

CATRIONA WHITE

FLAP

FROM THE SIDEWALK IN DOWNTOWN TORONTO, Ariadne lifts the stunned bodies of warblers and sparrows. It's a Monday morning in late September. Seven am. Already heels clack in time to the metronome swing of briefcases. Skyscrapers rise around her. A bemused man holding a paper coffee cup asks her what she's doing. Shyly she explains that she's a volunteer for the Fatal Light Awareness Program, also known as FLAP, an organization devoted to rescuing birds that have crashed into buildings. The man folds back the tab on his coffee lid and takes a sip.

"Sure you aren't part of the other FLAP?" he says. "As in the Firm Luscious Ass Patrol."

Without bothering to zip up her bag, Ariadne hoists it over her shoulder and hurries away. The speed of her gait causes her jeans to rub against her thighs. Beneath her flannel button-up, her armpits begin to dampen. The man throws his laughter at her like a fistful of pennies. If he'd been less of an asshole, Ariadne would've explained that the avian casualties happen mostly during migration seasons, when, instead of flying during the day, the birds, compelled by a rush of hormones, seduced by artificial lights, flutter helplessly in the labyrinth of reflective windows and concrete at night.

Ariadne migrates daily herself. She lives in Bloor West Village with her mother but spends most nights at Tyler's place in Kensington Market. Weekday afternoons and evenings she works at a café in Leslieville, a gentrifying area to the east of Toronto. The café is called Back to Your Roots because it sells home-baked goods made from root vegetables. So: carrot cake with Madagascar vanilla bean icing, parsnip-date muffins, potato and dill loaf, even the unlikely Borscht cheesecake—a velvety beet filling supported by a honey graham cracker crust. Some variety of world music is always playing, either Peruvian hand pipes or thunderous Kobe drums.

Although Ariadne takes her work home physically—pungent black flecks on her neck (stray seeds from the vanilla pods she scrapes clean)—

she doesn't take it home psychically. The beet stains never go past her skin, unlike the shudder of a bird in its final bloodbeat, Tyler's body stiffening toward orgasm.

The middle-aged woman who trained Ariadne for FLAP was rigorous and pragmatic. She showed Ariadne how to perform the bander's grip, a technique of holding the bird loosely around the neck. Afterward she gave her a tour of the most common crash sites, buildings with walls of glass and angled windows or courtyards alluring with their topiaried trees and shushing fountains. "Don't wear clothing with pictures of animals," she warned. "Don't whistle. Never make direct eye contact with a bird."

Kinglet, kinglet, kinglet, thrush. Birds' hearts flail their off-kilter rhythms in Ariadne's gloved palm, their legs at awkward angles, plumage stiff with blood. If they're still alive, Ariadne puts them in a plain, brown paper bag and places them carefully in her backpack. Some mornings she collects as many as twelve concussed or injured birds before dropping them off at the rehabilitation centre. She records information about each one: where and when she found it, the species, etc. FLAP wants to keep accurate statistics. She has a separate bag for the dead birds. The deceased are placed in a freezer until the end of migration season, when they are transported to the Royal Ontario Museum.

Four months ago, in celebration of their one-year anniversary, Tyler and Ariadne went to Mozart's *Magic Flute* at the Canadian Opera Company. Ariadne knows Tyler is impressionable, but the opera rubbed off on him more than she'd anticipated. The morning after the performance he went out and bought the CD. He's taken to whistling the Queen of the Night's aria whenever and wherever. Infamous for the heights of its notes, the aria sinks in his low whistle. Ariadne's loved this song since she was a child. The notes rise and lower in bunches and then grow jacked until they reach the apexes, all four of them. Every time she hears the real thing (as opposed to Tyler's slightly off-key rendition), Ariadne's mind traces an alternate Toronto skyline, moving across blocks of skyscrapers and then leaping up; the CN Tower held in each piercing F6, one of the highest notes sung in opera repertoire.

Tyler often has no idea he's whistling. Most of the time it's not a problem, but when he does it in movie line-ups or on streetcars, Ariadne elbows him to make him stop.

“Sorry,” he’ll say, his expression lost. He looks so adrift in these moments that, if it’s at all feasible, Ariadne will just let him whistle on.

