

*I Never Met  
A Bird I  
Didn't  
Like*

*(except for maybe Simon)*

by Tova Gabrielle





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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



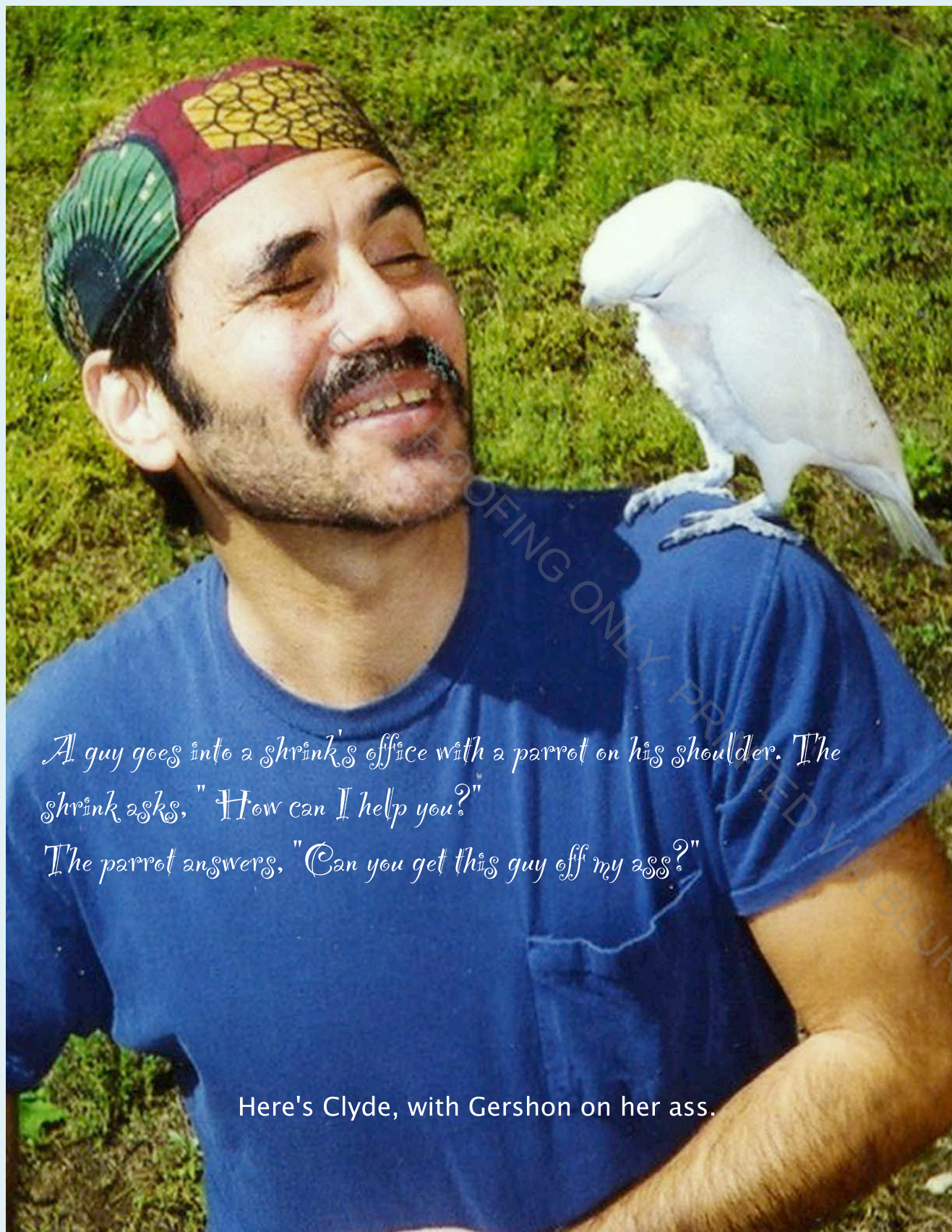
Tova Gabrielle has a master's degree in counseling psychology and has worked with parrots in recovery from their experiences with humans who lack bird brains. (She does not have such a lack herself and knows how to think like a bird.)

Guac, the bird on her shoulder, is a friend of a friend.

*With the onset of empty nest syndrome, I became mentally ill with Parrot Rescuing Disorder, a rare obsession with rescuing birds from unsatisfactory conditions, found in wayward mothers during mid-life crisis. I didn't know that these intense and demanding beings would, in turn, rescue me.*

*In recounting my encounters with avians, I offer you tips, observations, and my own deluded projections concerning my birds' sexuality, needs, and personalities, as well as a window into the mind of a pet codependent who has come to terms with her past follies and emerged to share her experiences and lessons with the world.*

*Tova has been published in anthologies and magazines featuring the genres of psychology, memoir, humor, and poetry.*



*A guy goes into a shrink's office with a parrot on his shoulder. The shrink asks, "How can I help you?"*

*The parrot answers, "Can you get this guy off my ass?"*

Here's Clyde, with Gershon on her ass.



## Introduction

When pet caretakers say, "We can't do a thing about him, they're revealing more about themselves than their pets... When the horse tamer in the book, *The Horse Whisperer* was asked where he got his credentials, he answered that it was just a nuts and bolts education:

"If the owner is nuts, the horse bolts."

I hope this book will help parrot lovers not drive their pets nuts. As for the parrots not driving the humans nuts, I can't assure you of a thing.

About a decade ago, when I was first divorced and suffering from a premature onset of empty-nest syndrome, I said the heck with men and kids and fell in love with parrots.

In the wake of my losses, I gained ... oh, about one or two dozen birds. It seemed like a fair enough trade-off.

In my search for adoptable parrots, I met other bird people who seemed downright addicted. I was glad I wasn't one of them. I only wanted to help distressed avians, whereas they were clearly avoiding the real world.

Now, if I did indeed catch a touch of the bird bug, it was probably from my own birds infecting me with their flock mentality.

To whatever lesser degree I might have been affected, I do know that once I started seeking out and finding birds in need, I just couldn't stop.

In my manic bliss, I did what anyone in love would do, and tried to rescue as many parrots as I couldn't say no to. I was willing to be all things to them, short of becoming a tree.

We had exhausting times together, negotiating the divide between what they needed by nature and what I was able to provide them (not unlike what had occurred in my marriage)

Although I was powerless over my birds, it would be a few years before I would hit bottom and face what all my ex-friends saw so clearly: that I had lost all self-respect and all control over my carpet, my deck, and the wood moldings around my doors and windows. In short, I had fed my birds my house.

I first compiled this book as punishment for my relatives and friends for letting my life go to seed, but then I realized that since everyone I met when walking about Amherst with my bird, seemed to have either a funny or sad story about a parrot, I might be able to get rich and famous sharing the joys and heartbreaks of having lived with these flighty rascals in my earthbound world.

May you be entertained, warned, and enlightened ...

What follows is my testimony.



ONE:

*Goffins Cockatoos*

*Timmy and Clyde*



## *A Brief Resurrection*

When folks in the college town of Amherst, Massachusetts, used to see me strolling down Pleasant Street with a white bird perched happily on my shoulder, they would do double takes or stop. Clyde would raise her crest, fluff out her feathers, and give a light-hearted "Hi Clyde!" and they would often laugh, look surprised, and say, "Hi Clyde!" back. But then the Frequently Asked Questions would inevitably start, and I would find myself feeling like a celebrity who, tired of the same old questions, wants to give sarcastics rejoinders:

"Is that your bird?"

"No, I'm her human."

"Can she think?"

"I don't know, why don't you ask her?"

"Is that bird real?"

"NO."

"Does she feel?"

"Do you?"

OK, perhaps you have to be another pet codependent to understand why I felt so uppity. First off, I'm simply wowed by these winged beings: Clyde could not only understand and use language appropriately, but she was extraordinarily attuned to her environment, including, it seemed, the subtlest emanations of life all around her.

No doubt my own projections as a wild being living in captivity fed my obsession. I desperately wanted Clyde not to be any more "othered" than she'd been during her former 20 years behind bars for the crime of being wild. Before she was allowed to live mostly outside a cage, she'd pulled out her own feathers in frustration—something that never occurs in the wild, and something that I would try to ensure would not continue.

Once Clyde burst into my life, she began a cute but devastating takeover. But I simply couldn't pass her on to someone who would again abandon her. So, being both smitten and anxious (like anyone newly involved), I opted for the well-worn path of denial.





