THE EMISSARY

Merritt Clifton

Somewhere in the distant heavens, in a dimension beyond sight of telescopes, where only faith and the imagination reach, the God of Winged Things held an emergency council on the state of our small corner of the universe. The God of Winged Things was worried because some creatures without wings on Planet Earth had lately invented mechanical flying devices, some of which could take them to other planets. These creatures, mankind, had invaded the once exclusive territory of Winged Things. They had brought wars and pollution into the skies with them; they had wiped out over a hundred avian species in less than 100 years. Were they to be further tolerated, or had the time come for the God of Winged Things to send around the great fire-breathing dragon who swallows suns, to put Planet Earth into permanent eclipse?

The council chamber was none other than the Tree of Life, the same one that holds up the sky in Indian legend, with every leaf and fruit a star. The God of Winged Things perched at the very top, with all the lesser winged gods and goddesses perched below in order of rank. Many came from far-off planets, representing creatures who almost swim through atmospheres thick as pea soup; who peck through hard

rock to find worms as big and fierce as sea-serpents; and of course the winged dragons were there, too, as well as the huge gliding ghost-birds who drift on the solar winds between planets, absorbing the sun's energy through green wings as long and wide as football fields. Some of the higher-ranking gods and goddesses we might know were Victory, Mercury, and Athena, of ancient Greece, along with Pegasus, the flying horse; Quetzalcoatl, of the old Mayan and Aztec cultures; the Birdman of Easter Island; and the Bird-Headed God of the Egyptians. All of the famous angels were there, and the winged devils. A bit lower on the tree perched younger flying figments of our thoughts: Batman, Superman, even Rocky the Flying Squirrel, for these too have their reality in this dimension, where birds and imagination soar together.

On the lowest, widest-spreading branches perched the god or goddess of each flying creature familiar to us, from the crows, eagles, and great blue herons down to the smallest gnats and mosquitoes. Though they perched farthest from the God of Winged Things, it was them he consulted first.

"Well, Brother Raven, tell us," he began, "what is happening to all the winged things on Planet Earth?"

With a caw to clear his throat, Brother Raven told of a great oil slick spilled by men off the cold North Raven's Land, which we call Alaska. Brother Eagle testified that his species couldn't catch salmon any more

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because of the oil. Brother Gull described similar slicks fouling rookeries almost everywhere men go. Brother Robin complained that songbirds were being wiped out by poisons sprayed to keep Brother Grasshopper, his friends, and his relatives from eating men's crops, adding that if left alone, the songbirds could do the job better. Brother Grasshopper jumped up to object to being poisoned at all. Sister Bat told the assembly the songbirds and grasshoppers really didn't have anything to complain about, by comparison: mankind was detonating nuclear weapons in her caves, so that she and her species couldn't breed any more. A thousand paper cranes rose in unison to describe the horrors of the atomic bombs that were exploded at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, whose fires and radiation killed almost every bird in Japan.

"We may be extinct on Earth soon," Sister Trumpeter Swan concluded, "like Sister Dodo and Sister Passenger Pigeon." Brother Pterodactyl, extinct on Earth for much, much longer, cackled "So what's the matter with that? There are other planets we can live on." But Sister Dodo hopped up, flapped her flightless wings, and told Brother Pterodactyl that it's all a matter of principle. Brother Auk nodded agreement.

The God of Winged Things listened gravely as creature after creature recited atrocities. Sister Dove recounted being massacred by hunters. Sister Chicken explained what it's like to be crammed into a tiny box-like cage all the time, never getting out and having to lay at least one egg a day or be turned into soup. Brother Duck mentioned that so many swamps are being drained and filled, he no longer had a place to stay in many regions. The butterflies and moths too had their stories. Miller Moth objected that since mankind had taken to wearing synthetic fibres, he couldn't even find clothes to eat in most closets. The room was abuzz over the bee's description of the destruction of rain forests, and hummed when the cicada added an account of how human-caused weather changes are replacing the dry forests of North Africa with empty desert.

"It appears as though mankind does not deserve to have Winged Things," the God of Winged Things pronounced at last. "Perhaps it is time to take away their birds and bats and allow the more voracious insects to eat them out of existence."

The Bird-Headed God nodded agreement. "Many years ago," he said, "a magician named Moses did exactly that in my part of Planet Earth. He took away

the birds somehow, and a plague of locusts devastated Egypt so severely it has been desert ever since."

But some of the gods and goddesses who were closer to human in form took exception. "It is true," allowed Superman, "that humans do tremendous harm to most of us who fly. They even take my name in vain, using it to sell toy weapons and promote fighting, when I came to them with a message of peace. Yet it is also true that humans always do the most tremendous harm to themselves. It is further true that the worst harm they do, they do from the best of intentions. I have been among humans," he continued, "in the wealthiest and most destructive parts of Planet Earth, and I know how many of them personally feed birds, build bird houses, and do whatever else they can think of to help us. As a species, they can be bad and dangerous. As individuals, they are mostly just as good as most Winged Things. They have not long been aware of the strengths and responsibilities. Remember, it took millions of years for each Winged Thing to discover his or her work and begin to do it. Let us welcome mankind among we Winged Things. Let us help them and teach them, not destroy them."