Tyler lives down an alley in Kensington market; it’s located beside a tofu factory, the air redolent with the dim, silky smell of boiling soymilk. His rooming house is tall and thin with a large communal room, but his basement bedroom is tiny, only big enough for a single mattress on the floor, several leaning towers of books, a desk straining beneath a laptop. The first time Ariadne saw this claustrophobia, Tyler said, “Let me present my hovel. Can you believe I only pay three fifty?” Ariadne could easily believe it.

Tyler works as a rickshaw runner, pulling people around downtown in a two-wheeled cart. Whenever there’s a popular musical or sporting event, he’ll be lined up outside, hawking the virtues of manpowered transportation. It’s mostly tourists or hammered bankers who actually take rides. Just for the novelty. Ariadne has never actually seen Tyler at it. Although he’s outlined the virtues many times, “under the table pay, making your own hours, the honesty of using muscle for a living, the stories,” she can’t shake the feeling that it’s demeaning. A bit ridiculous. She doesn’t want to think of her boyfriend that way and so she avoids visiting him—despite his offer of a free ride complete with “personalized city tour, including visits to all the important sites: places I’ve pissed, puked, or recited Ondaatje.”

After work Tyler gets drunk with the other rickshaw runners, regardless of how much money he’s earned. Whiskey shots, however, are reserved for Highroller nights, occasions on which Tyler makes over 300 bucks.

Even when Ariadne has to work the next day, even when she’s exhausted from having woken up at five a.m. to volunteer for FLAP, even if it means bailing on her friends, she’ll meet Tyler late at some dive and drink with him and his rickshaw buddies. It’s the only way she gets to see him on weekend evenings. A drink in his hand, a diamond sweat stain on his back.

His friends are crude and loud. By far the worst is Miles, the floppy-haired, muscular-calved, lip-pierced ringleader.

“So, how long have you been a rickshaw runner for?” she’d once asked him.

“How much rick would a rickshaw shaw if a rickshaw could shaw rick?” came the sarcastic answer.

She can’t imagine why Tyler likes these guys ... and they’re ALL guys. Then again, Tyler seems to like everybody, to be so easy and gracious with

himself that he doesn't bristle when confronted by the obnoxious. Most of the time Ariadne appreciates this quality in him, but occasionally it seems lazy, a lack of discernment. It's hard to imagine how anyone could feel anything for someone like Miles, who storms and spits and hollers whenever he gets a couple shots in him. All his stories begin, "This one time I was so fucking wasted, like blackout, I..." and there's always something dark waiting in the middle: a head rammed against ribs, a puking girl.

Annoyingly it's hard to think of Tyler without thinking of Miles. Ariadne met them both on the same night. She'd had the twin pleasure and displeasure at an art show opening on Queen West entitled *Peinture Feminine: Regarding the Gaze*. The artist, Jasmine, was one of Ariadne's old friends from high school.

This latest by Jasmine wasn't to Ariadne's taste. Covering the white walls in the one-room gallery were gigantic paintings of vaginas with googly eyes plastered all over them.

"Thanks for coming!" Jasmine said to her when she spotted Ariadne frowning at a labia's pupil.

"I brought you a piece of carrot cake," Ariadne said, handing over a white cardboard box. "There're also a couple muffins inside, parsnip-date."

"Isn't that darling!" Jasmine said. She squashed Ariadne to her chest, pressing Ariadne's thin frame to her own stupefying pair of breasts, displayed in all their pendulous glory in a v-neck t-shirt. "What would I do without you?"

"Great show," Ariadne said.

"You don't have to say that."

"No, really. It's ... it's empowering."

The googly eyes reminded her of the distraught bird she'd rescued last week, a Blue-Headed Vireo with a bad case of Frog Eye, his left bulging, engorged with blood.

"Thanks, thanks so much." Jasmine looked beyond Ariadne towards a new influx of skinny-jeaned people. "So what are you up to these days! God, it's so nice to see you. We should for definite get together soon. Maybe you can pose for me some time."

As Jasmine flounced away, a man walked up to Ariadne. He held two plastic cups of red wine and a napkin growing transparent from its cargo of greasy spring rolls. Later Ariadne would learn that Tyler read listings in the newspaper, on the lookout for gallery openings, book launches, any event where he suspected there would be free grub, and, even better, booze.