Clyde played her part in our dysfunctional relationship. As bird-frog princess, she demanded (and was granted) a seat by my plate. She ate like a bird: strewing bits and pieces of food all over the table and floor. I further acquiesced to this dominatrix's demands by granting her an occasional spot beneath my bed-covers. Now, like most couples after the initial infatuation, Clyde and I began having problems, particularly when I refused her affections—specifically, her efforts to feed me. In avian social mores, regurgitating into your beloved's mouth is a high compliment. ("Sorry, hon, I just can't get into it.")

Clyde didn't get it. Or maybe I didn't get it. After all, not only is this a form of birdie foreplay, but the method used by mother birds to feed their bappies in the nest. Clyde wanted to mate, and preferably with many male homo sapiens, but she'd take what she could get. Having bonded with humans when she first opened her eyes and saw one, she was doomed to identify with and lust after human love objects henceforth. Lying on her back in my son Julian's lap, she would spread her wings and go flopsy with pleasure as he stroked her, or, in the picture above, twist around to kiss him. (That was cute, but it made him nervous when she'd try to mate with his knuckle.)

Besides being a hopeless romantic, Clyde was a gregarious entertainer. Once, Gershon, our actor friend whom Clyde sometimes let me "borrow," included her in

his comic rendition of Elton John's "Crocodile Rock." For "Cockatoo Rock," Gershon dressed in feather boas and danced as he sang while Clyde perched on his shoulder and strutted, talked, and turned in accordance with his moves.

When the act ended, Clyde proceeded to bar-hop by bounding up and down the bar onto and off of the shoulders of customers seated there, punctuating each pounce with a victorious little squawk. Clyde was a mostly a hit—although some people nearly spilled their drinks. And there was always someone who was afraid of wild beings, be they birds or aging hippies like myself. When such a soul cried out drunkenly, "Oh no, a bird!" I couldn't resist cracking, "It's OK, I can protect her from you!"

Of course, my attitude didn't set a good example for Clyde, who always tried to ensure that people knew she was not only an insider, but on a higher plane than us. If ignored, she'd fly to the highest place possible, puff out her chest, spread her wings widely, and let out a screech that was meant to travel a mile in her native Australian rainforest. "I am queen, and if you don't show reverence, I'll have you for dinner!"

My mother, who eventually stopped visiting, wouldn't kowtow, but would cover her ears, wince, and complain, "She's so RUDE!"

Most visitors didn't usually return to my home. Nor did they seem to care when I'd explain miserably that Clyde simply wanted to be included. They didn't seem to feel guilty when I'd point out that they'd failed to return her greeting of "Hi Clyde." They didn't repent after learning that my child was as needing and deserving of love as any developing two-year-old. And they turned to stone when I tried explaining that she didn't know that screaming didn't endear people to her.

As people became scarce in my life, I thanked Clyde for helping me to sort out who my real friends were, while I continued accommodating and denying. How could I acknowledge the glaring difficulties inherent in raising an only slightly domesticated animal: of the misfit between my domestic home and her being a wild, when she was also my child? Parrots are not like cats and dogs who have acclimated to domestication after so many years. There are serious shortcomings inherent in attempting to getting arial beings to live happily in a home.

Clyde, along with her sidekick, Timmy, learned to go into the trees behind my house and stay in them during the day, then fly in at night for dinner, safety from predators, and warmth. Being tropical birds, they needed to stay in temperatures of 50 degrees or more and to avoid cold winds, as their lungs were extremely sensitive. Their return flight from the woods was always iffy. They often overshot and landed on the



neighbors' deck, from which I had to apologetically retrieve them while praying that they hadn't chewed the wood. If they didn't end up on my neighbors' deck, they might remain in the trees screaming and waiting for me to hold out a long branch for them to step onto and then haul them in.

Goffins are known to become dangerously aggressive when caged together, although in wider expanses, they get along fine, as Clyde and Timmy did in the trees. I stopped putting Clyde in the aviary when I observed that she would try to mount Timmy (that's right, *she* would try to mount *him*), and then, when he'd reject her, she would, somewhat understandably, try to kill him.

I let Clyde and Timmy have the run of the house when I was home, wanting cages to be the birds' rooms, not their jails. But when I couldn't watch them or when I was gone, they were caged. Timmy would have this amused look on his face as he would reach his talons through the bars and toy with various cage locks for hours. One lock that was supposed to be foolproof was a C-clamp. That was probably Timmy's favorite challenge. He looked absolutely triumphant when he worked that lock open. I would return home to find dishes knocked over, flowers eaten, and banisters chewed. That was when I began whispering to my family about selling him. Whispering because, when I spoke of such thoughts, Clyde always turned her back and ignored me.

From turning somersaults on her stand, to grasping a rope in her beak as we swung her around the room above our heads, to perching on my head and combing my hair with her beak, Clyde tried her best to be her wild self, within the confines of the human world. Her favorite game was sorting laundry, especially socks, casting individual socks onto the floor or jumping in the drawer and throwing them all out from there.

Well, I guess a supernatural bird like Clyde couldn't go on like that forever, nor could I ... A breeder had warned me that when you work with birds, you are working with wild animals. Unlike cats and dogs, they are not acclimated to domesticity. He said, "Sooner or later, you're going to lose one. We've only been working with birds for two decades at most. You just can't anticipate all the things that can go wrong."

Clyde, who got into everything, suffered a freak household accident when a vase fell on her in the confusion of moving. Yet even at death's door, she communicated a boundless affection: After her vital functions had apparently quit, I'd wrapped her in my dark green wool poncho and carried her out to the woods behind my house. I had

placed her gently on the earth, with wings spread and head down, covering her lightly with leaves so I could spot her. I would return when my grief subsided and give her a proper burial.

An hour or two later, I held a flashlight and climbed the pine-needle-covered hill on which she lay, but I could not find her. I was calling to her, saying, "Clyde, we love you, Clyde, I'm sorry," when I finally spotted the white of her tail. I no sooner got there when, to my astonishment, she lifted her head.

"My God, she's alive!" I called out, quickly scooping her up. I frantically called Information to find a vet and discovered an animal hospital that was open all night. It was an hour away. The vet told me that Clyde would most likely die within hours. I looked down into her face and thought, oddly, of a lion. I sensed that if anything was keeping her alive, it was my connection with her. Like a string on a kite, my affection seemed to be tugging her in, pulling against death's willful winds

Birds are ingenious at keeping things light. When they are sick, there is no way to know unless they are sitting puffed up on the bottom of their cages because they lack the strength to perch. When I brought Clyde home, she had an indescribably serene expression on her face as she lay on my chest in my bedroom, breathing shallowly, seeming deeply content

"Clydo, we love you! What a bird! Stay with us! You can do it!" I begged. Tonight, lamentably, there were to be no ardent squawks, only quiet grunts when I named Clyde's closest people. When I named Gershon, she grunted louder. And at the mention of Julian, I could feel her heartbeat increase and a slight shiver pass through her.

All night, she lay on my chest with a blissful look that transcended all physical ailments. Her good nature emanated through her breathing, and a deep peace filled the room as she rested sometimes with eyes partially open and at other times closed. I was begging her to stay with it, not to go, when it hit me that perhaps it was selfish to wish this on her. What did she want?

When a storm is approaching, eagles sense it and perch on the highest branches they can find. There, they allow the increasing winds to help lift them high above the dark clouds. They soar above the storm, returning to Earth only after the storm passes. As the dark clouds of my grief had gathered, Clyde seemed to be waiting out the storm in a transcendent state that soothed my resistance to her final flight.

