

## The Keepers of the Ghost Bird

### Excerpt

*After trying for a week to reach Jeremy Madeiros, the biologist working with the endangered Bermuda Petrel, Jenn gets a rare opportunity to travel to "Island A"—where the bird's rediscovery in 1951 caused an international stir when 16 petrels were found. Because its nocturnal pelagic habits keep it out of sight, biologists nicknamed it the ghost bird. Bermuda's national bird, few people have ever seen an adult Pterodroma Cahow, or Bermuda Petrel.*

Madeiras slipped the bird into a soft cloth bag and asked me to hold it while he got the bands out. I cradled it upside down against my chest. The cliff dropped away 30 feet to the sea not six inches from my right foot. It occurred to me I was holding a pterodactyl in my arms--I was holding the Dodo, the Great Auk, and a thousand other birds, birds that had evolved and gone extinct even before de Bermudez was born. The bird gave off a musky scent, a soft, sour but not unpleasant odor.

In his essay, *The Lives of a Cell*, Lewis Thomas says "it is illusion to think that there is anything fragile about the life of the earth; surely this is the toughest membrane imaginable in the universe, opaque to probability, impermeable to death. We are the delicate part, transient and vulnerable as cilia." Madeiros had told me that the ghost birds were tough survivors, but I hadn't grasped what he meant until now. I felt its tenacious heart beating, its innate toughness, its resolve to survive. I

thought perhaps at that moment the cahow--as tough as the earth--would go on, despite us. And that we--with our cars and wars and money and petty concerns and selfish genes--remained wasted and trivial.

Madeiras took the bird back, holding it against his chest, facing me, and spread each paddle-shaped wing, posing the bird just like the famous rediscovery photograph from 1951. He pointed out the characteristic thumb print near the tip of its primaries on the wing's underside. I understood why Robert Murphy, the renowned ornithologist from New York who had helped rediscover it had said "By Gad, the cahow." I had been under the spell of the ghost bird before I had seen it; now as I looked at the bird's face, this legend turned toward the setting sun, I felt something shift. It was the weight of belief. I understood--as I imagine many others had before me--why the cahow needed to be saved. It had nothing to do with its celestial secrets, with its beauty, with its beating heart. The bird wasn't inextricably linked to us by mystery and awe. It was us. Like Thoreau's wood thrush, it was a "part of our unfallen selves."

A man I knew who lived in the Florida Keys complained to me once that there existed "too many" cormorants, that they stood on his boat drying their wings and defecating.

That they had no "value." At least the ospreys, he said, had nobility, beauty. What good was the cormorant, he demanded, and I had no answer, at least one that I could articulate then. Instead words filled my head in a jumble, about balance, about ecosystem restoration, about overpopulation of humans. About the right of the cormorant to exist where it had for 100 million years. I couldn't form a coherent response, but in my mind I wondered: what good was the overfed middle-aged white man?

Like many children who spend their childhood in the shadow of a mentally ill parent, I turned to books. Our house had National Geographic, Popular Science, and the Time Life series about deserts, evolution, and rain forests. But what attracted me at about 8 years old--and try as I might I cannot trace that initial impulse --and what I carried around with me much of the time, was a cloth covered guide to North American birds. Just thinking about it now I can conjure up the cover in my hands -- a worn blue cloth -- and the smell of the glue in the binding. Drawn to study it, I flipped the glossy pages almost daily, burning the shapes and names of the species into my subconscious without knowing it: the indigo bunting, the great blue heron, the rose breasted grosbeak. The birds took on the significance of talismans; when I looked at them, I felt longing and attachment, possibility and despair. They represented an escape into some unknown future, a place "out there" that once reached, would fulfill me somehow.

Deeper than that, though, lay a desire to be noticed. In birds, unlike humans, even the drabest of creatures

had categories, had been drawn and laid out in the pages of the book, and had import: the dull brown sparrow came in so many variations: Clay Colored, Chipping, Vesper, Field. Each had a paragraph, and a tiny map. Like a yearbook, where even the ugly and unpopular creatures had focus and loving detail: the flamboyant Aix Sponsa next to Passer Domesticus. They had a grace and beauty that I felt I would never achieve; in them lay the hope of my possible transformation from an invisible preadolescent, to, if not something beautiful, to something like the roseate spoonbill: a vision of awkward loveliness. I studied those pages hard, drawn by their allure, and always emerging somewhere else. To paraphrase Robinson Jeffers: Did it matter whether I hated myself? I loved the wild Swan.

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