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TO A GREAT EGRET

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TO A GREAT EGRET

WILL WELLMAN

There will be egrets in a few thousand years
who will have evolved without plumes so we cannot take them.
— *Thylias Moss,* There Will Be Animals

Masters Bayou is a body of water in St. Petersburg, Florida, just past the Gandy Bridge if coming west from Tampa. It sits south of Gandy Boulevard, north of Weedon Island, and is closed in on all sides except the east where it opens to Tampa Bay.

If you follow the northern coast of Masters Bayou west you'll first pass a restaurant with a large, palm-thatched Tiki bar, where someone standing in the sand will most likely be singing Tom Petty to the bar's clientele; then a yacht company; a failed development, empty and overgrown with trees and weeds, and the last home to coyotes and foxes in the area; townhomes; a shipyard, which houses a giant ship, always there, named Murphy's Law; some more townhomes; then, lastly, two homes with expansive St. Augustine grass lawns. The coast to the south is all mangroves, those beautiful marine trees with roots like thick, khaki spiderweb spreading across the water.

At the very last moment, yards before the water ends, if you cut to the left—the south—you will discover a tunnel entering the mangroves. It's grown over and you probably think you can't make it, but you can. Follow the water down the mangrove tunnel.

Chances are, once you get a few yards back, you'll find me. I'm in a blue, sixteen-foot Mad River canoe with my friend Vince Chillura. My parents have just moved to Weedon Island, and Vince and I are exploring in this canoe I bought more than a decade ago in college. And depending on when exactly you catch us, you might see a great egret flying just ahead through the tunnel, effortlessly gliding beneath the enclosing mangrove limbs.

•

Great egrets (*Ardea alba*) are large wading birds found on all continents except Antarctica. Unlike most egrets, they are placed in the heron genus *Ardea* and not *Egretta* wherein the smaller egrets reside. Great egrets stand over three feet tall with a long, snake-like neck and brilliant, white plumage on wings that can extend nearly six feet in width. In flight, the egret's long s-shaped neck compresses inwards until its head merges with the body, the neck looking like a giant Adam's apple.

I have seen great egrets throughout my life. However, it wasn't until I interned with the Audubon Society at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary that I came to truly appreciate them. Corkscrew Swamp—13,450 acres in the Western Everglades outside of Naples, Florida—was formed in the 1950s to protect one of the oldest bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) stands in North America, as well as to provide habitat for numerous rookeries. The sanctuary is considered the crown jewel of Audubon's sanctuary networks and a popular destination for birding due to its 2.25-mile boardwalk which winds through pine flats, wet prairie, marsh, and swamp.

My six-month internship provided an education in slowing down. Phone service was shoddy, and the shared computer in the office had the slowest dial-up internet I've ever encountered. To talk with family, I walked a quarter mile down the road until I got a bar or two of service. The intern's cabin, affectionately known as the Gator Hole, had no TV and a barely functioning AC unit. I had become separated from the many comforts and distractions of regular life.

I spent my free time exploring the swamp and other ecosystems in the sanctuary. I quickly came to learn the wading birds by name and recognize their peculiar habits. Some days I went deep into the sanctuary to watch dozens and dozens of gators sunbathe along old agricultural irrigation canals. I would often walk the whole day with no direction or purpose—errantly as Jim Corbett would put it.

I remember, especially, watching great egrets feed. There are a few swamp ponds along the boardwalk where you can always count on seeing wading birds. Great egrets stand on long, black-scaled legs over water still as statues. This

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Stratten Peterson

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sophistry tricks fish beneath the surface into thinking the birds are no danger, just a tree, limb, or some other inanimate object. And then suddenly, like a strike of lightning, the long white neck wakes to life driving toward water, the bird's school bus yellow bill spearing dinner.

The numerous tourists and birders would *ooh* and *ahh*. *Did you see how fast that bird was? Oh my gosh, that was crazy!* I understood their wonder at the egret's speed—the brevity of the meal—but I was struck more by the stillness. Something about the deliberateness of the bird, static over dark, tannin-stained waters, awoke in me a notion of some forgotten world, some deep wood far beyond.

●

One spring in college, before finals, I drove to Panama City for a weekend of revelry. Bored of the interstate, I pulled off down a state road lined with live oaks in Florida's Panhandle. Outside of Tallahassee I passed an alligator farm and on impulse pulled over. When I approached the farm, I found a locked chain-link fence.

With no respect for life, we like little gods took it.

