," he said.

I never saw Daphne again after that late summer afternoon when we released the birds, when she gave up her vermilion flycatcher back into the clouds, Daphne, our own brasita de fuego securing the dance of one wayward vermilion flycatcher somewhere, presumably,

between Michigan and Mexico. But I never forgot her, never stopped wondering how she was doing, how and where she ended up.

I was twenty years old that broken summer we met. The world was huge then. I let its wide sweep, my own cowardice, keep me from reaching across and finding out, separating the Daphne I imagined from the real one floundering in the world. I don't know why I refrained. Maybe I tricked myself into believing Daphne would return to campus, to the nursery. Or maybe I was simply too scared I'd know what to do if she hadn't. I just let go.

Even still, I often wonder and wish I could take her soft hand into mine again, lean in, kiss those whispers I imagined across her eyes and help warm each secret that hid beneath them and answer the final question she asked me that day in the wide maple lined park with the wind in her bangs and the helicopter seeds pinging our shoulders. Never finding a better place between here and the sky, I'd like to try the simple opening of this white page to answer her, as if she might somehow find her way to it.

Yes, Daphne, to answer your good question of all those wandering years ago. Wherever you are, in those cypress bayous or maple seed scattered fields, with resumed flights of birds above us, wherever feathered wings dare open, it's impossible for this not to be okay

