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THE GHOST BIRDS

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Illustration by Hokyoung Kim

***Audio:** Karen Russell reads.*

I led the way through the woods because I didn't want my daughter to have her first encounter with the ghost flock alone. We were trespassing, but it seemed highly unlikely we'd be caught—the school had been abandoned since the previous century, when ash from the Great Western Fires made most of the region unlivable. My daughter had never set foot inside an old-fashioned brick-and-mortar school, and seemed more intrigued by the idea of seeing a chalkboard than by the birds. The school

was on the outskirts of a Red Zone in our family's ancestral breeding grounds—"Oregon" on the older maps, the ones from my boyhood. An evocative name, a name I loved and mispronounced with reverence at age eleven. I grew up in a town called Eugene, in the shadow of mountains that were unreachable by my third birthday. Ore-gone.

We were going in heavy, geared up. The blood kept jamming in my head. My daughter, Starling, looked so small in my viewfinder, struggling under the weight of her spectrograph. She is turning fourteen in November, and she has never seen a bird offscreen. Two milestones for me that dusk: my first visit to the world's largest known roost of Vaux's swifts, and my first trip with my daughter post-divorce.

As we pushed on toward the chimney, I wished that I had invited Orrine. I hadn't wanted my new girlfriend to intrude on my time with Starling, but now that our trip was under way I regretted the decision. I could have used the extra set of muscles. Another paranormal birder's expertise. Orrine has the most extraordinary eyes, the burst purple of a calliope hummingbird's throat feathers. We've been dating for three months now, if you define dating as sleeping under bridges hoping to glimpse a colony of ghost swallows; I do, and, fortunately for me, so does Orrine.

Karen Russell on ecological crisis.

The school's eighty-foot brick chimney was the tallest man-made structure for miles. It would be difficult to escape if the Surveillers took an interest. Orrine was shot in the former Okefenokee Swamp, while searching for traces of the ivory-billed woodpecker. Another birder in our network, Suzy, had been held for ransom after being caught by Surveillers in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve while mapping the migration of the resplendent quetzal, a bird that's lineage dates back forty-nine million years and that has been extinct for the past twenty. Popple lost his pinky to a Surveiller's laser while taking speed photographs of the ghost of a cedar waxwing.

The Surveillers aren't much for small talk. They won't hesitate to put a trespasser in a bag. Orrine was lucky that day in the swamp—she clung to a branch on one of the few living cypress trees, pulling herself up into its saving arms. The A.Q.I. was such a nightmare that the Surveillers left her behind.

Once the sky became deeded property, Surveillers started patrolling the hazy air above the lonely scrublands and evaporated lakes. Their employers are paranoid in proportion to the suffering that surrounds them; they seem to feel that anyone who casts a shadow in a Red Zone is an "ecoterrorist." We joke that they must want to keep the escape routes to the moon clear. "You'd think they'd look the other way," Popple huffed to me during our spring count. "What's it to them if a pair of paunchy loners are out here collecting songs? It's nothing *they* can profit from."

My daughter mercifully missed the land grabs and the water wars fought above the rasping aquifers. The sky is what has been colonized in her lifetime—a private highway system branching out of Earth's shallows into outer space, its imaginary lines conjured into legal reality and policed with blood-red force. A single human being now claims to own all the sky that lifts from the Andes to Mars.

I'd had a recent run-in with a Surveiller myself. I had not mentioned this to Yesenia, my daughter's mother. She is a worrier by nature, and I did not want to kindle that fire. I did not want to be consumed by it, either. My pilot friend, Stu, a cheerful alcoholic with a Humming Jet license, had flown me to the Red Zone south of Mt. Hood, where I'd spent three weeks camping out and

listening to the fuzzy music of a dead vesper sparrow. I escaped the Surveiller in the conventional way, via a blood bribe. Cash is not a resource I have much of, but my blood type is rare and beautifully oxygenated.

To be a kid requires difficult detective work. You have to piece together the entire universe from scratch. I tried to remember this when Starling turned three and her questions evolved from "Who that!?" and "When snack?" to that developmental rocket booster "Why?" No adult is ever more than three "why"s away from the abyss.

Children wake up to the knowledge that they have missed almost everything—millennia of life on Earth, and the blank blooming that preceded us. All children are haunted, I'm sure, by the irretrievably lost worlds behind them. My generation felt this vertigo keenly. By the time I was born, half the world's ten thousand species of birds had gone extinct.