“It’s my inner-raccoon,” he would joke.

Nearing Ariadne, he faltered with his spoils. She grabbed his wine glasses.

“Thanks,” he said.

Ariadne noticed that the scruff on his chin was black with patches of rusted brown. She smiled.

Then another guy—she only later learned that his name was Miles—appeared beside her. Without introduction, he bumped her lightly with his hip, which got her mid-stomach. “So, how many eyes do you have?”

She returned the wine glasses to Tyler and scanned the crowd.

“He’s only kidding,” Tyler said.

Ariadne couldn’t detect anyone she knew—no friends, no acquaintances, no one she’d so much as small talked to while waiting for the ladies. She inhaled, faced the spot where Miles had been standing, and said, “I know.”

Miles had vanished.

Without thinking Ariadne found herself searching the room for his floppy black hair. “I know,” she repeated absently.

Tyler handed Ariadne a glass of wine and her eyes finally landed on him.

Ariadne wonders what it feels like for the birds the instant before their flight is thwarted by glass. Do they think to themselves, finally, I never thought it would happen to me, but, at last, I’ve arrived, the search is over? Does relief fill their hollow bones as they rush towards light? Does surprise have time to crumple into disappointment before the birds hit the ground?

Ariadne realized she loved Tyler on their third date. Bearing a box full of baked goods, she met him at his place in Kensington. He took out a piece of potato dill loaf and bit into it. Crumbs landed in his eight o’clock shadow.

“I have a treat for you too,” he said, leading her down to his hovel.

Earlier that afternoon, a young businessman had paid for his ride in MDMA powder. Tyler divided the powder and put it in squares of toilet paper, twisted them into the shape of raindrops. He said to treat it like a pill, one quick gulp, no chews. He called this method parachuting. Ariadne wanted to protest because of the bleach in the toilet paper, but stopped herself, struck by how misguided her worries were: what did it matter if there were chemicals in the toilet paper if it was enveloping more potent chemicals? After a count of three, Tyler and Ariadne swallowed. She remembered being seven and

dropping green toy soldiers from the second-floor balcony, watching orange parachutes flare above them, calm them to the lawn.

And when the MDMA hit it was a bit like that. Not a fall, but a slackening of the walls. The blood sighed in her veins. Her bones moaned and relaxed. Heat lapped her skin. Her mind drooped into a new consciousness. It felt like being in a protracted epiphany. A life, tilting. Her aches and grudges, her disappointments, all sloughed off until she reached a porous innocence. It came from everywhere, from Tyler, from the air, from her memories, all evidence of an essential purity, the pulse of the universe! She understood and forgave and loved everyone she'd ever met. They were all just birds, helpless, off course. They were all just birds.

And Tyler, ah Tyler, he was the one who had led her to this realization.

She looked over at him. He was dragging the desk to the head of the bed.

"Fort?" he said.

Wordlessly Ariadne nodded. They set about making a hovel within the hovel. Because the room was small already, it wasn't hard. Ariadne rolled his chair to the foot of the bed. The wheels kept getting caught in underwear and socks. They draped his striped futon over the whole thing, secured the walls with pillows.

Throughout construction they talked. Ariadne told Tyler about the birds she'd saved, the yellow-rumped and ruby-crowned with their tilted heads and broken beaks. Tyler told Ariadne about all the people he'd pulled through the city, the fur-coated and the drunk, the cheap-walleted and the proselytizing. Ariadne rambled about the Classical Kids tapes she used to listen to. Each one covered some aspect of a famous composer's life or work. She didn't know why she was telling him all this, only that the telling made her happy. And Tyler seemed so genuinely interested that she kept going.

"My absolute favourites," she gushed, grinding her teeth, "were Vivaldi's *Ring of Mystery* and Mozart's *Magic Flute*."

When the fort was complete, they sat cross-legged inside, heads stooped. With its slanted roof, it felt like being in an attic. Tyler turned on his laptop. It filled the space with pulsing light. Music began to play. Ariadne had the strange sensation that she was watching each song being born.

"Let's pretend we're blind people," Tyler said. "And we just met."

