

The Bird Book

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I

It was Mai's favorite time of day, and she was walking west from the house.

Having shut the fence carefully by hooking a loop of barbed wire around the bamboo post, she smiled at Rotunda. The fattest, and perhaps stupidest, of the chickens was pushing at a small scattering of corn kernels with her beak. Rotunda checked behind herself frantically with every sweep and flew about a foot and a half into the air when the metal clinked against the top of the fence on the other side of the bamboo. Feathers and dust puffed from her when she did like debris out of the back end of a vacuum.

Mai started up the dusty road as the mountains around her took on an electric *dorado*, a yellow sparkling like jasper. Dark clouds piled high casting darker shadows, but today, it would not rain. The color of Mai's worn boots blended in with the powdery earth. Her dungarees fit loosely and swished only a little as she strode. A beat up brown hat hid her face from the last rays blasting straight down from the sky, but her bronzed forearms still caught light. A thick, messy braid tumbled down the back of her ribbed tank while sweat started to pool around it. When beads began to form on her brow, she removed the hat, slapping it against her thigh to the beat of her footfall. The cactus wrens and Gila woodpeckers worked noisily around her. The former were whisking around gathering the last touches for their nests: clumps of straw and threaded twigs cropped out of palo verdes and mesquites. The latter darted in and out of the holes they'd drilled in the

saguaros. At the same time, several other bird species still climbed to high branches, twee-thwarting and teeee-reeeeeel-inging and keeeeeee-kaowing at the sinking sun. Their bright heads remained high and brighter chests continued bared at the horizon, confident that the moment would come when the light would hit their brilliant feathers just right, and the long winter would finally be over.

Mai smiled at their tenacity so late in the season and turned from the road and out into the westward desert. A cottontail ran from underfoot, a mere cloudburst darting into the low growth. Mai used her boot to drag a few rocks up off the path and kicked them playfully in the bunny's direction. She noticed the hummingbird a few seconds later, perched as it had been these last few weeks atop an ocotillo. The plant had last flowered about when this bird had shown up, and now, the dried orange blossom almost crackled in his tiny clutch. Mai marveled as she had every day at the minuscule silhouette. A stark outline of his bill matched the blackness of his body until a fragment of the last pieces of light caught the gleaming purple mask on his face. Costa's. Mai learned the name by accident when she overheard a neighbor pointing out the bird on a walk with his young children. She had again smiled as the children stamped around the knowledge, waiting to go this way or that to find something more story-worthy than this speck. She doubted they had glimpsed his glamorous sheen as they would have seen a purple deeper than any plush toy, a sparkle brighter than any doll's prom dress.

Mai stopped walking. She stood in awe of the bird with the thorny shrub in his clutch, flitting away occasionally to power its diamond-sized heart by sucking up nectar from some still living bloom. A late frost had killed off the first wave of blooms this year. Today, though, the bird behaved differently. She watched as he lifted from the branches as

usual but then shot straight up into the sky. Her eyes had trouble tracking him at first, but she discovered with joy that a second hummingbird was in the air. She watched the male shoot a hundred feet or so above the female. Mai was delighted as he passed over her then shot downward with a characteristic shriek. Then, the two danced closely at a height at which she'd never before seen hummingbirds. Then, in an instant, the tiny things became one dot where they literally vanished into thin air. She blinked her eyes and scanned the sky again, but they were gone.

Desert scrubland startles most visitors to the Sonoran Desert. What they have anticipated in their minds to be spilling acres of sand fields like those of the iconic Sahara is soon replaced by thick brambles of native plants. They smile knowingly at the saguaro cactus because of its familiarity. That creature has managed to proliferate into pop culture past and present more successfully than the humble creosote. Yet those visitors are surprised to learn about the essential role saguaros play in the desert ecosystem. The Gila woodpeckers working around Mai are drilling into the upper parts of saguaros. Unlike their more destructive family members, gilded flickers, they stay low enough on the cactus to avoid lethal damage to the plant. The saguaro flesh responds to the boring by scabbing over much in the same way that humans respond to flesh wounds. After the Gilas lay their eggs and raise their young, they abandon the cavity to a host of other species. One darling opportunist is the ferruginous pygmy owl, now endangered in the United States. When a saguaro ultimately falls over, the hardened boot can be found on the ground in its rubble. Mai only observes these woodpeckers without reacting. If she had been awoken at three o'clock in the morning to a male Gila Woodpecker using the

sound of drilling into a metal pole to mark his territory on the swamp cooler beside her bedroom, there might have been more grumbling on the part of our protagonist.

The wormhole into which the two birds had disappeared stayed in her mind for the remainder of her walk. She couldn't decide if they had gradually dissolved or vanished all at once. She didn't question what she had seen. They had disappeared like the sensation left by a prick of rain. Lia, on the other hand, would question what she had seen. She girded the reality of her memory for the certain onslaught of her sister's skepticism. Her sister and her young nephew were scheduled to visit that weekend. When she arrived back at the house well past dark, her sister, Lia, was waiting at the old wood stove blowing up a fire for some tea. The boy slept on the couch.

"Lia!" Her face brightened, her mind emerged groggily from all the bird palaver.

"Dearest Mai." They embraced.

"Gosh, he's out," Mai said, lovingly indicating her nephew, Minh.

"Well, yeah, Bean," Lia said. "It's after ten."

If Mai had been ready to tell anyone about her silly hummers, it would have been Lia.

But, she reasoned, it must have been her eyesight, and Lia's world was much too grounded in the reality of a new marriage, a mortgage, and a son to entertain the idea that animals were dematerializing around the farm.

"Wow," she mused to herself. She didn't realize how long these evening walks had stretched to. "Dragon got out on the trails, the rascal. Took me to now to wrangle him back in," she fibbed.

The young women shared laughter. The old ranch dog had a habit of prowling the desert looking for love. He was very aged now but refused to give up the game. The women stayed up late that night chatting. They saw each other nearly monthly, but their lives were starkly different. There was always plenty of need to catch up. Lia told Mai of the drama with the board at the library, and of a camping trip she'd been on with Minh and his father. Mai told her how well the winter crop ended since she had mentioned the last time that frost nearly bit off the end of the harvest.

"Shall we walk up the road to the reservoir tomorrow? The weather's supposed to stay warm, and there'll be lots of life to see. Ol' Billy'd love to see us walk by too."

The women laughed for the last time that night. Their neighbor was always giddy with love at the sight of Lia.

Mai helped Lia hoist Minh into her cozy loft. Lia nestled in next to him in Mai's bed under a colorful, fluffy duvet. Then, Mai climbed back down the ladder and laid on the couch. It was warm from Minh's nap, and she lay awake until the last ember died comfortably in the stove. She was almost out of firewood and patience for these stubborn cold nights.