During that long night that couldn't possibly last long enough, I thought to myself,

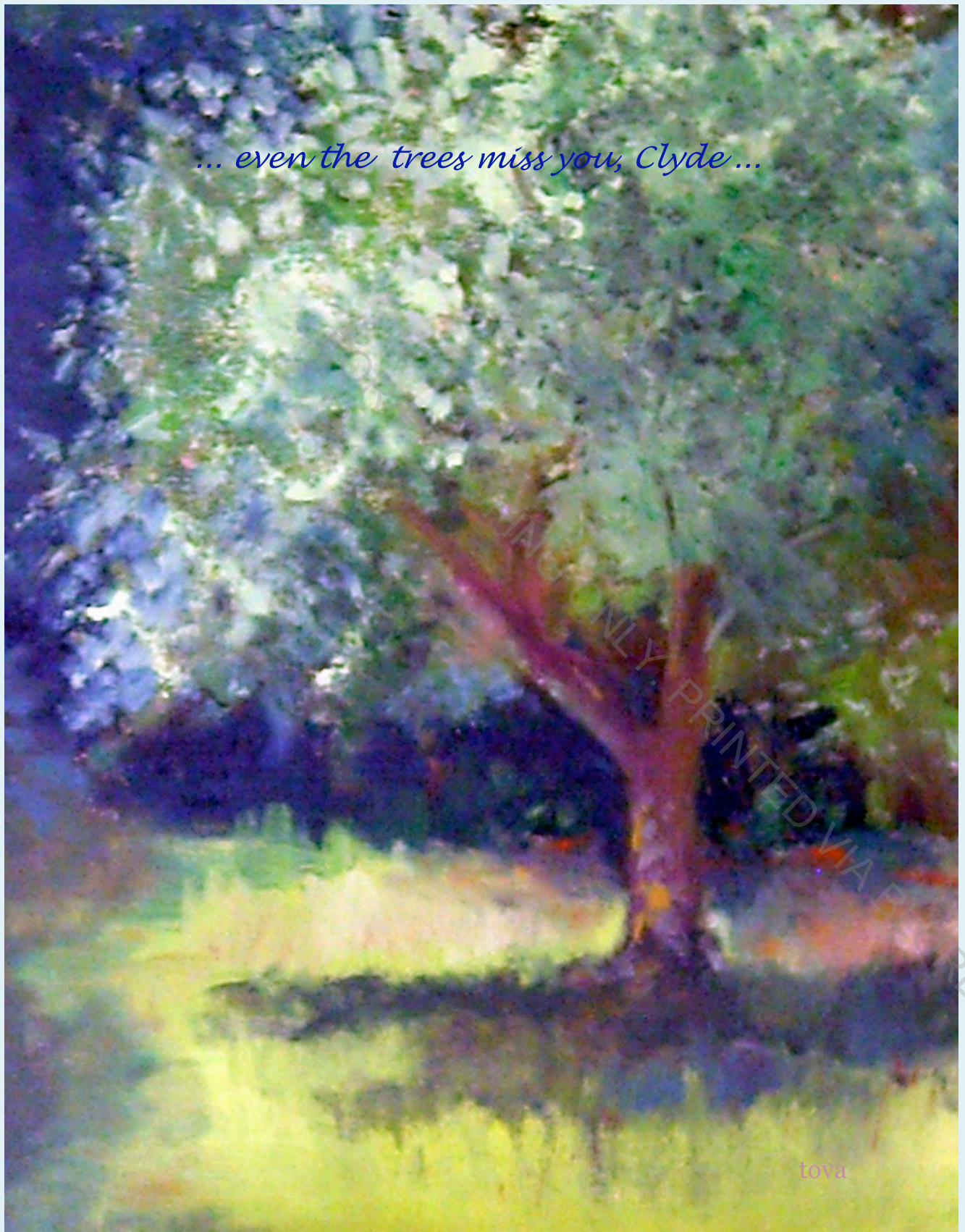


"Clearly, she cannot remain in this body. Isn't it enough to have these last hours together with her?" She seemed to be gliding into some invisible expanse of space. Sensing her gentle rapture, I felt blessed and finally came to a sense of resolution. By the time I finally drifted off at daylight, my dread had changed to acceptance.

At 7 a.m., I opened my eyes to see Clyde lifting her head from my chest, opening both eyes wide, and looking right at me. I thought, "My God, she's recovered!" as she flapped her wings once, hard. And then, just as suddenly, her body stiffened and she was gone.

I was left with a vision of Clyde. Having flown out of her lifeless body with that flap of her wings, she took off like a shot. Then, returning briefly, she joyously circled my head before taking off for good.

*... even the trees miss you, Clyde...*



tova





Timmy, eating a cherry.

You can't raise a bird on seed alone, any more than you can raise a child on only cereal. A healthy bird does not have a protruding breast bone, a sign of malnourishment.

Sunflower seeds are equivalent to potato chips. Birds love 'em but they can not live on them! If a bird is hooked on seed, there's a trick for weaning him or her: wet the seed and add real food, like a peanut butter sandwich on whole grain bread, or eggs, or anything mushy that will stick to the seed. Then start decreasing the seed and increasing the real food. At first the birdie will pick out the seed but inevitably, over time, he or she will come to love and even prefer, whole foods.

Avoid coffee, chocolate, avocados, and preservatives....( for the birdie, although it might not be such a bad idea for you either!). Most importantly, avoid Teflon! Burning Teflon is to birds, what Kryptonite is to Superman.



One: Goffins Cockatoos Timmy and Clyde

I could never figure out how birds choose mates. They all look very similar to me. So what is it that attracts or repels? Is it an unspoken attitude? I.E.: "I don't like the way you perch!"?

Clyde and Timmy would get closer inch by inch over the months, although things moved along much faster when they were in the trees.

Unlike some humans, most parrots are very fussy about who they will go into the nesting box with, and they are usually in no hurry to mate. How slow courting can be! (Think, junior high school: Remember sitting in the movies and agonizing about whether or when that arm might slip around the shoulder?)

They need the right diet, the right amount of light and privacy, the right chemistry .... They need to be happy!



"Care for some help?"



"Maybe I should get a pedicure!"

How do birds know what sex other birds are?

... Beats me ...!

In cases where the coloring is the same for both males and females there is no way to tell a bird's sex by looking at one. The sex organs are internal.

This explains why Clyde, being a female, was misnamed ... unless her former caretakers knew something about her that I didn't!

By the bi ...

Both homosexuality and bisexuality do exist in the animal kingdom and avian queendom.

*Goffins are more likely to reproduce in expansive environments, as well as in the company of other mating Goffins. I found that Timmy and Clyde cuddled only when they were out in the trees.*



*"Of course I love you. I just can't stand sharing the aviary with you."*

One: Goffins Cockatoos Timmy and Clyde



"Timmy! Look how long my nails are getting!"

Birds use their talons for showing humans where to scratch, for picking out sunflower seeds and throwing out the healthy hemp seeds, for slinging spaghetti, pulling fluff out of their ears, *scratching people, pulling leaves and bark off of branches, eating flowers, picking locks, and making tools.*

... (And for holding onto each others' backs when playing piggyback (also known as mating).



## Timmy the Tool-maker

My boy was a trend setter, a paradigm breaker, a...a... smart freakin' bird!  
Maybe someday humans will evolve to their level of consciousness!

OK, get this: Timmy once grabbed a chicken bone from my plate and took it to the aviary. He chewed on the bone and when he got to the middle, the bone was too tough for him to crack with his beak. So what did this bird do? First he splits off a long sliver of a black birch tree branch (his favorite) from an assortment in his aviary. After that, he chisels it down with his beak, whilst holding said utensil daintily, between those long talons (that look both reptilian and like something out of an extraterrestrial movie). Finally, the genius inserts this invention into the median of the drumstick and then pulls it out, and donning the marrow, bends downy head and extends his rounded little, hard black tongue and eats it.

*... What was that "crow" I once heard about only humans being smart enough to make tools??*

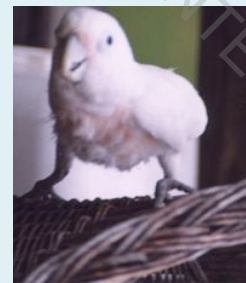


"Scratch hørø; þlllæææz!"

Cockatoos, more than other birds I am aware of, seem to crave being touched. Timmy sometimes seemed very human and had quite a way of communicating. (Or perhaps I seemed very avian to him and responsive to his hints.) When he would cock his head towards me and coyly reach up and scratch, I just loved to help him out.

I think birds can teach us how to access valuable states of being. For instance, did you know that birds meditate? At least that's what it looks like to me. They get real quiet between ten and twelve a.m. and seem to be very contentedly focusing on their breath. OK, so maybe they aren't focusing on their breath ... maybe they're focusing on the sensations throughout their bodies. No? Well, whatever it is, they just seem quite absorbed in something that I can only describe as divine. And they are experts at keeping things light and staying high!

*Wouldn't it be just delicious to be able to tuck your head into your shoulder and go to sleep at a moment's notice?*



Sometimes Timmy napped with one eye open; mastering being in two worlds at the same time.

Although she had plucked herself before I got her, Clyde recovered. She was transcendental.



Let it rain,  
let it rain,  
let it rain!





bird watching





"Life is beautiful"







... uhhh, "getting to know you ... "

Timmy cautiously approaches kitten, Misha. Were he alarmed or excited, his crest would be upright, rather than slightly raised.

I never witnessed or heard of cats being aggressive around parrots. If you were a cat, faced with those enormous and strong beaks, would you be boldly aggressive or innocently curious ?