"Yes," Ariadne said. She turned to face him. She understood him perfectly. At that moment it felt like the only possible thing they could do.

"We have to close our eyes."

And they did. The light became blotches. Tyler ran his fingers lightly all over Ariadne's face, stroking eyebrows, following cheekbones to temples, tracing lips. He was sculpting her. Ariadne outlined the curve of Tyler's nostril. She felt his smooth forehead and bristled chin. Her finger held sideways, a mascara wand, she curled his eyelashes.

Ariadne thought this seemed about perfect. This was a pace of life she could handle.

In the first few months of their relationship, nothing Tyler did could disappoint Ariadne. She carried him with her in the rumple of a repeated outfit, mascara ashes drifting beneath eyes, a crick in the neck, fatigue. She was happy to reschedule her entire life for him. Exhaustion and love were indistinguishable; both tenderized her days. At the beginning she would have stayed up with Tyler all night, every night.

She would *still* stay up with him all night every night, provided—and this was a big provision—that Miles wasn't with him. Fair or not Ariadne blames Miles for Tyler's nocturnal lifestyle, his excess drinking, any aspect of his behaviour that violates her image of Tyler as essentially an innocent.

When Ariadne and Tyler go out together, Tyler spends a lot of his time laughing with the other rickshaw runners, telling inside jokes or re-telling the same stories. It isn't malicious (Tyler is too kind for that) but she feels deserted just the same. To escape this feeling, she's taken to leaving the bar early, catching the subway back to her mother's to sleep alone and leaving the boys to their one last drink, which multiplies with each alleged dying sip.

Whenever she considers saying something to Tyler about Miles, she hesitates. She doesn't want to control him. It's his choice to hang out with Miles. She might not approve but what right does *she* have to question it? What right does anyone have to control anyone else? As much as she might like to think of Tyler as helpless, off course, he isn't a bird. He's self-aware. He's a big boy.

He can choose.

One time she did get as far as writing Tyler a long email asking him to stop hanging out with Miles so much (in the email she referred to Miles as a leech and a cancer). She might even have sent it, if Tyler hadn't surprised her with opera tickets.

"Our one-year anniversary," he said. "They're playing that opera you liked when you were a kid."

Ariadne deleted the email that day. Tyler was perfect just the way he was.

Before they went to the Opera, they smoked some weed in the park behind the AGO. From their vantage you couldn't see the AGO's canoe hull of windows, only the blue, tinfoil shimmer on the back wall, like a giant gum packet. There wasn't much weed left. After a few hits off the pipe, they scraped the bowl with one of Ariadne's hairpins and lit the black clump.

As they approached the glass front of the opera house, Ariadne marveled at the people inside—men and women in their dark evening wear moving, holding champagne flutes or tiny bottles of beer, laughing, nodding, turning off cell phones, hugging, sneezing, smoothing their skirts, kissing. Outside, the street smelled of hot dogs with a faint undertone of urine. The sky darkened. Ariadne just wanted to get in there already. The amount of time it took for the streetlight to change felt personal. She began to trot, pulling Tyler impatiently by the hand, but slowed her pace when she thought of the birds. She stopped in the middle of University Avenue. Inside the opera house, pale wooden floors and railings made the light soft and creamy as custard.

Birds throw themselves at so much beauty, she thought. Light convinces.

Cars honked at her. Tyler tugged her onto the cement shore. "What was that all about?"

She considered mentioning that the building was a deathtrap, but said instead, "It's just all so stunning."

They sat in the nosebleed section and watched Prince Tamino faint in front of three maidens. At first Ariadne read the English translations projected above the stage, but they seemed so vapid compared to the mystery of the songs, that she stopped. Tyler was entranced. He sat with his lips open, eyes wide. When the Queen of the Night sang her famous vengeance aria, he squeezed her hand.

The straps of Ariadne's bags are starting to feel heavy on her shoulders. The sidewalks are filling. She needs to head back to her car soon. It's parked at the St-Lawrence Centre for the Arts. The parking lot attendant is a friend of a friend, so she gets a special rate. But first she'll walk the perimeter of the Toronto Dominion Centre; made up of six towers, the tallest reaching fifty-six stories, it's an entire city block going from King to York to Wellington to Bay. It's one of the deadliest areas in the downtown core.