I was the kid who loved baseball cards and antique globes. Vintage newspapers and paperback novels, the arterial reds and blues of old surveyors' maps. At Don's Pawn, I bought a partial encyclopedia set that on my shelf looked like a boxer's toothless grin—I left hopeful spaces for the missing volumes. My father called my bedroom "Jasper's library of rags." Well, I was ten. I could not explain why it was thrilling to spelunk backward through time. I became aware of the past as a vast and mostly unmapped space, still shimmering with the inlaid mineral of the unknown possible. The cooled magma of a finalized reality. When I became a teen-ager, real lava was flowing in our streets. Phreatic eruptions had become commonplace, along with food shortages, tsunamis, hurricanes, and wildfires. History was my sanctuary throughout the whirling and burning of the twenty-forties and fifties.

By the time I discovered the Paranormal Birding Society, extinct bird species outnumbered living ones. I should have been collecting feathers in 2040, not Orioles baseball cards and rotary telephones. I never suspected that every bird would disappear in my lifetime. Wavelengths of color and song. Ice pigeons. Yellow-eyed penguins. Great blue herons. Purple gallinules. Red-throated sunbirds. Somali ostriches. Rock doves. Day-old chicks, accumulating damage with each smoky breath. There was a last nestling of every species. On the nightly news, and outside our sealed windows, we watched birds dying from the smoke waves and the fast-moving plagues, from habitat destruction and hunger, from triple-digit temperatures and neurotoxic metals powdering the air. When I was Starling's age, I did not understand, somehow—even as I lifted the greening copper of a twentieth-century telephone to my ear—that our time would end as well.

The fires spread to every continent. The air turned a peppery orange, making each unfiltered breath a harrowing event. A straightforward solution, for any winged creature, would seem obvious: climb higher.

But many birds that headed for the cleaner, thinner air responded to extreme hypoxia just as their human counterparts did when moving from sea level to the Rockies and the Himalayas. Millions died from clotting blood. They fell from the skies in trickles, then torrents. The variegated laughing thrush. The blue-fronted redstart. Obituary writers for *Nature* could not keep up. Human beings, with our infernal ingenuity, adapted. We found ways to survive the death sentence we'd delivered to our gasping cohabitants of this planet.

Nobody I know is travelling to the future anymore. Not Earth's future. Some diehard optimists enlist as sailors on the trillionaires' intergalactic fleets. My sister Dolores signed her twins up for eight-year terms as indentured servants on the floating starships. Of course, they call it something else, you know: "Emi and Luna are joining the Star Guild!" Air has become damn expensive in the past decade. I hug my daughter tighter to me, flooding her respirator. I want Starling to stay on Earth with me. I worry that she is losing her dreaming eye—the conjuring eye that is hers alone, the one that can see beyond appearances, into the ultraviolet.

It meant a lot to me that Starling had agreed to come on this trip. Now that she's a teen-ager, it's hard to get her unhooked from her Hololite, and even harder to get her to take an interest in nature. We've had a version of the same argument for years now:

"Dad. I'm fine with a world without birds. Anyhow, if I want to see one, I just ask the Hololite to show me a flame-go, or whatever I'm into."

"A flamingo."

"Exactly. Show me a flame-go, I say, and then one appears with its weird pink candy-cane neck in our living room. And you can program it to fly, or have sex with another flame-go, or eat shrimp cocktail, or whatever you want to see."

I swallowed. "It is not the same. These are real birds that have gone on swimming and singing beyond extinction. They are independent spirits."

Two weeks before our trip, I'd learned on the Ghost Bird Alert Network that the tiny, intrepid ghosts of Vaux's swifts appeared to be following their old migration route down the Pacific Flyway, using the decommissioned chimneys of churches, military bases, and mental asylums as truck stops on the sky-road to Venezuela. In late August, Wanda had counted five thousand ghosts rippling like a single wing and dropping into the chimney of Old Northern State Hospital. Thermal readings suggested that eleven thousand spirits would soon be haunting the chimney of Chapman Elementary School, their numbers peaking in mid-September and declining until the last stragglers left in early October.

I told Yesenia that we'd be visiting my mother in La Grande; I told Starling to get familiar with her early birthday presents, an E.M.F. detector and a pair of Nighthawk binoculars.

"Oh my God, Mom is going to give you so much shit if she finds out. What if Mom keeps calling Grandma and we're not there? What if Grandma breaks?"

"Oh, she'll make it to Tuesday, at least. Your Grandma is an *excellent* liar."

Yesenia refuses to let me take Starling on my bird-watching excursions. She barely lets me take her out on our balcony in full protective gear. When we first fell in love, Yesenia saw ghosts of golden-winged warblers and tundra swans, but gradually it seemed as though the power left her. Sometimes I wondered if Yesenia was afraid to see the ghost birds, and had passed that fear down to our daughter. Certainly she resented the time I spent away from home, waiting for the birds to materialize.

Here is the beautiful thing, the maddening thing, about paranormal bird-watching: you can make your eye available to them, but they have to choose that sky.