## *Timmy the Tease*

Timmy became even more of the trickster in the wild. It was as if the tree amplified his personality, ever blithe, humorous and naughty. He took full advantage of his newfound rise in the world.



Timmy liked to jump around when I was trying to persuade him to come, clearly enjoying making me chase and cajole him before he would climb down onto a stick and come in. Sometimes he would stay out all night and worry me to death. Being a tropical bird, he needed to be in 50 degree climates or warmer and was very susceptible to wind. By late the following day he might start worrying and squaking for me to come get him. He didn't know how to fly well, having never learned as a babbie, and would overshoot or completely miss his destination. I could never understand why it was so difficult to gauge distances and directions, but I suppose if I'd never learned to walk I might wobble about missing my mark, also.

One: Goffins Cockatoos Timmy and Clyde



The sulphur crested cockatoo above was done in inkwash, while the one below is pastels.  
(What amazes me is that they can smile... How can that be, considering that their beaks are stationary?)



This is my inkwash impression of a rose breasted cockatoo. This is one kind of bird I could never acquire. They are said to be the sweetest of the cockatoos.





What is the bird on the opposite page doing?

Ummm....probably flirting or dancing, or maybe both.

This cockatoo's stance reminds me of how Julian and I would dance with Timmy.

Timmy would begin the routine by looking at us coyly and slowly begin swinging his head from side to side, with his crest raised. This movement of the head would be accompanied by a dance of short sideways hops. He would squawk/hop to one side, pause, then squawk hop to the other.

The entire dance was done with wings outstretched, and each jump seemed a small triumph.

We would join him in this dance and pounce and squawk in synchronized rhythm with him. Our talented leader and dance teacher would be beside himself, or perhaps trying to get beside himself with each little exuberant pounce.

Two:

Simka, the blue-front amazon, and  
Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw



Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw

Simka, best friend, actress, guru



This gal kept me smiling with her laughing and whistling at a world with which she seemed to be having a constant affair...

When I first met Simka she was hiding from me in a Christmas tree in Vermont. She was just a bappie and clearly didn't want to leave the flock. I remember having the odd thought that Simka was not my type. I wanted a different one of her siblings, but that one was not for sale.

Simka turned out to be my favorite bird ever and I dare say I was hers (if indeed she saw me as part of the flock).

Simka had some very unique behaviors and life experiences:

Often times, when people would be talking about something humorous, Simka would seem to somehow pick up on some inaudible cue, and laugh aloud, before any one else laughed.

She liked to do the "wolf whistle" (the kind of whistle that men make when they see a hot mamma) at two times in particular: whenever I turned on the vacuum , and when I was getting dressed.

Simka had connections: Since my partner was an actor, she once filled a role in a play at New Century Theatre at Smith College. At one point they needed to make an audio track of her singing and trilling. The instant we entered the recording studio, Simka's feathers raised on end with excitement and she began making the most versatile and musical trilling sounds she had ever made. She followed that with whistling in a more animated way than I had ever seen.

It was as if she could sense the music that happened in that room.

In her role in the play, she sat on a perch while people talked about her, and in one situation, someone briefly yelled at her.

After a few rehearsals, Simka started yelling back.

The actors were distressed and called me in to help them deal with her. I explained to them that Simka was a real, feeling being with a high sensitivity and emotional intelligence; and that she did not respond well to being ignored or yelled at. She was no doubt confused and distressed by being yelled at, especially when these behaviors came from people she didn't know.

I suggested that each actor make eye contact with her and say hello to her. This seemed to both calm her down, and help the actors adjust their psychic antennas to her needs.

I had the actor who yelled at her direct the yelling to the side of her cage, so that she wouldn't take it personally and become frightened.

Problem Solved: Simka stopped screaming. At the end of the show, Simka received a standing ovation. I, of course, got no credit. But what parent does?









Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw



Simka had a sidekick, Cody, a yellow collared mini-macaw, who was very possessive of her (although he was sweet when I could get him alone).

Cody was excitable and sensitive. He had abandonment issues (which is why I rescued him –his human became too ill to attend to him). Cody got aggressive when he was with Simka, I think because he was afraid of being taken away from her. Once he apologized to me after nipping me: He bent his head and walked toward me with his wings hanging very low by his sides and his beak scraping the floor. When he got to my feet he stopped and looked up at me intently. I didn't think anything of it and put him back on his perch.

Cody climbed down and repeated the exact movements he had just performed, wings low to the ground, head down, beak scraping along the floor until he got to my feet and again looked up at me earnestly. Suddenly I understood what he seemed to be doing.

I told Cody it was OK and picked him up. He gave me a kiss .

When it came to Simka, Cody was a mindless groupie. It seemed like Cody wanted to BE Simka! While Cody was obsessed with Simka, Simka's strongest interests seemed to be with me, the one who took her out into the world where she was a local celebrity.

Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw

Cody used to live with a dog and he would ride around on the dog's back. Sometimes he would push a ball to me with his beak and say, "*Get that ball!*"

Simka and Cody loved to play hide and seek in the kitchen cupboards. They would hide behind the cupboard doors and jump into sight, shrieking "peek-a-boo!" or "hello!" before they would duck back into the cupboard and out of sight.

The playfulness of the birds was infectious. One day I was strolling, arm in arm, with my mother. I had Simka and Cody on my shoulder. Someone passing by stopped and exclaimed, "Look how well they get along!" I replied with an enthusiastic, "Yes, and the birds get along, too!" Other times folks would stop me and say, "Oh how beautiful!" I would assume they were complimenting me, and say, "Thank you! My bird is lovely too!"



Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw

### *Birds Love Water*

While a bird that is not accustomed to bathing or showering will be shy of it at first, they will love it once they get used to it. Give them a big enough tub to get entirely submerged in, spray them daily so that they can get thoroughly soaked, or, for a good time, take them in the shower with you.



Lots of smart bird-people take their birds into the shower with them. The birds seem to go into an altered state when that water starts to pelt them like rain. I have seen birds that normally did not get along, become completely friendly when in the shower together. (Maybe this would also be a good cure for humans who otherwise don't get along.)



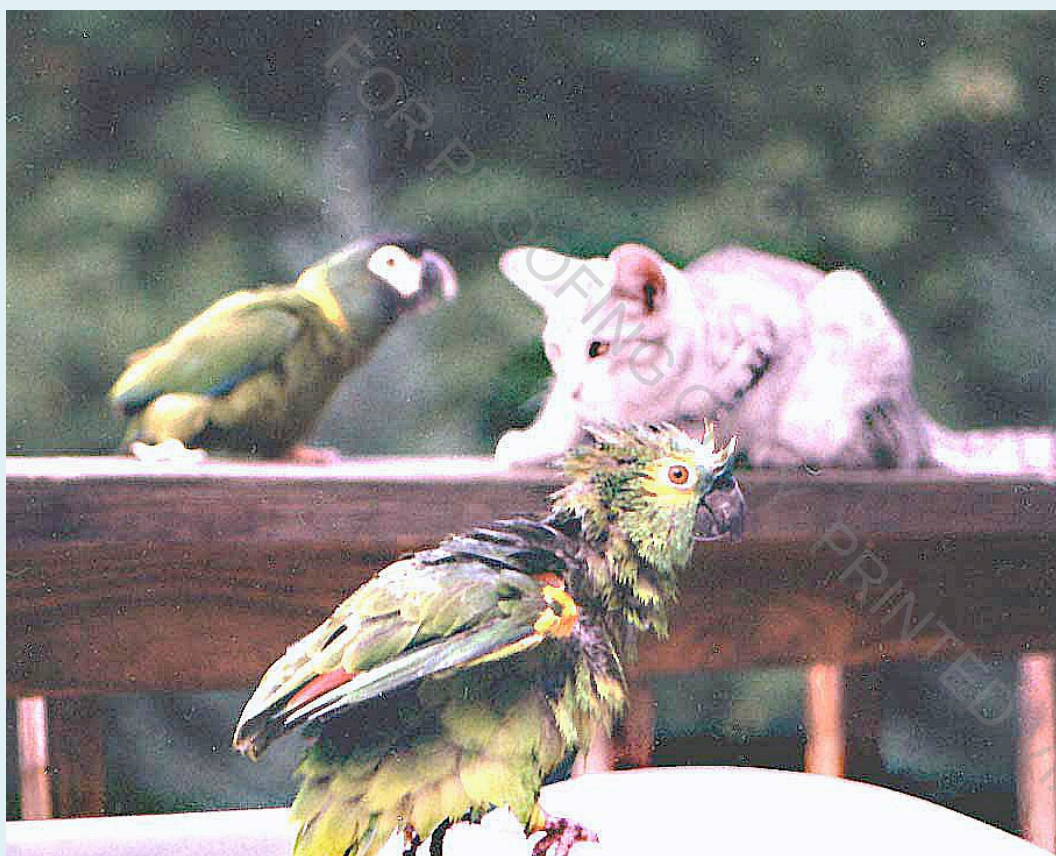








Cody, getting in Misha's face (all posturing)  
and Simka, taking a break from bathing