"That is what the people I was god over said," retorted Quetzalcoatl. "Now their temples lie in ruins. Except for the corn, beans, and squash they eat, the legacy of their generosity is nothing, and their descendents are some of the poorest people in North America."

The various Winged Things fell into argument. Most wanted to destroy mankind immediately, but wiser creatures including the barn owl returned that many Winged Things now depend upon mankind to create their habitat. To destroy mankind would be to destroy themselves. "There is room and need for us all," the barn owl insisted, even as his cousin the spotted owl demanded an end to mankind before mankind ended the redwood forest that was the only place he could live.

At length the God of Winged Things drew down thunderbolts, which he used instead of a gavel to silence the group and gain everyone's attention. "It is clear to me," the God of Winged Things pronounced, "that the real issue here is not what mankind has done to us, nor even what he may do in space, but rather what he is capable of doing; and that depends upon what lies in his heart. Now, I cannot decide from all your testimony whether mankind is good or evil. Certainly mankind eats the chickens, ducks, and turkeys, but so do the hawks and owls. Certainly mankind steals, but so does the crow. Mankind lays waste to vast tracts of land, but so does the grasshopper. Whether each of us is good or bad depends not upon what we do, but rather upon whether what we do is appropriate to our place in nature. And so my question is, does mankind have a heart that can love nature, or does he love only his own inventions?"

"I shall reach my verdict by means of a test," the God of Winged Things continued. "I shall select one of you as my personal emissary. one who is willing to go directly among mankind to seek my answer. How my emissary is treated, I shall treat mankind. Now," he went on, as the Winged Things set up a clamor to be chosen, "my emissary must be strong and brave, but he or she cannot be so strong and brave as to frighten or threaten mankind, as we know all of us can be ferocious when in danger. That lets you out, Brother Eagle —" the eagle's wings drooped — "and you, Sister Peregrine. Nor can my emissary be so large as to have trouble gaining entrance into mankind's houses. So the emissary cannot be you, Brother Moa, or you, Sister Ostrich. The emissary cannot be recognized as an emissary, as then he or she might receive special treatment. Therefore I cannot send Mercury or Pegasus or Superman or the Birdman. Certainly I cannot send a Winged Thing from another planet. I shall not send an insect, either, for many insects and mankind are natural enemies. It would only be natural for mankind

to kill a termite or a fly. I must send a bird, a small bird, who will not be eaten or caged as a matter of course, but only if mankind truly has it in his heart to do us harm.

"Do I still have any volunteers?"

Several small birds and one bat jumped up the tree to a large, empty perching branch directly below the God of Winged Things.

"Not you," the God of Winged Things told the bat. "You are good and brave, but you go by night while mankind mostly goes by day." With a squeak of relief, the bat descended to a hollow place in the tree and hung upside down.

"You," the God of Winged Things said suddenly to the bank swallow. "Are you willing to suffer for your fellow creatures?"

"I'd give my right wing, Sir," piped the bank swallow.

"Go and do it," the God of Winged Things ordered. "You have two sunrises and two sunsets, and then I shall summon you back to me to make your report."

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All the Winged Things were in their places when the bank swallow arrived, flying awkwardly. The God of Flying Things had repaired his broken wing bone, but the bank swallow hadn't had time to practice using it again. He was tired from his long, long trip. He could scarcely keep his eyes open. Yet he knew his was an urgent mission. Already the winged dragon who eats the sun was looking toward the distant Planet Earth like a hawk about to pounce on a mouse. Settling into the empty perch before the God of Flying Things, the bank swallow chirped out his story in a rush:

"As you all know," he began, "I am a bank swallow. Like my cousins the mud swallows and barn swallows, I often live near mankind, and so am familiar with human ways. I have been shot and wounded by young men's BB-guns; I have been eaten by the cats most humans keep; and my habitat is endangered because the noise of passing cars and the poison in their exhaust

disturbs the embankments where I make my nest. But I have never attempted to meet a human being face to face before, to enter their houses and hear what they say to one another. I thought that if I simply flew into the house, I might be chased out as an unfamiliar intruder, or be eaten by a cat, but if I were invited in, well, then I might find out something.

"I saw that human beings sometimes stand beside the road with one arm outstretched, to get rides in other human beings' cars. They call this hitchhiking. Although hitchhiking can be very, very dangerous, I thought it might be the best way to meet a human being, so, after breakfast, I flew down to the highway to try my luck at it. As a car approached, I swooped in front of it and flung up my right wing. This was a mistake, as it was going too fast and I was too small. I felt as if my wing had been ripped right off my shoulder. As I tumbled into the tall grass beside the road, I saw the driver pause for a moment, looking into his mirror. But he could not see me, and drove on.