Just as I turned back to my car, I heard a hushed southern voice ask, *Can I help you?* A forty-something man in wind-flapped overalls appeared—the owner of the gator farm. I mumbled something about being interested in the farm and wanting to look around. He graciously let me in.

Like numerous eccentric folks throughout the South, he was this brilliant, backwoods philosopher sort who decided on a whim to open a gator farm. A kind and quiet man, he walked me through the farm, telling me about the operation and the numerous gators that lived there. One bull gator had been penned up in solitary confinement, a punishment for his cannibalistic palate: he'd killed and eaten parts of two other bull gators.

As we walked through the farm, my guide wowed me with numerous facts about gators. American alligators (*Alligator mississippiensis*) have four-chambered hearts, unlike most three-chambered reptiles. During a dive, gators slow their heart rate down to two to three heartbeats a minute to conserve oxygen. And in the winter, gators will nestle up in a den and brumate—a reptilian version of hibernation—until temperatures rise above 55°F. He also mentioned, *they can go weeks, hell months, without me needing to feed them.*

We finally came to an open-air building with the constant sound of running water. Inside at a row of tanks, the man reached down, his hand disappearing to the elbow in water. It emerged with something small, greenish-black. Our eyes met, and he handed me the small thing: a baby gator, a foot long at most. That little gator writhing in my hand shocked me. The muted warmth of its body, the blood that coursed its veins—blood that has traversed this world for millennia—pumped in my hands. Panama City couldn't have been farther away.

●

A striking fact—birds are closer in relation to alligators than lizards are. Alligators and birds both have dinosaur ancestors.

There is a suborder of hollow-boned dinosaurs known as theropods. Modern birds originate from a subgroup of theropods known as the coelurosauria. The coelurosauria were the colloquial strange birds of their day: they were literally feathered dinosaurs. At some point during the Jurassic age (145-201 million years ago) their hollow bones and feathers led to flight.

I was trained in the sciences in both undergrad and graduate school. I believe the scientists; I appreciate their rigor, research, and monomaniacal obsessions. Yet, it's enough for me to look into the eyes of a great egret—the black pupil, the amber yellow iris, the singular, far away stare—or see their scaled, stilted, reptilian legs and know the bird carries something beyond its own history, something beyond history.

Some days I watch them and a world unfolds within me.

●

I've long been fascinated by a spiritual term developed by Gregory of Nyssa in his book *The Life of Moses*. A fourth-century theologian and contemplative, Gregory of Nyssa lived in Cappadocia, present-day Turkey. Alongside his brother Basil the Great and their close friend Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory was one of the Cappadocian Fathers—early Christian theologians influential in the West and East, notably for their work on the Trinity. Macrina the Younger, Gregory and Basil's sister, was a prominent figure in her own right and is now a saint in both the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The Life of Moses recounts Moses's life from a narrative perspective and then, in the second section, interprets that life as it relates to the

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mystical, or contemplative, path. Throughout the book Gregory of Nyssa discusses, and wrestles with, the concept of epektasis, a term which claims the spiritual life moves continuously, and eternally, toward God. For Gregory there is no perfect spiritual state to be reached or achieved, but rather the journey, in and of itself, becomes the perfect.

Epektasis envisions our lives as a continuous journey informed by occasional brushes against a reality grander than our own. Each encounter expands our horizons as our sense of reality is transfigured into something deeper, broader, and more mysterious. We are given a few more words, becoming ever more proficient in the language of life.

•

In nineteenth-century Germany, in the small Bavarian town Eichstätt, a farmer is out in his fields. Something sticking out of the ground catches his eyes and he bends down to pick it up. After some effort he dislodges what is no ordinary piece of limestone but a fossil. And the fossil isn't any ordinary fossil—it looks like the remains of a miniature gryphon or a gremlin with wings. The farmer, Jakob Niemeyer, holds on to the fossil for a year.

Eventually, though, Jakob sells it to his friend, the innkeeper Johann Dörr, who puts it up in the inn as a novelty item. With the money from the sale Jakob buys a cow. The bizarre fossil hangs on the wall of the inn, uninterpreted. It changes hands a few more times until finally it is purchased in an auction by Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin's Natural History Museum, with help from the industrialist Ernst Werner von Siemens.

The fossil is described as being of the genus *Archaeopteryx*, a combination of the Greek words for "ancient" and "wing." This fossil is the most complete of its kind, not only a full body but an entirely intact head—a first. And the bird, called Urvogel—"first bird" in German—is a transition species, the species that links feathered yet flightless dinosaurs to our modern birds. Known in full as *Archaeopteryx lithographica*, it was the size of a raven and could fly, though most likely not for long.