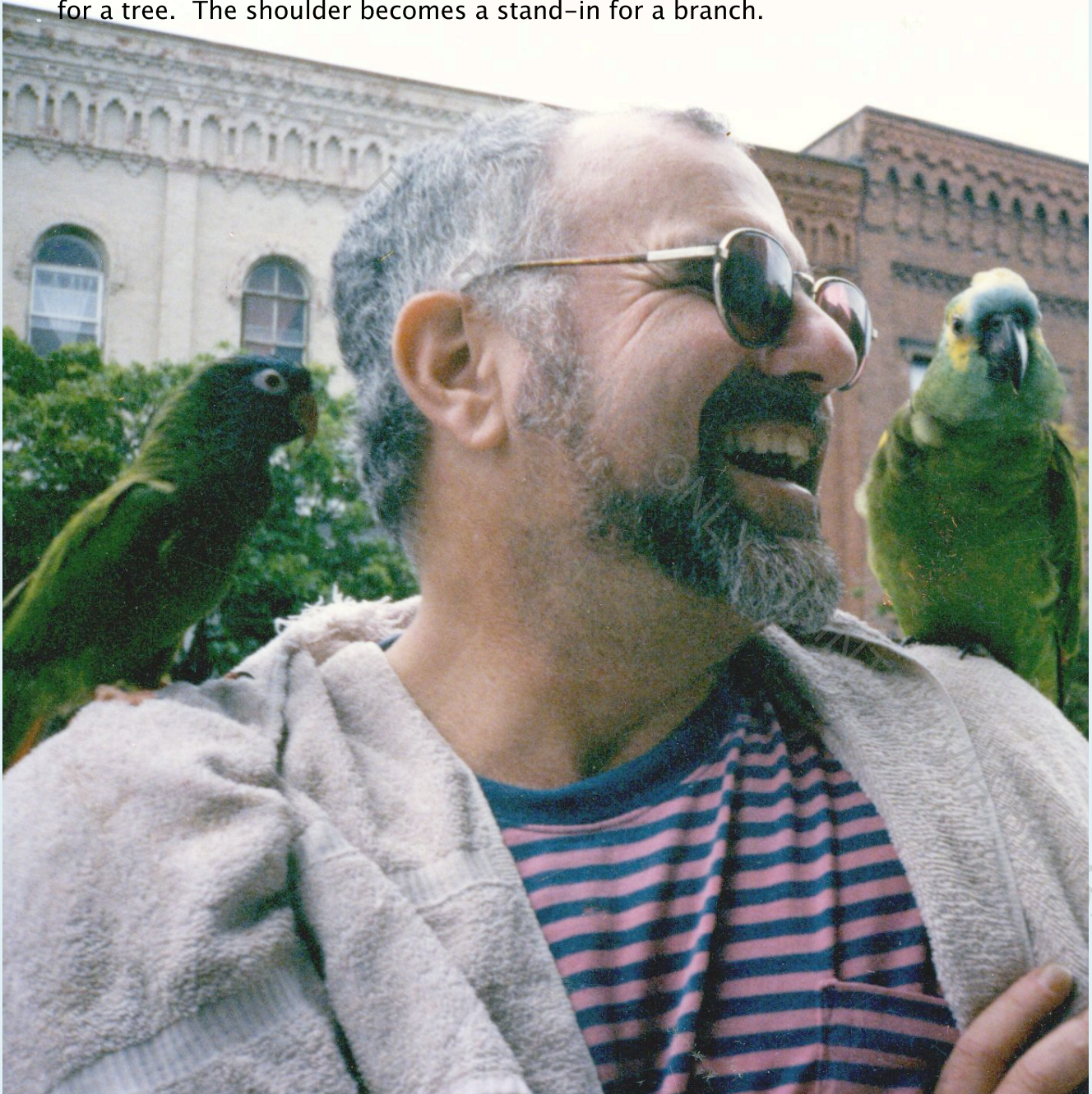


Cody and Simka loved to play with baby toys and would spend hours quietly doing so in the mornings while I slept. They especially liked to play with beads, and colorful little rocks and plastic gadgets. However, they were afraid of toy insects. It seemed as if they perceived everything as being alive. Although they love toys, they are also very happy with a good stick from a tree out back. A good stick has various thicknesses and has bark on it. These branches will provide endless entertainment and help to keep their feet and beaks in good repair. Most trees are bird safe and if you are worried about critters, you can bake them in the oven on low for a while ... Yum, baked bugs.





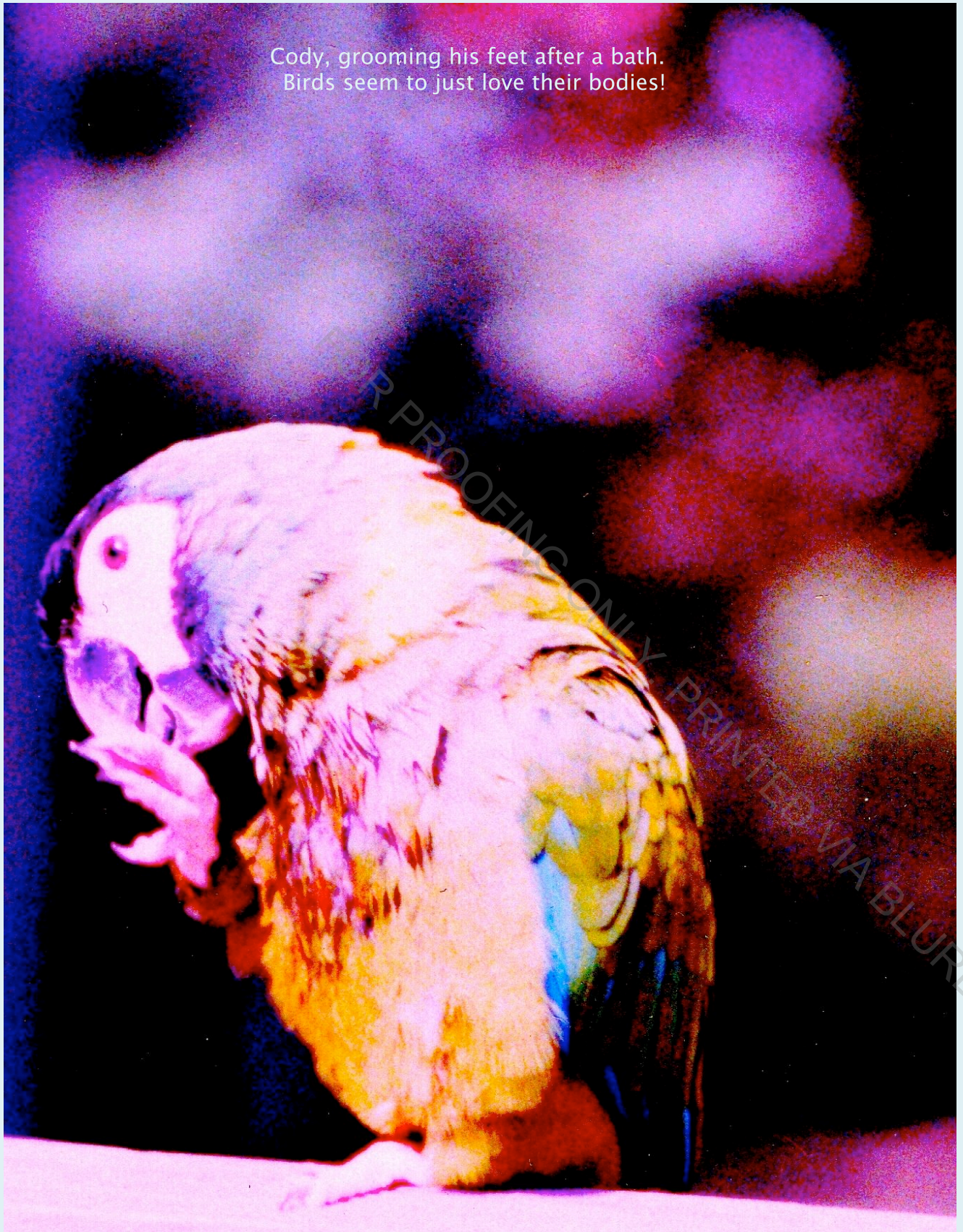
If your bird treats you like it owns you, it's not a great idea to put birdie on your shoulder (unless you are a masochist like some people). When they are on human shoulders, it seems that, to them, the human is something of a stand-in for a tree. The shoulder becomes a stand-in for a branch.



