The Unfailing

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I am not fast enough in closing the screen door behind me: a moth flutters in, climbs to the ceiling, blunders down inside the lamp-shade. When I try to catch it, it eludes me, flies under the couch. I give up. The next morning, I see it on the tile wall of the bathroom. Again I pursue. It would be easy to crush it, but I have an intuitive belief all things are equally important; their basic functions---eating, sleeping, playing, protecting their young,

Jim Barter, *Animals: 1419*
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contemplating---are the same; and I recall
Blake's words:

"Kill not the moth or butterfly;
for the Last Judgment draweth nigh."

FICTION

So I persist. I place my handkerchief swiftly and gently over the moth; but when I try to pick it up, carefully, considerately, it slips away; when I finally get it into the living-room and out the door, I find it does not emerge from my handkerchief when I open it. Going back, I find it on the floor, still uninjured.

This time, my tender enclosing and lifting entrap it securely. On the front steps, opening my handkerchief again, I see the brown, gold-barred insect zoom away.

In another country, many lives distant from this one, I am climbing a vast lonely slanting shelf of land like a raised beach from which the surf of a million years has receded. I see bones of colossal dead fish, the skeletons of animals like dinosaurs, the wreckage of ships. Over everything rests a gentle, ominous stillness.

I am desperately tired, and I am seeking to reach a truth beyond the cliff that lifts at the horizon's edge. In this region, it is not food or shelter one attains, not a conquest of safety or power, but fresh perception---revelation like sudden star-splinters, a white maelstrom sprung abruptly against the terrace windows of the mind.

I feel that I shall glimpse a verity beyond the beach, the searing hot rim of rock that shocks into blue distance and the falling bodies of gulls that come over, come over endlessly, pleading for life again, for food no longer present on dark, frothing waves, for this continent has gone dry.

I struggle upward along the blistering sand; the sun blunts its searing edge on my shoulder. I feel strength going; the flow of sweat gives me the sensation of being sucked into a water-shaft of death.

And then, abruptly, the shelf of beach begins to give way, to crumble. I slip downward into a gaping crevasse; fear erupts like volcano flame and lava against the dome of my mind. I cry out and grope at the sandy margins of the fissure.

But I slide deeper.

Then, over me glides the brown, gold-barred moth I had spared and taken to the outdoor light. It dips and tilts as though examining me. I hear its voice, piping and thin; and the words, strangely, are instantly intelligible. I realize that in my earlier life they had been too high-pitched for me to catch. Now, he is telling me to let go, to trust.

I recognize him as the moth of that earthly time, and I obey. At first, the loosening of my grip plummets me into smothering blackness; but then I sense the moth's wings curved against my side, light and electric with power. I feel them tighten, subtly, and then lift.

I am carried to the light, the beach again; I am borne up over the skeletons and flotsam toward the cliff's rim. And there, looking over and down and far out, I perceive the new meaning.

Ants are crossing my sidewalk. As I hurry along, it is difficult not to step on some of them; also, my wife says they are too numerous about the house. But I hate to injure anything alive; I even dislike crushing grass or weeds underfoot, since I learned that science has an instrument now that measures the pain a tree feels when it is cut, exactly as in a human being.

So, who can tell? Perhaps the very stones I kick or crunch or scatter as I walk, react negatively, in some form of discomfort, hurt, or suffering, to the impact against their bodies. At any rate, I carefully avoid the ants, go around their ant-hills in the grass, and get into my car.

In that further country, I am moving through a haze that blurs objects all around me. Desperately I hurry. It is humid and difficult to breathe. I strike against the jagged branches of trees, which tear me; I stumble into thorn bushes. There is no sound, no movement. No bird calls quicken hope; no habitation is visible,---only the dim vague, fading outlines

of wild growth close in and move away as I walk hesitantly, fearfully.

Into my mind images keep stabbing---those people and things in my mortal existence to whom I gave pain and for which I must atone.

And then, worse than all else, I suddenly realize I do not know where I am going; I am utterly lost, and I have no memory of goal, of purpose in being.

Panic fills me; I tremble and stand motionless.

And now the mist becomes fog. I can barely see my hand before my eyes. Terror-stricken, agonized by isolation, my absolute loss of knowledge, I run blindly, I strike against trees

and shrubs, ripping my skin. I see, hear nothing; blood seeps from my wounds; and now a great faintness, a vertigo roll over me, threatening unconsciousness, a submergence like annihilation.