People assume that to haunt means to stay rooted to one coördinate, like a star in heaven, or a murdered gangster pacing around his last Chicago hotel room. But, if there is one myth the ghost birds have exposed, it's that death means stasis. The flocks we track continue to cross oceans and continents, and the Paranormal Birding Society has been collecting fresh data on their distribution patterns, undead coloration, and evolving calls and songs.

The Paranormal Birding Society sounds awfully official for what amounts to a rumor mill of several hundred people in four hemispheres. We are working to recruit new members. It's a challenge to convince people that the study of ghosts is worthwhile. Why collect data on the dead? A haunting is an opportunity, as Orrine likes to say. Who could watch a murmuration of ghost starlings iridesce across the city skyline without wanting to know where the birds are going, and why? We have so much more to learn from them. How to pierce the smoke wall of our dulled senses and lift into the unknown. How to navigate the world to come.

The very first paranormal bird-watchers rarely understood what they were seeing and hearing, naïvely believing they'd spotted the last surviving snowy owl in a car-wash rainbow, or heard the call of a living whip-poor-will. In the years following the Great Death, grief-mad humans reported sightings of extinct birds on every continent. A bar-headed goose was allegedly seen by a spaceship captain eighty kilometres above the Indian Ocean.

Gradually, as people accepted that the birds were gone for good, the Paranormal Birding Society took flight. But so many questions remain. The most profound of these is the one a child would ask: Why are the ghosts still here with us?

If you want to find birds in 2081, you need to befriend the mechanical ones. Humming Jets are the slender, solar-powered daughters of the helicopters I grew up with. Stu took us over the Cascades. He can turn all the water in his body into red wine and still fly straight—it's his Bible magic.

"Nobody lives down there anymore, right, Dad?" Starling asked reluctantly, when we were about an hour away from the collapsed bridges that bracket the still-burning fires around the ruins of what was once Portland. I wondered what she was seeing with her inner eye. I'm sure they show the kids holo-reels of the Great Western Fires, no doubt heavily edited.

"Nobody is alive in that city," I confirmed.

She nodded, doing her best impression of the blank mountains below us. Maybe she'd decided to feel her grief and horror when she returned home. Starling, like me, is a master procrastinator. I can put off feeling things for years at a time. She looks like me, too, with that face like a blasting cap. When we do erupt, watch out. Yesenia told me as I was packing my things that she'd had an epiphany: "I used to think that you were crazy about me, Jasper. But now I understand that I made a grammatical error. I am not the object here. When I delete myself from the sentence, guess what? You're just crazy."

When Yesenia suggested that I look for a new place to sleep, I felt an avian calm come over me. I used old coördinates to navigate through the blinding storm.

"Do you remember," I asked her, "when I opened the bedroom window in our first apartment, in subzero temperatures, to let in the ghost of a female nightingale?" It was one of our touchstone memories. Her gasp of joy had been as beautiful as the night song.

"I was always pretending," she said. "But you make it so we have to pretend. You're like a little boy that way, Jasper. I'd rather smash my own thumb with a hammer than see the face you make when I tell you I don't see the ghost birds in the eaves of the St. Francis cathedral." I'd never heard a sadder laugh in my life. "Not one dead pigeon, Jasper."

On one of our last nights together, Yesenia and I had it out; she refused to let me take Starling to hear the ghost of a hermit thrush which had been singing late into the evening in the sunken multiplex.

"She is happier than you and I will ever be in this world we made, and you resent her for it! Jasper, what kind of father wants to turn his daughter's body into a haunted house?"

"Your bird-watching crew is totally unhinged," Starling once told me approvingly.

Her mother said a version of the same thing in a different key.

Two weeks after the Surveillers released Suzy, she killed herself. All the hundreds of readings she'd taken, and risked her life to smuggle home from the cloud forest, had come back bone-white. Nobody knew if there had been a problem with the exposure or if the Trogonidae family of birds was leaving us for a second time.

One song had survived—Suzy's recording of a violaceous trogon. Twelve down-slurred notes, repeated with a plaintive intensity. An ancient song forged in Eocene sunlight.

I played the ghost-audio recording for Starling and her mom. Both listened patiently for the first twenty-two minutes, and then Yesenia stood up and pantomimed a scream.

"Jasper," she said. We would be separated in three months, although I did not know it at the time. "To me, this sounds like a horny Chihuahua."

"I like it," Starling said from the sofa. She tends to side with whichever of her parents seems the most downtrodden on that particular day. Even knowing this, I felt my heart lift.

"I knew you would, honey," I said, beaming at her.

"What did you like about it?" her mother said. "To me it sounded like, *cow-cow-cow*."

Starling looked from Yesenia to me, and I was struck once more by the mature sadness in her dark, enormous eyes.

"I like watching Dad's face while he listens."