Mitch, with Santo the blue front conure on one shoulder and Simka on the other. Mitch was always kissing up to Simka, who was gay, I guess. She preferred me.



Cody, grooming his feet after a bath.  
Birds seem to just love their bodies!









Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw

**Cages have 3 uses: to sit on, to retreat from the world into, and to be beautiful bedrooms filled with toys and, most importantly, branches for their feet, beaks, fun, and for chewing! Oh how birds need to chew!**

**When housing birds, *think tree*.**

It is important to incorporate trees or branches into their housing. They have a need to chew. It's better than giving them your door moldings.

Branches are a source of comfort and entertainment, better than toys. Most fruit trees and common trees like birch, beech, maple, and elm are very safe for birds.

*Cody, preening Simka*

When new feathers push through (like whiskers) they have a waxy sheath on them. In the wild birds preen each other in order to release the new feathers from these sheaths so that they can then open up, or "sprout."

You can preen a bird by rubbing this waxy sheath between your thumb and index finger and breaking the wax with your nail. Just don't go too far down the feather (think, "cuticle").





Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw



While I highly recommend taking a bird outside to see the world and to socialize, it's tricky and risky to put your bird in anything but small trees. I often had to get my winged friends down with a long stick and a lot of coaxing. I clipped their flight feathers so that they could not fly far but would still be able to land on the ground without hurting themselves.

Birds are very territorial and hierarchial. When they are in a tree or on perches, whoever is on top is the boss.

So when you are the tree and the bird is on your top perch, you are somehow one down to the bird (Don't ask me how) However, Simka never got nippy or "bossy," even when she was on my shoulder. She was always sweet to me.

If you are going to put your birdies in trees, make sure to clip their longest 5 feathers the same length as their secondary ones, but not the rest. This will protect their internal organs when they fly to the ground, but keep them from flying out of sight of you and the house and screaming all night for you to come find the tree in the woods with a flashlight and get your kid to climb 40 feet with a bagel on a stick....and missing school the next day.

~

A note about cutting the flight feathers: Birds do not have clotting ability and so if you cause them to bleed, you need to immediately stop the bleeding with a paste that you can buy in the pet store, called, "quick stop." In an emergency you can make a paste out of flour and water and apply that to the injury.











Simka would harmonize with music. She loved to hit the high note with a great shrill whistle.

I was always sure to leave music on when I went out.

Some folks leave the TV on for their birds, but not unlike small children, birds can become very upset by what they see. It seems that birds cannot differentiate between reality and the imagery on television. I once heard of a bird having a heart attack as he watched a hawk fly toward him on the set.

## **Simka Goes Air-Skiing:**

As I have mentioned on previous pages, it is important to feed your birds a wide variety of healthy foods. They can't handle coffee, avocados, sugars, chocolate or preservatives.

I once made the mistake of giving Simka sugar, and the results were astounding:

I had been driving along, eating a vanilla ice cream cone, with Simka on my shoulder. (Yes, I was quite a sight.) Simka leaned over and nibbled on it, and I didn't think much of it.

After a few minutes, Julian, who was in the passenger seat, asked, "Where is Simka?!"

It was then that I happened to look in my rear view mirror and see Simka clinging to the trunk with her wings outstretched and whistling shrilly as I drove along obliviously.

She had scooted out the window and, with talons securely hooked into the rim of the trunk, was having the ride of her life.



Two: Simka, the blue-front amazon, and Cody, the yellow-collared mini macaw

I'm one of those odd birds who feels the need to buy pets for her pets. Sometimes it might have been better to keep them single, as with Simka, who was really a one-person bird. Over the years, Cody became more and more attached to and protective of his relationship, to the point of biting anyone who approached Simka. It got to a point where I was thinking of selling Cody, a taboo in bird etiquette. You just don't break up bonded pairs. Well, I walked down to West Hartford Center with Cody on my shoulder and, sure enough, someone stopped me and offered a thousand dollars for that bird. I really thought this man was especially kind, so I considered the option.

The man came to my mother's house, where I was staying, and where I had my birds. (My mother always begged me to leave the cage open so that they could go in and out—she hated cages.)

When the man came into the den where the birds were sitting on the cage, Cody started chanting, "Bye bye, bye bye!" and climbing away from the man and down the outside of the back of the cage.

The man nonetheless approached, grinning at the birds.

"Stop!" Mom said. "Tova, can't you hear Cody? He's saying bye bye."

I pulled Moom aside and said, "Mom he offered a thousand dollars."

"I don't care how much he offered; the bird is telling him to go!"

Mom, of course was right, and brought me back to my senses. A relationship was saved, at least for the time being.

# Three: Red Front Macaws Rudy and Ruby

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Three: Red Front Macaws Rudy and Ruby



Rudy, Ruby's "abusive husband," hanging out

Ruby and her mate, Rudy, both endangered red-front macaws, had been given to me by Jean, an animal lover I'd met when retrieving my sixteen-year-old Julian from her house.

I'd heard her birds calling from inside, and I asked to see them.

Jean told me how frustrated she was with their screaming. She eagerly led me into a back room where her two birds had sat for ten years, not mating in spite of the recommendations of other breeders to isolate and ignore them so that, I suppose, there would be no competition for their affections. This reminded me of my parents' well-intended but poorly enacted efforts to discourage me when I was little from playing with my brother, in the belief that it would encourage greater bonding between me and my sister. Is there really such a finite amount of affection in living beings that it has to doled out like that?

I was captivated by Rudy's and Ruby's long green bodies, bright red heads, and the orange and blue markings on their wings. But when Rudy sidled up to me at the side of his cage, gave a soft, appreciative little whistle, and then whispered to me, "Hi, how are you ...?" I was almost giddy with delight.

Like I said, breeders advise that if you want birds to mate, you should give them a very large cage and leave them alone. I guess that, as with humans, desperation breeds affection. The only problem is that birds fall in lust with the objects they first see when they open their eyes, and since these birds were hand-fed, that spelled trouble in the nesting box. Ruby, apparently not feeling very maternally nurturing, would intentionally break her eggs.

For a decade, Ruby and Rudy had tried to woo Jean and her husband, Harry, who, being the strong man he was, was less taken in by their ruses. Dear Jean had been more seduced and consequently more hurt. Once, Rudy, probably frustrated by too much time in that back room and overzealous to be out, had bitten her hand, and the wound had required stitches. Since then, she'd left the beasts to abuse each other.

Sigh. Such is the way of family dynamics.

I wanted those darlings as much as any love addict, and if I got hurt, well, it wouldn't have been the first time. Common sense has little place in infatuation.



For the next hour, Jean and Harry watched me work with the birds as the birds worked on me. I began by establishing who's who in the pecking order. Using the tools of a stick and towel, I taught them to step up onto the stick by pushing the lengthwise stick against their chests and commanding them to step up. Rudy tried to nip me but stopped himself, yelling, "Ouch! Bad bird!" in Jean's voice.

I encouraged them to come to me and then to allow me to hold them. They learned to step up onto 2 sticks in a ladder-like fashion, which, odd as it sounds, established my dominance in the relationship, without which, I might have continued getting bit, if I went against their wills. Just as children need to know that their parents are in control, this leads to easier relationships. I had them nuzzle against my chest in the towel. I held them close so that they could hear my heartbeat.

Jean asked me if I would consider taking them, even though she could sell them. She said she knew that I would make them happy. She would have visiting rights. She came by once or twice after that and left with peace of mind, seeing that the birds had so happily joined in on the antics of our ever-increasing flock.

~

*Some birds prefer other species over their own: Rudy the Red-front Macaw immediately abandoned his same-species mate, Ruby, when he met Simka's mate, Cody. Rudy kept Ruby in line when she would move menacingly toward Cody, lightly nipping her in the neck. Simka, ever the one to keep things light, seemed to simply ignore them.*



Julian, with Ruby



Another kind of Macaw:

Hyacinth (oils)



# Four: Poetic Musings



## Pickleweed Howl

Birds bloom and plants fly but no one is crying  
in blue grass and salt marsh, with Ash Grass aspiring.  
The watery bogs seem to think it's still summer  
yet breezes blow cool and the sun shines asunder.