Deadly for humans, too. In 1993, Garry Hoy, a thirty-nine-year-old lawyer, crashed through one of the windows and fell twenty-four stories. It happened during an orientation for new law interns. Meant as a demonstration of the window's strength, it was Garry's favourite trick. He hurtled towards the window and launched himself against the glass, only this time the window didn't hold. It cracked open and unleashed his body to the sky. The journalists couldn't help themselves; they called him Icarus.

On York Ariadne spots a tufts of orange, black and white, a male American Redstart. She inches cautiously towards the bird; she doesn't want to startle it. The bird doesn't move. She's near enough to see its white breast-feathers, ruffled by the wind. Its beak is open as though about to sing. The song of a Redstart is a series of staccato *tzees*, ascending and descending, sketching its own jagged skyline. During these recitals, however, the beak stays closed. Ariadne crouches to determine whether the bird is alive. A faint gurgling rises from the parted beak. If she's to save the bird, she has to act quickly. She performs the bander's grip and bags the limp body.

Last night had a typical beginning. Ariadne had worked, eaten a late dinner with her mother and then gone out to meet Tyler at a bar, Grossman's Tavern on Spadina. By the time she arrived, there was already a pattern of shot-glassed sized perspiration rings on the bar before Tyler. It looked like a wonky Olympics symbol or an ambitious Venn diagram. He pulled her towards him. He smelt of sweat. He was wearing green cargo shorts and a t-shirt, despite the cool lick of the September wind outside.

"Hi," she said.

He gave her a sloppy, tongue-thrusting kiss and handed her a shot of amber liquid. Whiskey. A Highroller night, then.

Ariadne passed Tyler a white box full of Back to Your Roots leftovers, but Miles intercepted, yanking the box away.

"Geez Ariadne," Miles said. "You really need to stop bringing your work home with you."

Tyler laughed and kissed her on the cheek.

Forty-five minutes later, Ariadne sat alone. At a nearby pool table Tyler laughed with strangers. I should be able to amuse myself, Ariadne thought, trying to reason her way out of pain. But it was pain she felt, shifting in her seat alone, pain and embarrassment. The band was so loud it shook the pitcher of beer on the table. She didn't know what to do with herself. She drank herself deeper. As a distraction she tried texting her friends or con-

centrating on the repetitive thump of the bass drum. No one texted back. At least, not quickly enough.

How much longer could she wait for Tyler without dissolving?

There he was pushing another loonie into the side of the pool table. Men looked at her body, appraising her, turning away or leering, she didn't know which was worse. Trying to become engaged in the clack and roll of stripes and solids, she stood unsteadily by the game, but Tyler barely glanced at her.

"Why doesn't Tyler ever want to hang out with me?" she said to the darkness. Or, more precisely, she said to Miles, who had appeared beside her.

"Yeah, right," he said, "I can't believe he just leaves you all by yourself."

"Me neither." She glanced at Miles. The murky lighting altered his face, defining his cheekbones and exaggerating the shadows beneath his eyes. He looked beautiful, in a hostile kind of way.

"Let me make it up to you," he said. "Let me give you an orgasm."

A blur of drunkenness stood between Ariadne and her typical reservations. She didn't blush or turn away. "Sure you have enough to spare?"

She couldn't wait to tell Tyler that Miles had hit on her. It would be concrete and irrefutable proof that he was a jerk. And yet, here she was, bound, complicit. She'd followed the logic Miles had given the conversation, followed him out of her normal behaviour into banter. Worst of all, the words had felt exhilarating in her mouth.

Miles pulled his chair closer. "You know when you and Tyler first started dating, I didn't get it." Ariadne rolled her eyes (flirtatiously?), but Miles pressed on, "I'm trying to be honest here, no offence intended. I didn't understand what he saw in you. It was only after watching you, your subtle hotness, that I understood."

"It's okay," Ariadne said, unsure where she was going. "He does this every once in a while. He's not trying to make me feel bad. He wouldn't do it if he knew how uncomfortable it made me." She pauses. "I guess I've just never told him."