To be safe, I'd had Stu take us in three hours before sunset. We had seen the domed compounds of some of the wealthiest people alive, glinting on the bald slopes of the eastern Cascades, spaced with desolate evenness above the scalded valley. "They covered these mountains in bubble wrap," Stu said, an analogy that was lost on my daughter. A new fire was burning in the Great Scar, formerly Southwest Portland. Wind turbines turned below us like huge flaming dandelions. None of this surprised my daughter. What raised her from her stupor was a flash of green. "Are those real trees, Dad?" More mysterious than the choking dust storms and orange skies, harder to comprehend than the Great Scar or the Red Zones, these pockets of inexplicable green health baffle us all. "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair," Stu said, hovering over a small hilltop clearing half a mile from the school and tossing out the rope ladder.

After Stu flew off, we made camp, "we" being a touch generous; Starling kept jumping from rock to rock, staring into the canopy of leaves. The plan was that we'd spend the night here and get picked up by Stu at dawn. I felt almost giddy—we were far from the sweep of her mother's monitoring eye and the blue sinkhole of the Hololite. The toppled firs and pines had made a path for us—a raised walkway through the undergrowth. I watched with a rush of pride as Starling stretched out her arms to balance on the wild red trapeze of a quake-felled ponderosa.

When the carbon sinks of the world's forests began to burn—exhaling centuries' worth of carbon, in a protracted death rattle that continues to this day—millions of birds were dispossessed. Now the ghosts return to nest in their old homes. With the right equipment, you can sometimes hear them, even in the domed cities. Often a ghost sings for months and never materializes, and a paranormal birder must make the identification from sound alone. This is a skill that I hope to teach Starling. Not just the waiting and the listening but the openness to revelation. Which is another way of saying, to being wrong about what is possible and true.

We began our descent down the low hill toward the pale-brick ruins of Chapman Elementary. The front entrance appeared to have caved in a long time ago, the once white columns leaning like green dominoes, but I was reasonably confident that we could get in through the gymnasium. The building was constructed in the Classical Revival style, I told my daughter, America's loose interpretation of Europe's severe ideals. I pointed out the broken pediment over the entry door, the double-hung rectangular windows through which we could see shining leaves in the second-story classrooms.

"Geez," Starling said. "Who went to school here? Future senators? Fern-eating dinosaurs?"

Chapman Elementary had not been destroyed, and this had everything to do with humans' love of Vaux's swifts. Birds were the reason the chimney still grazed the clouds, a factory-style smokestack with a Dickensian vibe, far better preserved than the ruins of downtown Portland. Thick silver cables made a triangle around the smokestack—the seismic-stabilization system that had saved the school when Quake 7 flattened the city.

"Why do these ghosts like chimneys?" Starling asked me, and I explained that the swifts had been forced into the arrangement by humans, who clear-cut the woods and encroached on their homes. When the birds were unable to locate old-growth snags, they adapted to a stone forest of millworks and smokestacks. Later, small bands of humans worked to protect the "chimney corridor." Layering their feathery bodies over one another, the swifts huddled together on cold nights, revived at daybreak by the sun-warmed bricks.

"You turn that boiler on, and you're going to kill fifteen thousand swifts," a biologist from Portland Audubon told the Chapman Elementary schoolchildren. So they voted to retire their furnace, piling on parkas and shivering at their desks until the last birds

left. The children changed their plumage to save the swifts.

Starling yawned at me, theatrically unmoved by this fable. Before leaving on our trip, we had sat on Starling's bed and watched footage of the swifts from the early two-thousands. A gift from Portland Audubon, transferred to holo-reel by someone's great-granddaughter. In the clip, thousands of Oregonians gathered on this hillside to tailgate the Vaux's swifts' descent. Everyone gasped and applauded when the flock first appeared on the purple horizon line, materializing in twos and threes, then tens of hundreds, around the slender brick tree of the chimney. We heard people shouting encouragement to the balletic, evasive swifts, while others cheered on the hungry raptors that chased them—a whirlwind that was part Tom and Jerry, part sky horror.

An hour before sunset, in the late-September light, the tiny swifts began to congregate, diffuse as autumn leaves and seemingly directionless; at some inscrutable signal, they sped into a dark-blue cyclone and began to drop in an orderly frenzy into the open chimney. Even on the grainy holo-reel, it was clear that we were witnessing a miracle of coördination. The Vaux's swifts turned from leaves to muscle. From fog to rope. A lasso formed in the sky, made of ten thousand rotating bodies. By the time the moon had risen, the final swifts had been inhaled into the chimney.

"How do they decide who goes in first?" my daughter asked. "And last?" Vaux's swifts were mysterious aerialists of the Western woods; they had died out before researchers could answer that question. Perhaps she would be the one to make the discovery, I'd said, maybe a little too eagerly. Starling had rolled her eyes. "I have enough homework, Dad."