I often think of Jakob and if he would have wanted the bird back if told of its historical significance—one of the most important fossil finds to date. Maybe he would have sold it again and bought even more cows. Maybe he would have just said, No, I'm good. An ordinary farmer in an ordinary town who will be remembered forever because of a stone he found one day.

I think, too, of the bird, the fossil—

Urvogel
Archaeopterex lithographica
First Bird
αρχαιος πτερυξ

In many ways the bird appears alive, it is not only a complete skeleton but seems to have just jumped off the ground to test its wings, and suddenly realizing it can fly gives off a shriek for something new it has brought to the world. And now, 145 million or so years later, it sits in a museum in Berlin, splayed in stone, frozen in eternity, still crying the scream of transition.

•

I recently moved back to Florida after three years in New Jersey. A few months after returning, in October, I went to a Publix grocery store down the street from my parents' house. When I parked, I discovered a great egret on the hood of the car next to me.

The area between a bird's eyes and its bill is called a lore. When great egrets are breeding their lores turn a bright lime green. This particular great egret was preening itself on the truck's hood, its lore a stripe of neon green like some twenty year old headed to a rave.

I walked through the aisles of Publix mindlessly placing vegetables, fruit, and other items into my cart, thinking about that bird. Of all the places it could be it's in a parking lot, surrounded by busy streets and indifferent grocery store patrons, standing on a car hood.

That bird should be in some wetland far, far from here, surrounded by cypress swamps older than Christ.

•

A large part of my youth was spent killing animals. I hesitate to say "hunt" because much of it was simply target practice. It pains me to write these words now; I flinch to recall every BB and bullet pelting the body of bird, rabbit, squirrel. Occasionally, my memory lines these animals up—along with all the deer, hogs, and racoons, too—and I relive each death I caused. My boundaries of concern were so insular and well-kept.

Once, at a friend's ranch, birds flocked by the hundreds to a nearby landfill. The winter sun laid its soft light across the bahiagrass pastures and pine flats as the birds' shadows drifted slowly across it all. We shot the birds from the sky one by one—seagulls, egrets, whatever

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crossed our path—their lifeless bodies barreling back down to this terrible earth.

With no respect for life, we like little gods took it.

●

Sometimes I see egrets and think of them as lining out evolution like the VHS tapes I forgot to rewind as a child. Some martial arts movie—a broken man's graceful, violent redemption—I'd seen a thousand times. The next kid starts it and sees the end.

●

I imagine God laughing.

The First Bird clumsy as a chick, body slathered in vibrant awkward feathers, runs then jumps only to soar into a hard crash, its bill diving deep into Jurassic earth. But this is Urvogel and it contains the future and sets out again as God's laughter reverberates.

So, again. But this time the jump becomes a glide then a push down with clawed wings, the creature moving upward, the lift streaming stomach, DNA imprinting something that will be so simple for a Great Egret millions of years later.

It must've been sunset. The small raven-like dinosaur-bird's body a silhouette against the reddish-orange dusk, floating momentarily over primeval forest that never knew axe—the giant, deep green leaves.

●

History is dotted with strange figures who exceed the bounds of a singular vocation. One such figure is Lord Northbourne, born in Britain in 1896. Walter Ernest Christopher James, 4th Baron Northbourne studied agriculture at Oxford and rowed on the crew. He eventually rowed in the 1920 Summer Olympics, earning a silver medal.

After university Northbourne combined his agricultural science studies with the biodynamic agricultural theory of Rudolph Steiner—another one of history's eccentric polymaths. Northbourne soon became a leading opponent of the burgeoning industrialized agricultural movement that would later become known as the Green Revolution. The agriculture Northbourne and others promoted envisioned the land as a living entity that demanded care and respect. Lord Northbourne is credited with creating the term "organic farming" and his book *Look to the Land*, alongside his advocacy, is considered seminal in the field.

Yet, rowing and farming were not the end of his pursuits. Northbourne later became associated with the Perennial Philosophy, also known as the Traditionalist school—a loose group of thinkers from various traditions who believe all religious and spiritual traditions seek after the same truth. Northbourne went on to become a scholar of comparative religion and wrote widely on the subject.

Northbourne's writings, many collected in *Of the Land & the Spirit*, seek to find a way to combine his deep interests in the material and spiritual. Suspicious of the modern distinction between mind and body, Northbourne questioned the prevailing industrial mentality and drew attention to the growing reductionism of the scientific outlook, which privileged the empirical: "In fact, it is much more how we see things than what we see."