My mind's in the mud pool and in it are fishes.  
Storks walking above, pull up Squigly Delisheses.

Birds in the mudflats with ripples beyond them  
are dappled and hackled, mud-whacked and sun-splattered  
with chit chat and chattering to  
a world all in crackles.

I'm slip-shod and salted, tired and hackled,  
yet water and wind are not rattled or shackled.  
Sun's a warm distant girlfriend, I wish to hold onto  
She doesn't forget me; she needn't remember  
to pull up her hood, for tomorrow's November.

Amidst boggles of tomorrows, I let go of the sorrows  
for here in the sunshine the world's just and still mine.  
Beside sea stalking Sleepers, I'm a tight, blue-jean creeper:  
a land-locked low-peeper, amongst flighted wet winkers,  
mud-marsh slow sniffers, and shimmering beepers,  
I'm a mid-day light reaper, a waker and sleeper  
on sun-splattered dapplegrass, just a lazy word-heaper.  
a nodding-out hipster, no-fuss trick-or-treater  
of salt-glanded sea suckers on stem-soaked sunlight reapers.

My thoughts gather thickly in thickets of lushness  
then splatter like batter in thoughts that don't matter  
to dry beds of mud flats and sneaky rock crevices,  
where minds wander wearily and thoughts roam directionless

The hills in the distance host birds plush insistence:  
that will-ness and frillness become silence and stillness  
as Picklegrass wiggles, smallish and content-like,

not city-slick or thick lipped, money-minded or grunt-like

Pickleweed Soda Ash, with glass-making doctorates  
host dots like dill pickles for sea-staring snipers  
Bright Bitter side sitters, these salt-sweltering settlers  
are benign benefactors; squatters without feathers.

In blue light late breezes, freckled young peepers,  
birds and the picklegrass are pocked freedom-keepers  
Salt light and redlike they bend their red heads, like.  
They're stemlike and twiggy, but not anorexic, not shift or drippy.

Sing-song, crunching footsteps awake me re-raveled  
feeling spongy and ungly, weedy and watery  
I'm a wandering stop-worryer a runaway from hurrier  
a word scrambling barrier to the hurried and harrier

It's a fate I could live with, a plan I could give with  
with water and wonder crawling out from down under  
no fear of the future or shame of a blunder.  
Relaxing and languishing on poor man's asparagus

To rest and re-ravel, a plan most gregarious!



*Just Before the Rain Came*  
*Just before the rain came,*  
*a heaviness set into my bones;*  
  
*a shadow crossed my face....*

*Just before the rain,*  
*the dream-catcher froze in the window*  
*saying I must let these strangers in:*  
*the nightmare of nakedness,*  
*the one of forgetfulness,*  
*the long abandonment,*  
*as the tyranny of desolation, unheeded*  
*turned*  
*myriads of dancing demands...*

*Just before dawn*

*the rain came*

*and with it, strange dreams.*

*But before I dreamed the strangers,*  
*before the rain brought in the day*  
*a remarkably friendly wild bird*

*came to me...*  
*and you turned towards me, in your sleep*  
*pulled me to you, spooning*

*while the wild bird nestled  
so unbelievably close!*

*Before the strangeness,  
and the rain  
that cast its shadow on the day  
before I knew what I know no  
before the aching dreamed me up  
before I even saw your face  
before the koans of this life,  
the fears and cravings,  
this tunnel  
of dreaming  
death into life ...*

*O before  
all of this  
world closed over  
sensation*

*I was there  
as I am here  
after all the chapters of lived live  
dispersed in dusts of yesterday  
the world was all sensation,  
moss pillowing my cheek*



*assuring kisses,  
the mind consumed with energy*

when all was balance....

*Before I dozed  
the first time  
before the breast was taken aw*

*before they brought in angst instead;  
when I was just energy in motion*

*music uncolored by trauma*

*and orchestrated  
with rhythms  
peculiar to no one*

*I was with the wild bird who was not wild at all.*

*Between befores and  
after-words  
between worlds, words, and dreams*

*the slate was clean  
the mind was clear -  
it was just before I was lonely ...*

## *Yellow Bird*

I dreamt of you again last night, my lemony Indian Ringneck.

Full of contradictions, the one we call "Blond Bimbo," you are the one Mitch and I take turns bringing to bed when our spirits get earthbound. We choose you from the rest of the flock. It is always you of whom I dream, my buttercup, so bright.

Mitch and I noticed that you seem half-cocked, waddling along slowly, sweeping the floor willy-nilly with your long tail. We laughed and call you waltzing Matilda.

Having forgotten your native song, you imitate humans and whining dogs.

It is said that you Ringnecks don't bond. Is it because you take on different mates unlike the others who pair for life?

Can you truly not bond or do you simply reject bondage?(Would they say that a nun or a yogi can't bond?)

You lie on your back in the palms of our hands, sticking one talon into your beak as if biting a nail, as we compliment and scratch you under the wing. Like a man, I claimed that I didn't need you at all, could sell or trade you tomorrow because I was not attached to you in the same way I was to the others.

I remember how you chased away the aloof and exquisite female Cleo in preference for the company of your brother by whom you knelt, craning your neck, begging to be fed by him, acting like a baby. Cleo was never aloof toward you. I saw you menacingly poking at Cleo. Then, fickle girl, when your brother Pasha wasn't looking, you would sidle up to Cleo and rest your downy head on her breast as if to say, "Of course I still love you ..."

I called you ridiculous because you choose to mimic only discordant sounds and not the classical whistles or the cordial hello's and whistles of your rival, Simka. No, you only imitate the tones that itch and annoy, that interrupt Sunday morning slumbers: a whining pup, or the conure, Nemo, with his shrill territorial warnings



that itch and annoy, that interrupt Sunday morning slumbers: a whining pup, or the conure, Nemo, with his shrill territorial warnings to all that alighted on his yard, announcing his dominion, to real and mostly imagined intruders.

I retrieved you from the pet shop when the whites of your eyes had turned red from stress, making you look haggard although still a baby. You looked at Mitch when we returned home and your eyes spoke such relief.

You are the one, the only one who sleeps all night cuddled in the crook of my neck when I am not willing to contain my hurting, can receive no comfort from humans. You are the one who loves me tenaciously, yet with exquisite subtlety. You make slight flap flapping sounds with your wings, content in the privileged dark. You slip right through the veil into my dreams like softly lapping breaking waves upon the shore of my consciousness, washing over and surrounding me with your innocent reality.

# Five: The Rest of the Flock





Mom,

kenji likes the conure but can't handle the constant need for attention. santo needs more. i can't even take his squawking sometimes—he is loud. i hope having a friend will help. he is a sweet bird, especially when travelling. we take him for walks and he loves it. –Swan

This bird is a blue front conure named Santo. Timmy used to sleep with his wing around Santo.

Santo fell for my daughter, Swan. He loved to cuddle at night against Swan's neck.

The blue fronts are the sweetest of the conures, but all conures have loud voices, not meant for the indoors.





## Cockatiels

Some folks say that cockatiels are basically miniature cockatoos. Both species are from Australia and full of personality. Cockatiels seem to be a bit more talkative than cockatoos.

Luka and Suki were musical, witty, and whimsical. In fact, I would have been as happy with 20 cockatiels as I was with all the more expensive, larger birds in the aviary.

Luka seemed unable to differentiate between imagination and reality (not unlike me). He once tried to eat peanuts from a picture in a magazine. He was a feisty bird who liked to hide behind a little jewelry box I had next to my bed and intermittently jump out and say, "Peek a bird!"

Suki was a healer. He would fly to my shoulder when I was clipping another bird's talons or attending to any distress and serenade my patients, whistling "Tequila" then promptly flying back to his perch when I was done.

## **Nemo and Paco the Conures and Simon the Senegal**

I always fantasized about having a parrot. I knew that they cost a lot of money and so had never considered that I actually could own one of my own (or, rather, as I would later learn, "be owned" by one).

The first time I went into a shop that sold parrots, my son Julian was ten at most. We were astounded by a very personable bird with a black head, aqua chest, and green wings. The bird reached out a soft, warm foot toward me and grasped my left index finger. This bird, which I learned was a nandy conure, seemed to be smiling. "Oh, too bad he's \$500," I said to Julian, and moseyed on. Julian nearly cried because he wanted that bird so badly.