We reached the school with a golden hour to spare. Our silence changed color a dozen times. Arrival. Elation. Anticipation. Nervousness. Itchiness. Impatience. Dismay. The red sun that would have cued the living swifts to descend made nothing happen. The ghosts failed to materialize. The evening blue was fringed with a deep maroon, and we stared at the trees inside the school windows. Nothing called to us from the surrounding foliage or the jungle of rust. Nothing came here to roost.

Stars were beginning to appear in the sky, blessedly smokeless tonight. On such evenings it's hard for me to stay suited up with my mouth glued to my respirator, even though my gauge assured me that toxins were hiding in this air.

"What if we missed it, Dad? What if they funnelled in while we were standing here and never showed themselves to us?"

It was possible, of course. Backlit ghosts don't show up in my scope, and the sunset had seemed to follow me and my spectrograph to every new angle. Could eleven thousand ghosts hide from us? What a silly question. How many billions are hiding from us now?

"You might be right, Starling. Do you want to have a look?"

I hadn't set foot in a school in three decades, and the child in me shuddered. It took us a long time to reach the hollow shell of the gymnasium at the base of the hill. There was a stretch of exposed blacktop with faint yellow markings which might have been an ancient basketball court; this was where we'd be apprehended, I thought, if there were indeed Surveillers. Starling followed me, zipped into her white Tyvek suit with the dull-red face shield that made her look like an astronaut on our own planet; whatever she might be thinking about, it was not the fresh-pencil-shavings smell of September, bound books and bullies and locker codes.

Starling started ninth grade last month. She exists for her teachers as a lollipop-headed projection in the make-believe agora of the virtual high school, a flickery publicly funded arts magnet. Only the wealthiest kids can afford private in-home tutors; my

daughter and her moody, multiply pierced friends recite Neruda sonnets into their EduHelmet microphones. Snow days have been replaced by electrical storms at the server farms. Starling's log-in seems to fail every other week, to her great relief.

"Did you like school?" Starling asked me. I was scanning the windows, wondering what might cause the plants to sway on a windless indoor night. It was a subtle, unmistakable movement.

"I can't say I did. I was more of an autodidact. I made my teachers nuts."

My daughter smiled inside her mask.

"That doesn't surprise me."

Sometimes I think I should have left Yesenia years earlier. Sometimes I know I should have fought harder to stay. No scenario seems fair to Starling. Even though the verdict is in and the papers are signed, I still run with the hypothesis that we could patch things up. I love being a full-time dad to Starling. Loved, past tense—that can't be right.

Starling claims not to mind "splitting time." It sounds so violent. I picture her in safety goggles, bringing the axe down on a block of hours. She says she wants us all to be happy. Happiness for all three of us? None of my experiments has yielded any insight as to how this might be accomplished.

The rubble was daunting. We had to crawl on our hands and knees around the broken columns, and it was my daughter who found the hole in the eastern wall that we half-wormed, half-sledded through to get inside, to the ground floor, rousing decades of dust; just when I decided that we ought to turn back, the ceiling abruptly soared away from our heads. "Wow. It feels like someone took the lid off a box," Starling said. We stood and spun our headlamps through what must have been the school auditorium—I had the exciting, upsetting sensation that we were being swallowed by the school, transported from the building's throat into its belly via a kind of architectural peristalsis. Above us, the hallways crimped and straightened. I had always intended to call off our expedition at the first sign of danger, but in the putty-gray lighting of our headlamps nothing felt quite real, and it

became harder and harder to imagine crawling backward in defeat when the swifts might be glowing just around the next bend in the elementary-school labyrinth. It took effort to imagine that generations of children's laughter once echoed here. Or birds' chirping, for that matter.

"Do you want to keep going, Starling?" I asked, and she grunted yes, or possibly the school itself did. The pipes seemed to be running, somehow. Or to be alive with a watery echo. The light was almost nonexistent, and I helped Starling to switch her headlamp to night vision.

"Starling?" I called into the spandrel under the school stairwell where she'd been standing only a heartbeat earlier. "Stay where I can see you. . . ."

Starling decided not to listen. Even as a small girl she had a maddening talent for tuning us out. She'd stare into the sky-blue glow of her Hololite with the lidless focus of a fighter pilot and ignore a hundred repetitions of her name. "Why can't you be a good listener?" her mother would warble. Once, around age seven, she'd turned our voices back on us: "When you say listen, what you really mean is obey."

I hope that you'll believe me, even if Starling's mother one day tells the story of this night as if I were a criminal, using a verb like "kidnapped," a noun like "danger." I never imagined our trip could torque like this.

