

Chorus of Murmurations

Creative Nonfiction • Aubrey Hume

In my first month of college, my recently made ex-girlfriend came to campus to visit me. We spent the night downtown, getting subpar ramen paired with an imported fruit flavored soda in a funny bottle I paid too much for. When she first pulled up to my dorm building, I got into her car without ever looking at her and directed her to where she should park. We sat in silence, seatbelts still around our waists – keeping us safe from whatever was to come next – until we finally exchanged a dry hello.

Things are different. You shouldn't even be here.

I don't look at her until we sat over the two bowls of noodles that tasted more of water and the wooden chopsticks in our hands than anything else. When I do look, I see her wholly. She appears nearly the same as when I had first seen her years ago. But our cheeks are slimmer, faces a little more stern and structured, symptoms of finally growing up I suppose. Her eyes were the same though. They are soft and welcoming, but the blues mostly carry a new wariness, that look of knowing someone too well and still finding yourself pretending you're strangers - something I am responsible for.

I maintain our quiet with my head down as she goes to the counter for a box for my unfinished meal. I am uncomfortably aware of the fact that she has finished her bowl. I am just as aware of the look of worry on her face I see when I lift my head to meet her steady gaze already studying me.

As we walk the crowded sidewalk back to her car, our shared

atmosphere feels like that of months ago, too easily copying past habits. I almost reach out for her hand in the crowd to help guide me, trying to solidify something that has already crumbled away. I am responsible for this. Against better judgement even, I am the one who did it all. The breakup and the invitation to see me weeks later.

I am selfish for this.

I offhandedly mention that it felt like we were on a date again. She does not have anything to say back. We take a walk around the lake when we get back from our outing. I normally do this alone to avoid overthinking. I also normally do it in the light of day, but here, now, it is dark. I cannot see exactly where I am going; where my feet fall as I go forward because of this. I am not afraid of much though. I occupy myself with wondering if I just stepped on an old acorn or something the geese left behind. Maybe it is because of the darkness, the guise the lack of day provides, or maybe it is just that I cannot fully see her eyes that we truly begin talking.

Stupidly, I start by bringing up how she really should see all the ducks that live on the lake that will approach you, far tamer than you are used to a duck being. I know she would like them. I let this sit before I consume the whole conversation. I bring up the swans, the fact I like seeing them in my own time. I really do like swans. Back in high school, I often found myself asking my friends what I reminded them of; what color do you think I am? What character would I be? What song reminds you of me?

I was desperate to be perceived, and desperate to know how I was perceived along with it. My questions often followed this formula in an attempt to build up my own character. I still do this, despite knowing that it can be seen as annoying and probably a little narcissistic. I want to know myself regardless - I really don't know why I need a middleman.

One day I asked my friend in her car, "What kind of animal would I be?", and she sat there and thought (I loved when people would take their time to answer when I asked about myself) before she finally said, "A swan, I guess." This was a good answer in my book, but I wanted clarification of what that meant. She said that I carried myself nicely and seemed elegant. It was the first time someone even alluded to me being pretty. I boxed these words up quickly and took them home with me. I wouldn't need to ask another question for a while.

I see the swans on the lake here and a reflection of my loneliness in

the water too. It is a comfort to see them glide across the water and know that, even if it is just the once said words of an old friend I may never run into again, someone could compare me to them.

In this moment though, my identified companions are nowhere to be seen. I am left only with the water, wind, a cold concrete bench, and my first love. My eyes have started to adjust as my words have become more emotional. Apologies and catching up and reminiscing. Resentment is met with explanations, met with forgiveness. I cry first. And then, she cries in a way I have never seen before. It is the most I have ever seen her just, leak, wringing herself out dry.

An old friend of mine would've referenced and connected some obscure movie to this moment. We always called each other Bird. The phrase is dedicated to an old favorite, *Blue Jay*, a film we both were once enamored with. In it, two high school sweethearts reconnect and relive after years and find themselves still in love with one another despite the time that has passed, reverting to a younger version of themselves. Usually, Bird's references weren't so much of an exact echo of the plot. Usually, it's just a funny way to bring up something only we know about, something that is tinged with regret and a sense of wistful loss. You can't get that time back. It is surreal and somewhat sickening to know it.

Bird and I would go into depth about these things in an existential teenager manner with energy drinks and snacks from the gas station fueling our minds. I think we considered ourselves characters in an obscure movie only your nerdy friend would know. Over the last summer we had together, we would sit at the local park until my curfew had already passed and talk about meaningless things, trying to bring out meaning in them. Some of the time at least. It was also a lot of complaining and exasperation and laughing. We managed to say anything, in our own form of talk therapy.

What was said at the park stayed at the park. It was all fair game including: how my grandparents would listen to bird songs and jokingly bicker over who knew what bird it came from, that when I was in the hospital my mother would gently give me a "birdie-bath" with a rag, that my summers in Kentucky were highlighted by the hummingbirds during thunderstorms, how every time my father was bitterly angry I managed to see a goldfinch on one of the feeders.

Birds have been with me everywhere, little reminders of love.

I hear my mother talk about the doves building a nest above our front door and know this to be true. I know she will not knock their nest down carelessly, instead choosing to watch them settle and develop there. An invitation for welcomed guests, their life is not a tacky addition to our porch.

I can still see the flocks above the fields of my old home swirling together like rough waves and I know this to be true. Calming and then rushing, moving together in one mass, guided by something I can't see. I see the red winged blackbirds still, noisily chattering and being refreshed by the knowledge that their presence meant spring was arriving. I remember the neighborhood cat we called our own showing up with birds on our doorstep. Even when hurt, even when hunted, that innocence and simple care was preserved. My brother and I would tidy it up, give it a proper burial as one of our companions, dressing the grave with flowers and a makeshift headstone.

And though we were never happy to see another lost, I knew that cat was trying to tell us something when she showed up with a bird in her mouth at our door. That little cat that ended up dead under the wheel of a car, even though she grew up on the street. And I still feel guilt for the chick she delivered that I unsuccessfully tried to nurse back to health in our garage. I named it and checked on it like it was my own, knowing it was the weekend and there was nowhere else to bring it. And even though it's been years now, and the comment probably was said with less thought than I would like to consider, I try to see myself as a swan. When I see them, they make a funny little noise you wouldn't expect from their appearance, one that makes me smile. I love the sounds of birds. I wake up in the morning and listen to their songs and let myself be cradled by their chirps. I used to stay up all night to listen to them by the neighborhood pond at sunrise with over-steeped tea in my hand. I'm still fond of my old friend Bird, no matter the time that has passed since our departure.

I don't tell her all of this, of course, and we leave our cold gray bench at the lake when she says she is tired. In our light tread, something appears out of place. A fold of brown tossed on the ground before me. It distracts me as we get closer. And suddenly, I am standing above it- laying there, under the clean windows: a dead bird. Unsuspecting. Ran right into the glass without knowing better. I wonder if it would be too hard to bury it, put a flower next to it, make a little blanket from a leaf nearby – anything to

recognize it before someone comes in for their shift in the morning and moves it to the trash with a gloved hand or dustpan when they discover it.

But I just stare. Its feathers move ever so slightly in the breeze. I see the way the brown hues shift slightly on its back, that its beauty is there, even in its cold state. I see it, and though the moment seems to drag on, we quickly shift and make it to my room.

She slept in my bed that night. Inches away from me, holding me, yet out of reach. In the morning, when she leaves, I walk her out to her car and realize I am restless.