I often stumble in trying to walk a line between respecting the power and validity of science, while not falling prey to its reductive dogmatism. Northbourne's words have always served as a dependable guide. They capture those moments beyond explanation that are, yet, too powerful to dismiss: "Whatever is too exalted or too comprehensive to be grasped or defined distinctively, though it can in principle be apprehended directly."

●

I have sat waist-deep in a swamp pond, surrounded by alligator flag and frogbit, shadowed by cypress limbs draped in Spanish moss. I have heard the great egret's slow shriek, the strange mix of hissed air and the tear of a palmetto blade, the prehistoric lurch of a great blue heron, the warbling roll of sandhill cranes. I have been taken to places I have never been.

●

As Gregory of Nyssa knew well, we never completely reach the absolute, the fullness of being, God—instead we are graced with moments of egrets in mangrove tunnels or baby gators in the hand. Wakeful moments that shake our limits and expand the world as we know it. Like springs in their excessiveness, they overflow with meaning, never yielding boundary or bottom.

Yet, there is a distinction to these moments I have long struggled to express. The egret in the mangroves is a different experience than the egret striking its prey at Corkscrew Swamp. While both experiences are transcendent, the transcendence is of a different type.

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I have long categorized these events as ecstatic. The Greek word εκστασις (*ekstasis*), root of the English words *ecstasy* and *ecstatic*, is the combination of two words—the Greek words for "out" and "I stand." At its root, ecstasy means to stand outside of oneself, perfectly capturing those moments of revelation, of epiphany, wherein we are amazed, dazed, and, as the saying goes, beside ourselves.

Yet, this etymology only seems appropriate for those moments when one transcends the world as time's procession ceases and all else fades away before an overwhelming feeling often called religious or spiritual. But what of the other moments, the moments when one is brought within a reality beneath the superficial monotony of the everyday?

These experiences are transcendent in another way—they awaken us to a depth lurking under the surface of the quotidian. They are not a rising above, or outside of, life but a deepening into it. I've come to call these moments *entostatic*—utilizing the Greek preposition εντος (*entos*), meaning within or inside. Entostatic are those transcendent experiences where I don't stand outside myself but, rather, come more profoundly into myself, and this world, through a heightened perception of all things. My connection to my body and the world is felt in its fullness.

Two moments—observing the great egret's stillness before it struck its prey and holding the baby alligator at the farm—awoke me to something beyond the ephemeral happenings of this world, something primitive. And this isn't some nostalgic romanticism; I'm not trying to capture a specific past but rather something primal that pulses in the here and now.

The entostatic moments provide a living connection to a place before words.

●

When I was in elementary school, I'd regularly visit a friend who lived near Tampa Bay. Most days we'd wander down his street to play along a rock-strewn seawall by the ocean's lapping waves. Occasionally, we were joined by a neighborhood kid whose name I've forgotten; I only remember he always had a white shirt on.

One day the three of us headed to the bay's edge. The homes in the area had large yards and the space by the water was relatively private. We picked up rocks and broken glass and threw them into the sea. At some point, the kid with the white shirt pulled bread from his pocket and tossed out small pieces until a parade of seagulls descended upon us. He then stuck his hand back in his pocket and removed a tiny white disk.

I will never forget his face as he grinned, told me it was Alka-Seltzer, and then stuffed it into a larger piece of bread. He threw the piece into the crowd of birds, and it was instantaneously swiped up by a seagull. A deranged smile appeared across his face. Its *belly's going to explode*.

I cringed as it flew away, imagining this white-feathered bomb igniting in the distance.

In my mind that bird still flies fast over ocean. Its never-ending journey becomes a repentance, calling me outward, away from all the death I've created.

●

One Friday afternoon in college my friend Adam and I loaded my canoe—the same blue Mad River—onto my two-door Chevy Blazer and left Gainesville for the Sante Fe River. Our friend Chris had a river house in Sante Fe, twenty minutes or so north of Gainesville, and we were going to meet him for the weekend.

At some point along I-75 our conversation ceased, and I zoned out as one does while driving. It must've been spring then, I remember the trees—the chlorophyll seemed to burst forth from the leaves to create this shimmering green mass. The trees lining both sides of the interstate suddenly overwhelmed me. My skin tingled with energy that covered my entire body like a blanket. I was wrapped up in it and felt charged. Driving down a highway hungover, the trees tilted down to me, trying to talk to me with words beyond my own tongue.

In that entostatic moment—Adam beside me, completely unaware—I shut it out. I closed it off with all my might. Immediately the sensation disappeared.