First, my headlamp went out. I still have no idea why—I've used it on half a dozen counts, and I've never had any issues. The pink perigee moon was visible through the windows, floating beside us like a loyal owl. But Starling was by this point a little freaked out. I could understand that, of course. She didn't want to give me her headlamp, and so reluctantly I let her take the lead. "Look, Dad," she called, fixing her low beam on two heavy doors. "Seems like something you'd be into." The doors were bracketed by a beautiful W.P.A. marquetry mural, with two human figures cast as guardians of the portal. A young barefoot girl stood under the tree of life with a dove on one arm, and I swear she looked just like Starling. The wood grain turned an undersea green and mauve as she spun her light over the doors' engraving: "Send Us Forth to Be Builders of a Better World."

We reached a stairwell filled with four inches of gray ash; Starling autographed it with her sneaker toe. "Look up, honey," I said, tipping her chin until the lantern beam reached the far wall. A replica of the chimney rose out of the shadows, and dozens of kiln-baked birds hugged puffy clouds. Of all the things to survive. Ash had buried half the staircase, but some fifth-grade classroom's ancient mosaic still clung to the wall, sweetly misshapen swifts that retained the doughy imprint of their ten-year-old creators' fingers.

Next we made our way through the silent museum of the gymnasium, the scoreboard still legible:

SWIFTS 36–LIONS 28

"An unlikely win for the swifts," Starling mumbled. We paused to take a water break. Most of our supplies were back on the hilltop. I hadn't imagined we'd spend so much time in the school; had I known, we could have spent the night here, and waited to see if the ghost swifts would leave the chimney at daybreak. Starling wanted to take her mask off—so did I, to be honest—but I thought of Yesenia's horrified face and said no, better to be safe. We sat on the bleachers and drank through our straws; I started to tell her about the desalination glands that once extracted salt from albatrosses' blood. "Don't gulp," I said, but of course she did not listen, and now her water was gone.

"Oh my God, Dad. You know the difference between a Buller's albatross and a Salvin's albatross but I bet you can't name three of my friends."

"Sure I can. Diego."

"He was my best friend in *kindergarten*. He joined the Star Guild years ago."

"Amy?"

"Dead," she said, with a gloomy satisfaction.

"O.K. I'm not playing this game."

Starling stood up from the bleachers, wheeling on the court. "Well, I hope we can find at least one swift tonight. Do you know how bad it's going to feel if we get stood up by eleven thousand ghosts?" She made a face.

"Oh, believe me," I told her. "I know."

Her goofy, real laugh was a gift to me. One of the rarest sounds in the galaxy.

We searched the ground floor for another hour. I'd expected an entrance to the boiler room, access to the chimney; instead I found a two-by-two panel in the wall beside the old janitor's closet, which opened outward like an oven door, and fed into a terrifyingly narrow chute with a ninety-degree bend. The old dinosaur of a steam boiler waited after the bend. Were we going to cram ourselves inside the chute, like a letter through an old mail slot? I couldn't settle on the best order of operations—if I went first, I might get stuck, leaving Starling alone. But if she went first worse might happen. Only now do I wonder that I did not consider a third option: leaving the building. I swore I could hear a chirping, dim and repeated. "Do you hear them, Starling?" She cocked her head, staring at me illegibly under the headlamp's halo. "Maybe," she said at last. "Maybe I do. Should I go in, Dad?"

"I'll go. I might need you to pull me out if it gets any tighter—"

Decades of dried bird shit filled the chute. We scooped out guano with our gloved hands, watching it crack and plume apart; at last I was able to wedge myself in up to my waist and shove myself forward, holding my breath out of habit, as all humans instinctively do when entering an unknown element. Now I was grateful for the bulky Tyvek suit, which I ordinarily despise. Starling was right behind me. "Wait, honey," I called uselessly. She grunted as she pulled herself through the chute, and then we each turned a slow circle in the closet-size room. Two hulking steam boilers, unused for almost a century or more, glowered at us. Ancient red-and-green pipes. But then we looked up. Rising for what felt like miles and miles above our heads was the chimney, like an eighty-foot telescope.

"Dad! Dad!" Starling reached both arms into the chimney and closed her fingers around the lowest rung of a rusted maintenance ladder. Our eyes flew up the tunnel together, a heavy dark where no ghosts roosted, hemmed in by blank brick, out the top of which we could see the deep-black sky and the rippling light of stars.

I smiled tightly, trying to conceal my disappointment, because what I saw was only what anyone would expect to see in a decaying chimney: exposed rebar, calcium-eaten brick. Not a single feather in sight. Nothing opaque or glowing, dead or living. The

outrageously thick paste of excrement was the only proof that Vaux's swifts had ever roosted here. The chirping had ceased as abruptly as it had begun. No bodies, no spirits.