"Human beings are stupid and negligent,' I thought through my pain. 'They rip through life like bats out of hell — excuse me, Mr. Bat — and never give a thought for anything or anyone else.' I was ready to give up my mission right then and there, to tell you all I had learned the truth of human beings in much less than 48 hours.

"But as I flopped and staggered and tried to find a safe place to wait until the God of Winged Things called me back, another car stopped. Now I was supposed to go and meet ordinary human beings. I was supposed to come and tell you who ordinary human beings really are. But I tell you this: there are no ordinary human beings, only gods and goddesses and other magical, wonderful creatures who often as not do not realize or use the extent of their own powers. This first one I met was a healer and a spinner and a mother and gardener, who cares for her corner of the planet as devotedly as any pheasant hen for her flock. She took me in her hands and held me and sang to me and brought me flies and water for as long as I remained with her.

"In her company was a boy, not unlike the boys who carry BB-guns. The boy would have crushed me accidentally by grabbing and holding me too tightly, if his mother had not cautioned him, but he was a kind

and generous boy just the same. He reached out for me by way of reaching out toward life itself, as young creatures of all species must. Indeed, mankind is a young species, much younger than most of you, or me. Any harm this boy would have done would have been accidental. If anyone had threatened me with deliberate harm, then, small though he was, this boy would have fought that person with all his might. You ask me what lies in the hearts of mankind, and I tell you, it can only be love.

"I met a number of girl children also. There was one who wished to be my attendant. It was she who cried for me when I left the human beings to come back to you. She fed me flies, told me stories, and gave me the name of Tweeter. Now you may think this is a silly name, and it is. It was the name of a cartoon-bird, a creature of human fantasy who was always chased by cats. Then it became the nickname of a soldier who had himself surgically transformed into a woman and became the companion of a very dangerous criminal, who is remembered in a popular song. But the name also means something. When a human being gives another creature a name, it is as if the human being is giving that creature equal status. When this girl-child gave me my name, she was inviting me into her family. And the name she gave me, I came to understand, was a good name after all, for the soldier had himself made into a woman because he disliked killing and bloodshed, and thought that if he was a man he would always have to be a soldier. As a woman, he thought, maybe he could give life instead of take it. And that's what the song Tweeter did. She died using her own body to protect the famous criminal from gunfire. So my name was the name of someone who made big mistakes, but had the best intentions.

"I learned all this, I might add," the bank swallow continued, "from a great long-haired orange eater-of-birds, a cat, who came to me in my sleep, and I tell you, even the cats are gods and goddesses. As we are, perhaps. But in that company of people when I was awake and a cat when I was asleep, I felt most ungodlike. I depended upon them, and they each in turn helped me as much as they could.

"There were men, too. There was a fiery-haired carpenter who became a minstrel as the sun set, like a woodpecker by day and a songbird at night; a trash-

picker who roves from north to south and back again with the seasons, somewhat like the sea gulls; and a giant who took me with the healer to seek help in healing my wounds, like the ganders who transport smaller birds across oceans on their backs. There was a sad-eyed, crane-like doctor who gave them ointment for my broken wing.

"And there were other women. Each one stroked my head and spoke softly to me. None did me harm.

"So, Sir, God of Winged Things, hold your dragon a little longer. Planet Earth is an egg. The violence Brother Man and Sister Woman do, is the violence we all do in struggling to crack out and spread our wings for the first time. They shall learn to soar with us in dignity and freedom and joy in the love of life."

The bank swallow retired with a rustle of wings that rose into a thunderous clapping as first the God of Winged Things and then the others took flight toward their homes, their questions answered.

And so we live on. The winged dragon who eats suns eats other suns. The bank swallow is somewhere conversing with the big orange cat. The children grow wings in their sleep.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Articles are invited for a proposed anthology of theoretical explorations in the area of feminism and animal rights. We are looking for new articles that extend our thinking about this complex issue. Possible areas for consideration include: history (such as the role of women in the antivivisection movement), critiques of science and medicine, anthropology, literary criticism and aesthetics, religion, ethical theory; philosophical questions such as "rights theory" and the interconnections among the social constructions of race, gender, class, and species; and issues related to ecofeminism, popular culture, the Third World, persons of color, lesbians, and the differently abled. Please send two copies of the article by June 30, 1992, to either Carol Adams, 814 Grinnell Drive, Richardson, TX 75081; Josephine Donovan, English Department, 304 Neville Hall, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469; or Susanne Kappeler, Flat 13, 92/94 Upper St., Giles, Norwich, England NR2 1LT. We would be happy to answer inquiries.