"You shouldn't have to tell him that," Miles insisted. "Now, just hear me out. I've wanted to say this to you for a while, but I didn't want to offend you. That's the last thing I want. Really, though. I'm not sure how to put this. Okay, so you're like an acquired taste—like coffee and olives and beer—and all the things that you don't like at first, when you're little. But now it seems crazy because those are the things you love the best. Those are like just the ultimate. It took you a while to figure it out. But the figuring it out part is

integral to the whole business, right? You get what I'm saying? You work hard for it, and it gets better and better and part of that whole deal is the work you put into liking the damn thing."

For a moment Ariadne considered what sex with Miles would be like: quick, brutal, all lust burning itself out in the act, a light flicked off. Nothing like her and Tyler. They moved their bodies together with the slow-imagined grace of starlight.

"I'm going to go talk to him," she said, sending her chair crashing to the ground.

"Suit yourself," Miles said portentously.

Tyler was at the bar again. Ariadne wrapped her hands around his waist. She felt sentimental and tipsy. "Baby," she whispered in his ear. "Let's go home."

"Two shots of Glenlivet and a pint of Steamwhistle," Tyler said to the bartender.

Ariadne shifted beside him, leaning on the bar. "Did you hear me?" She spotted the box of baked goods, unopened.

"Just a couple more drinks," he says. "It was one helluva night. Three-hundred-seventy-five bucks. Thank you, Céline Dion!"

"I'm asking you to leave with me."

"In a bit." Tyler pulled out a twenty and laid it on the bar. "We're all set," he assured the bartender. He made his way back to the pool table.

He handed a shot to Miles.

Ariadne didn't bother saying goodbye. She located her purse, snapped the box from the bar, and stomped into the night. As she left, she could hear Tyler's whistle. She stopped in the doorway to listen.

"Shut the fuck up, Birdman," Miles barked.

And, without protest, Tyler did.

Ariadne barrels towards the parking lot, the American Redstart in her bag, when she sees the rickshaw. Lying on its side in the gutter on King, the metal frame glints, the wheels spin. On the back there's an ad for a massage parlour. Businessmen and women peer down, barely slowing, as they pass it.

A taxi driver leans over the front. "Dude, you alright?"

The sight of the cargo shorts confirms Ariadne's suspicions.

"Tyler," she screams as she nears the wreckage.

There he is, collapsed on his side with his ribs rammed against the handlebar, his left hand pinned underneath.

“Birdlady,” he slurs.

Carefully placing the bags of birds, the dead and the living, on the sidewalk, she stoops.

“You okay?” Ariadne said. “Can you get up?”

Ariadne can smell the stink of alcohol on his breath. It’s his own fault, she thinks. She’d asked him to come with her and he hadn’t. He stayed with Miles.

“I came to give you that ride,” Tyler says. Her anger lessens. “That ride I always promised.” One of his eyes is black.

Ariadne helps him to his feet. She feels a charge of guilt. Why hadn’t she ever visited him at work? Had she really been as laissez-faire as she’d imagined or was her continual absence a form of control itself?

They right the rickshaw. Tyler teeters.

“Get in back,” she says. She heaves Tyler onto the seat, retrieves the bird bag and places it next to him. “Hold onto this.”

She lifts the handlebars and tries to run. The rickshaw is cumbersome, but she manages a light, straining jog. Remembering the American Redstart, she quickens her pace.

In the backseat Tyler begins to whistle. She can hear the flap of wings scraping the bag. Tyler’s song summons all the panic inside the birds. Cheeps persistent and harsh as car alarms escape through the nylon.

“Stop, Tyler,” Ariadne says. “The birds don’t like it.”

But Tyler doesn’t stop.

The whistle surges out of puckered lips, reaches impossible octaves, yearning after that Queen of the Night F6. The aria soars, cracks from the turbulence of its ascent.

Ariadne stops. She balances the bird bags onto one shoulder.

Tyler slumps forward. She helps him to sitting position on the sidewalk. He whistles on and on.

Bags safely stowed back on the seat, she begins to pull the rickshaw forward. Her jeans rub against her thighs and her armpits dampen. Before she turns south on Victoria, she looks back, squinting, at Tyler. But the sun is too bright, and she can’t find him in the glare.