"O.K., Dad," Starling was saying behind me. "I'm feeling a little claustro. Sorry we didn't find any ghosts. I'm ready to go back now."

I gave the ladder an inquisitive shake. I thought I might climb a little way up, to investigate—sometimes a ghost bird is camouflaged in dense shadow, waiting for living eyes to strike it like a match head and send it leaping into view.

"Dad?" my daughter called from the shadows. "Can you help me? The chute won't open."

Panic had already infiltrated her voice by the time I reached her.

"Let me try, honey," I said, and together we failed for a quarter of an hour. The chute that led back into the wider hallway wouldn't budge. I made a bad mistake then, hurling my full weight against it like a linebacker, hoping I might force it inward and instead sealing it completely.

"Is something holding the door shut?" Starling cried. "Are the ghost swifts blocking it?"

And I told her no, the ghost birds were not responsible. It was her father who was the warm-blooded dummy to blame.

"So we can't get out?" She was breathing too rapidly through her respirator, although I did not mention this, because I was matching her breath for breath.

"For the moment. Only for the moment," I said, a lie that did nothing to slow my own heart.

We were trapped in an oven. My headlamp battery was well and truly dead. Starling's had begun to flicker. We were out of water. We could survive a few nights of dirty air, but water was going to be a problem.

Mrs. Adwoa had assigned "The Cask of Amontillado" to Starling's freshman English class. Starling was writing a pretty terrible paper on it, the thesis statement of which seemed to be that friends should not let friends brick up one another while drunk. I'd made the mistake of sharing some reservations with her after reading a draft. I'd offered my help several times. Then Starling, for some reason, had started crying, and Yesenia had accused me of "crushing her spirit."

I worried now that Starling was thinking about the terrifying scene in Poe: the live burial behind the wall. "Baby," I promised her, "we're not going to die in a chimney."

Perhaps this was the wrong choice of words. I'd meant to reassure her, but as often happens with Starling and her mother I seemed to accomplish the opposite.

"Goddammit, honey. Please don't cry."

"Fuck you, Dad," she screamed, swinging her headlamp around like a bull in a pen. She was moving away from me, her voice pawing the walls. "Fuck you. Fuck you. I want to go home now."

I reached out and spun her around to face me; she was trying to squeeze between the boilers, looking for some secret exit concealed behind the pipes.

"Dad? Why did we risk our lives to see a bunch of dead birds?"

I struggled to formulate a true answer that would not push her farther away from me. I couldn't tell her: You are growing up numb to the universe, numb even to your numbness. You don't know the difference between a screen and a portal. Your eyes cannot distinguish between a digital hallucination and a real ghost. A critical window is closing, Starling. I am trying to hold it open for you, so that you can enter the night.

Instead, I put the question back to her: "Why did you come tonight? Why did you board the Humming Jet with me?"

Her shoulders shook so rhythmically that at first I thought she had a bad case of the hiccups. A moment later, she was still. Distantly it occurred to me that I was very proud of my daughter for budgeting her air. A crying jag was a conflagration we could not afford.

"I came because you asked me to come. I came because I'm sick of you leaving us." She did a funny thing then—she pushed her face shield right against mine. We were as close as the bumper cars of two hooded faces can come.

"Because I don't want you to be crazy, Dad. I'd rather be wrong. But I don't see them—" Her voice snagged on some inner hook. "I can't see what you see."

Her eyes regarded me opaquely behind the red screen. I embraced Starling, but I came no closer to guessing what was in her heart. While we were holding each other, aware of each breath depleting our tanks, I wished, if I'm honest, for the Surveillers to come. I would have given them a gallon of blood, whatever they wanted, to fly us out of this dungeon.

"Can you radio Stu? Can you call for help now, please?"

Stu and I do things the old-fashioned way—we pick a meeting time and place. I've never wanted to risk any devices; I don't want to be tracked by satellite. The plan was that he'd return at first light to pick us up from our hilltop campsite. But I had no way to contact him, I admitted. Starling stared at me, her eyes ruby-tinted.

"Great. Well, I guess your swifts can always fly him a message, maybe do a little glow-in-the-dark skywriting. 'S.O.S. Dumbasses Trapped in School.' "

Starling's laughter had a hysterical edge that scared me more than what she was saying.

There is no Plan B, I did not tell my daughter. No backup to the backup, nothing to save you but our rickety arrangement.

"Listen," I said. "I need you to wait here. I am going to climb out and get us help."

The pitiful gurgling I heard I first tried to assign to a bird. Brown-headed cowbird. Gunnison sage grouse. Pain came to inform me that these were my own calls. Blood-bubbled speech. Starling was on her knees beside me, trying to give me water.