Instantly hooked on the personable, funny, but unaffordable bird, I decided that somehow Julian was going to have that bird or one like it.

Two weeks later Julian and I went into another pet shop and found another nandy who looked exactly like the bird we had seen. I went out to the cashier and asked, "How much is that bird?"

"You don't want that bird," the man answered.

"Why?"

"I'll show you," he said, and I followed him back into the room where the bird was. At the sight of the man, Nemo screamed and lunged at him.

"This bird is MEAN," he said. I looked into the bird's eyes and saw intelligence and fear.

"Yes I do want the bird."

"You can have it. Let me get you a box."



"No, do you have an old rag or a towel?

"You're crazy. You'll get bit.

"No, let me have a towel please."

I somehow got Nemo into the towel. I must have known about the helmet grip because there is a way to hold a bird's head so it won't turn, and I must have known about holding it to my chest so it would hear my heartbeat and thus be soothed.

I drove home with Nemo on my lap in the towel and talked to him the whole time.

On the way home, I stopped at another bird store for a consultation. The woman at this store looked at Nemo and said, "This bird is scared stiff. You just have to help him calm down and he'll make a fine pet. I can see he's a sweet bird."

I recall the feeling of this sweet, warm little body in my lap as I was talking to him in soothing tones all the way home. Julian, beside me, was ecstatic.

Nemo tamed down immediately and became quite a large personality around the house. The only problem was his voice. Nanday conures normally live in the rainforests, where they call to their mates who might be up to a mile and a half away. The volume was deafening.

I rationalized that he would make a good watchbird: Nemo thought it was his job to protect us from anyone who walked by or, god forbid, up to our door.

I decided I wanted to get a mate for Nemo. Julian and I went to a bird farm in Connecticut and Julian got hooked on a gorgeous golden, handicapped bird that they had foolishly named "Stumbles." This bird suffered from collapsed ankles due to poor nutrition in the breeder's care. I was much more

interested in the other birds, but this one was not only offered to us for free but was the one who stole Julian's heart. "I want Stumbles!" he cried and cried.

"What about a beautiful bird, a younger bird, a perfect baby with a perfect body?"

"I want STUMBLES."

On the ride home, Julian held the bird in a towel on his lap. As soon as the nanday conure, Nemo, and our new female bird whom we renamed Paco met, they fell in love.

The next bird I rescued was a wild-caught Senegal parrot, Simon. I would soon learn that wild Senegals are the one kind of bird that are almost impossible to tame.

Was Simon's spirit broken? I don't know, but this bird did not seem to possess the natural innocence of the others. He had absolutely no issue with taking my face off; it seemed he went out of his way to bite me. I remember that Mitch would come home from working with inner city kids who were in lock-up and somehow it seemed that he was talking to the fierce Simon as if he too were just out of or on his way to jail: "Listen, Simon, dude. I feel your pain. I'm not going to abandon you. Give me a chance. It's OK now. I promise."

Mitch thought Simon was a riot, but I truly could muster no love for this bird, no matter how much it was not his fault that he was so traumatized.

Simon had a thing for Paco. He would wait until Nemo was asleep and then sidle up to Paco and start preening her. She would move away from Nemo and return Simon's affections, but when Nemo would stir, she would rush back to his side...

**Paco**

The birds had distinct patterns of activity and inactivity. They sang and played, starting around 8 a.m., until around 10:30, when they became meditative and quiet until around 6 p.m. Then their talking and playing would increase. They liked to go to sleep with the sun and needed complete darkness and quiet. They would protest vociferously until accommodated. (Never approach a sleeping bird from the back, as only predators do this in the wild.)

When black-front conure Nemo and gold-front conure Paco were sleeping one night, Julian came into our bedroom and said he wanted to see Paco. I told him he couldn't wake the birds because it would startle them. "I want to see Paco!" he insisted and burst into the living room to say hello to the honeymooners.

He came back into our room, leaving the door to the living room open and the light on in there. A minute later, Paco flew into the room and flew right over to Julian, landed on his shoulder and bit him on the ear. Then, as suddenly as she'd come in, she flew back into her room, having set the score straight. At least one of us set some boundaries with Jules that night.



Julian feeding a gull  
near Martha's vineyard



## ***The Llama***

Baby was a tiny pigeon-toed yellow budgerigar that Julian had persuaded me to buy. His beak was slightly crooked. The bird magazines warned consumers to check whether a bird they were thinking of buying looked healthy and to beware if it were too docile: it could be sick. But being an odd bird myself, I had acquiesced to my son's request, having found Baby's vulnerabilities endearing. Julian soon fell in love.

Baby had the biggest mouth of all of our birds, which included two cockatiels and two conures. His squawking protests and unrealistic efforts to stand up to the larger birds when they tried to push him off a perch elicited cheers from Julian, Mitch, and me.

Baby would squawk even more when we rescued him, diving into our shirtsleeves and under blankets and even sticking his silky, round, feathered head into Mitch's mouth. Mitch would kiss Baby's head feathers and cause them to stick straight up in a Mohawk when he emerged.

I knew from the start that Baby was weird. But I did not voice my concern that since he had probably been malnourished as a buppy, his beak might not straighten and his legs might collapse. And when Baby turned from bright yellow to dull green and then to an unnatural blue (the color of his belly), I rationalized that it was just nature's mystery, even though he was not yet molting.

We thought we could love those things away, I suppose. I bought Baby a white budgerigar as a companion. Whitey had a crusted sear; again, I was unconsciously attracted to the weakling. The storekeeper insisted that no, the crusting was not from nasal discharge but just from "probably having been knocked around in shipping." Whitey died before we became attached, fortunately.

Baby loved going into the shower more than any of the other parrots in the aviary. They often went into a trance when that lukewarm rain began to fall, closing their eyes and craning their heads to be tapped with spray,

extending their little round nutshell tongues to drink greedily of the drops. In order to get a more direct pelting of the precious jeweled droplets, Baby would climb up on the large, flat, silver-feathered head of Simon, our otherwise unapproachable wild Senegal. Insatiable Baby refused to acknowledge her limits. I'd like to believe the vet who assured me that it was not my fault that Baby drank so much water that she drowned herself from overconsumption, that only a challenged bird would not stop drinking the "rain" when she had had her fill.

Just before the bird died, Julian cried out a demand to me to make Baby's convulsing stop, to keep shaking her upside down, trying to squeeze out more water, as the vet had prescribed on the phone minutes earlier regarding her spasms. But while it was helping, it was not enough.

Moments later, I held her somehow suddenly weightless body in my hands and noted that for the first time I was not running from the sight of death. All that was left, I saw, was a sweet feathered ball that she had inhabited for a few months. I was surprised that death was neither ugly nor frightening, only vacant. Then I phoned Debby and Marty, my bird-loving neighbors with whom I'd shared many a "bird and breakfast" Sunday morning. They had brought their own kids to play with ours and had wanted to buy Baby, remarking at her unusual feisty antics.

Julian needs some kind of burial ritual; do you know any?" They came over to my house, armed with holy water that had been charged by a high Buddhist lama, and pried open Baby's beak to put a drop in and say a prayer of good passage. Julian took a sip, and immediately his sorrow lifted. We walked out to the garden on a balmy fall night and placed Baby into the ground. Julian and I were about to cover her soft belly. Touching her lightly, Julian said, Goodbye, Baby." We both heard a squeak and felt a vibration come from the bird's long-stilled body.

"She's alive! Did you hear that?" we both exclaimed. Yet, upon further investigation, it was quite clear that Baby's stiff body was indeed dead. It was as if a tiny strand of energy had somehow remained in her body and been released at that moment of saying goodbye.

"Baby loved me so much she said goodbye!" Julian shouted as we all walked back under shimmering stars. Then he remarked that it was a good thing that that high camel had given us the magic potion that had brought Baby

back to life for an instant. There followed a puzzled silence. "Camel?" I asked. "Yes, that llama camel, how did it give Debby that holy water, anyway?"

We explained that a lama was also the name of a Buddhist priest and then walked dreamily back to the house to feed the rest of the flock.

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### Negligence

This couple has completely forgotten about the bird! The poor thing seems to be holding onto the woman's shoulder for dear life. What if he falls and she backs up and steps on him?

How long do they think their fun and games can last when they are prone to acting out their own narcissistic fantasies?



### Violence

Here the couple appears to be fighting over a stupid, un-ecological and health-endangering coke bottle, and right in front of the bird.

Talk about unconsciousness!

Is this poor bird fluffed up out of pleasure, or is it getting ready for fight-or-flight?

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