I'd entered the slipstream for a second, was inundated with all the world had to share, and a second later stopped it. I was paralyzed with wonder and, yet, was terrorized by it.

Maybe I wasn't ready to give myself to that mystery. Maybe I thought I didn't deserve it.

●

Sometimes when I see a great egret, I watch them for a few seconds; perhaps they lift their head and look my way, and then I say, silently, *I could never put you in a cage.*

●

In the Victorian era, in cosmopolitan cities like New York, Paris, or London, women walked around wearing large hats decorated with

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plumes. These plumes were not synthetic but rather real feathers from real birds: snowy egrets, spoonbills, flamingos, great egrets. As with many fashion trends, it looked silly *and* ornate, ridiculous *and* prestigious.

The feathers these women wore were acquired through simple acts: birds were shot, their showy feathers removed. The majority of these plumes were taken from birds in the Everglades of South Florida. Estimates indicate plume hunters were killing more than five million birds a year in the Everglades alone. Populations of wading and shore birds dropped to dangerously low numbers.

Their stark white bodies bring pause and the world around them slips away.

The demand for fashionable plumes became so outrageous that certain feathers were worth twice their weight in gold. No feather was more desired than the breeding plumage of snowy egrets (*Egretta thula*). When the breeding season arrives, snowy egrets grow long, slender white plumes all over their neck, head, and back. These delicate, wispy feathers were the most prized, and their popularity led to the near extinction of snowy egrets.

During the dry season in South Florida, water becomes a rare commodity. The once expansive waters recede and fish pool up into the small remaining bodies of water. This creates an easy feast, and wading birds descend across the greater Everglades to feed, breed, and nest. Plume hunters would gather there too, to shoot, kill, and take. Numerous young birds were left to die of starvation as the bullet-ridden bodies of their parents lay deserted across the earth.

The tide began to slowly turn, though, as many folks realized bird populations couldn't sustain the plume industry's rabid demand. One of the first game wardens in all of America was hired at this time, specifically to protect birds from plume hunters. His name was Guy Bradley.

Bradley moved with his family to Florida from Chicago as a child. Growing up in South Florida, the young Bradley served as a guide for plume hunters, among them the famed French hunter Jean Chevalier. Chevalier was notorious for his hunting exploits. Gloria Jahoda, one of Florida's greatest chroniclers, mentions in her book *River of the Golden Ibis* that during a particular hunt, "One of Chevalier's boatmen saw a kill of a thousand egrets in a single day." By the time he was eighteen, Bradley himself would have killed, or guided others in the killing of, thousands upon thousands of birds. All pillaged for their feathers, their disrobed carcasses left to rot.

Eventually laws were passed to protect the birds and other wildlife, and Bradley left his plume hunting ways behind him. He was hired by the Florida Audubon Society—whose namesake also killed so many birds—to protect plume birds across an expansive range reaching down to the Florida Keys.

What led Guy Bradley, this rough, tough, sun-squinted blue-eyed man, to live in the most uninhabitable of places, all to look after birds? Most accounts quote Bradley saying the recent legislation outlawing plume hunting was motivation for his new line of work. It had to be more complex than just a change in laws, though. This man had made money hand over fist killing birds. His memory was riddled with image after image of plume-robbed bodies, a never-ending ticker tape of dead birds killed for a few feathers.

Certain times I imagine Guy Bradley doing his solitary work—a miserable and extremely dangerous way to live. Many poachers wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone that tried to stop them, a hard reality Bradley learned three years later. I see him out there tromping through the Glades, protecting these birds but also filling his mind with new memories. He combs the swamps, woods, and marshes seeking image after image of living bird—snowy egrets, spoonbills, flamingos, great egrets. Each day the warden walks no longer toward death, and each bird he sees—neck arched over their young nestlings to feed, flying through the pale South Florida sky, or wading through tannin-stained swamp water—becomes a sort of resurrection.

●

I still see egrets regularly. I see them along roadways eating from drainage ditches, down creeks off the Chassahowitzka River, hopping from the brick of a neighborhood road onto the yard behind them, flying overhead. Their stark white bodies bring pause and the world around them slips away. Other times, the egret's presence transforms all that surrounds it, and a deeper sense is brought to the world.

Great egrets are not so much totem, sign, or symbol; they are each a unique, singular bird carrying within themselves the story of this world. They invite us, occasionally, into that story, and we carry forth as the salty red liquid that pumps through the world. We follow a history unbound by the strictures of time and become what has always and will always be.

●

Bird, bark your cry. ●

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