I'm not sure what caused my fall. Starling said I'd climbed less than halfway up the ladder when I lost my footing. She watched my palms open and shut as I plummeted, grasping at the railing. She heard the bone break and screamed for me, she said, because I wasn't moving or speaking. Another night had enveloped me, more vibrant than anything in the dark boiler room.

"Wake up," I heard a voice calling down to me from the roof of the world.

Let me dream, I groaned inwardly, but she would not give up.

"Daddy! Dad! Jasper!" Jingling the key ring, trying all my names. "Don't leave me alone!"

She began shaking me angrily. Her pitch rose and broke, and I remembered that this stern nurse was in fact my frightened daughter.

When I tried to stand, it felt like walking on stilts of bone. My left leg had become a torture device, built from my own flesh and wired to my screaming brain. Nothing had ever made less sense to me than the sight of the white knob jumping out of my thigh, blood hiccuping around it.

"Starling. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Stop apologizing, *please*. It's better when you're screaming."

Starling had abandoned all restraint, huge phlegmy sobs rocking her back on her heels. As frightening as any of this night's evil surprises was the speed with which my worst fear became, in a heartbeat, our best and only hope.

"You'll have to go alone," I said. "I'm so sorry, Starling. I can't move."

Paddling in lakes. Seizing prey. Climbing trees. Digging holes. Bird's feet are adapted to so many marvellous purposes. Vaux's swifts are ideally adapted for life in the air—so lightweight they can't perch like most songbirds, or even walk. Instead they hang down, down, down. I closed my eyes and saw the swifts getting sucked into the chimney. Faster and faster they spiralled inward. Spinning on a vertical current of their own creation and vanishing into a dark hole. *Stop dying!* I commanded my leg angrily, which

was pumping out a shocking quantity of my lucrative blood onto the boiler-room floor. Stop dying and I swear I'll do a better job at living.

"Dad? What should I do? Tell me what to do."

I could not remember the last time Starling had solicited my advice on any subject. Ordinarily she saved her urgent queries for the Hololite.

"Go," I said. "Climb out of here. Morning is coming. Stu will see you on the rooftop at dawn."

Would he? No better plan suggested itself.

For what seemed like a very long time, Starling stood staring up the flue. Holding onto the "H" of the maintenance ladder. Waiting, deliberating. I confess that I saw how small she was against that epic climb and I did not think, *My daughter is as bright and fleet and brave as a bird. Of course she'll make it out.* I thought something inarticulably sadder.

But then she looked back at me, and I struggled against the headwinds of the terrible pain, my killing fear, and tried to steer my thinking in another direction: I imagined the Humming Jet rising over the hilltop on a tide of sun, a silver bird coming to carry Starling home.

"You can make it, Starling," I said.

She started to climb. The beam from her headlamp travelled away from me, pushing up the chimney. "Be careful," I called after her stupidly.

Then came the lacerating light. It was as if someone had switched on the moon.

Two ghost swifts were lighting the passage out of Chapman Elementary School, back to the upper air. Feathers came dazzling down around them. I stared up the flue and watched as they illuminated the rungs for Starling, their bodies burning so much more brightly than the dimming bulb of her headlamp. When I looked again, the chimney was shaking apart. Bricks began to lift and dizzy around the cylindrical walls. Blue and gray in the moonlight, course after course of glowing bricks growing wings before my eyes. The bricks were swifts, I realized. More swifts began to awaken and rise from the rough masonry, as if a single bolt of shining cloth were unscrolling itself, a bunched and unbelievably long dark-blue scarf with thousands of knots, the tiny beaky faces of Vaux's swifts pointing upward at the low enormous moon. So many sleek wings opened at the same instant. One brain coördinated it: the shared mind of the ghost flock.

Could Starling see them? Her face was invisible to me, but I saw her pause on the ladder. I watched my daughter watching the ghost birds. She was still forty feet below the open concrete cap, gripping the rails, her suit crosshatched in a wild ricochet of beating blue light. More incandescent swifts gusted up around her, chirping at an ultrasonic octave. She began to climb after them. Their light was guiding her out. A held breath of swifts exhaled skyward in a rush, and my daughter was among them, pulling herself onto the school's roof. Stencilled against the stars, she knelt and waved down at me; and then even her shadow was gone.

The spectrograph and the electromagnetic field detector and the ghost-box recorder are still, as far as I know, sitting on a collapsed desk in a classroom in the ruins of Chapman Elementary. We'd abandoned them all, ballast that we could not carry into the chimney. So the only devices on hand to record the transformation were my squinting eyes.

A paler light spilled around the swifts' cobalt wings as they exited the chimney, the same otherworldly sapphire hue you could once see shining through crampon holes in glaciers. A light that opened up not only my field of vision but my mind itself. The blackout I feared did not come. So much remains to be seen. ♦

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