And then, reeling, sinking to my knees, I see a strange and wondrous sight. A file of ants is hastening along the ground; they cross the drops of my own blood; they go straight and unerring toward some point in the fog. A raw, tight, fibre-tug of hope makes me move; I crawl, following the ants. They make a tiny sibilant sound not unlike language. I seem to catch the significance, their encouragement.

For a long while I press on, keeping beside them as they advance. My palms and knees bleed from the stones; but I am confident I shall escape, arrive somewhere, recover sanity.

Hours, weeks seem to pass; the ant-file proceeds, sternly resolute, devout in its

singleness of motive, their antennae signalling me their sympathy. And at length, the fog thins out. Stronger in mind and flesh, I rise to my feet; I follow the ants at a slow, walking pace. I come out into a great meadow. And, finally, the sun breaks through the white walls that have imprisoned me; wind blows; the air is cool and firm and exalting. I can see across great vistas to water, hills. And in a rush, sweet as the balm of love, I know once more where I am going, what I am. I recall my commitment, my destiny, the God who guards and counsels.

A cry of thanks breaks from my lips; tears sting my eyes; I look down to see the ants, to give them tribute and gratitude. They are gone.

And suddenly I remembered, and I know. They are the ones across all the soil and rocks of my earthly years that I had side-stepped, walked around, avoided, released when they were pinned down, struggling, on their backs, or

brought to safety when they were kicking, swimming hopelessly, doomed, drowning in cowbarn milk or flowing rain-water.

I heard a thin, frenzied squawking one day and rushed to the front door. A swarm of sparrows was attacking a wounded one struggling on its back. Yelling, I sprang down the steps. The cut-throats fled; the helpless sparrow turned slowly on its side, fought erect, and stunned, waveringly, gazed at my rapid approach.

It was a runt, crooked-looking, with irregular coloration and a sawed-off tail. I had seen it before, flying in a sort of twisted, wildly-beating, ineffectual way.

Now, as I slowed my step, calling to it reassuringly, it found strength to fly, just clearing the ground, around the corner of the house and into a low bush.

"Poor little bastard," I said aloud.

And standing there, I remember the sickly sparrow under the scrub-pine tree last winter, whose plumage was all drooping, roughened,

drab, who could barely move. We put corn and wild-bird seed in the hollow the storms had scooped from the snow under the low branches, and it hopped about miserably and pecked a little; but no doubt in the howling zero winds it died. Or perhaps for a few days our mercy earned it the reprieve of life.

And I recall the pathetic horned-lark that seemed to stagger and fumble as it ate from our boards near the outdoor fireplace. When I neared it, it remained after other birds scattered, eating ravenously, as though starved. And then I saw it had only one leg, and leaned on its wing to keep balance. I protected that bird all I could, warded off blackbirds, harassing sparrows, cowbirds, grackles, when it was trying to eat, and then stood close by to discourage their return.

It stayed many days; I became aware of its mate, always hovering not far off. The larks, I have learned from long experience, have an extraordinary loyalty to their own.

So, now, I am glad I have saved the runt sparrow, the inferior and deformed which the strong and normal love to kill.

Later in the day, I see him out back near the cross-bar post that holds the laundry line, under the tall bugloss weeds with the heavenly blue flowers; he is standing motionless in the grain and seed I scatter there twice a day. He seems paralyzed, and I am afraid he will be attacked again.

I go out, approach slowly. He does not move. When I reach for him, he runs, dazed and awkward, tipping forward piteously, his tail tilting up and his beak plowing the ground. In the dark caves of the bristly-branched, celestial-blue-flowered bugloss he takes cover. I can stretch my hand in and touch him; his eyes are glazed. I think he will die. Shall I put him in a box in the basement? I decide he would rather die in a natural setting.

Sometime later, when I return, he has come to,

is perched on a bent-over dead weed, clutching it desperately, swaying, tipping, recovering balance, his head nodding, his eyes sightless. I know I can pick him up, but I leave him alone a while longer.

An hour afterward, when he is still there, afraid a hawk or night prowler will get him, I pursue him into the bugloss, catch him and take him to a cage in the basement. He struggles very little, walks to the side of the cage, tips over against the screen, his eyes toward the open roll-up door and the setting sun.

My heart is torn.

I come back after supper. He is still in the same position, his eyes closed. I have decided to take him back to the bugloss. If he is to die, let it be in nature, in the outdoor darkness scented with flowers and soil and weedy, wind-stirred virtues he loves. I lay him in the bugloss. Before night, I say to myself, he will be dead.

But when I go out for a last look, he is gone. And crossing over to my feeding ground under the wild cherry, I find him there, able to walk about more animatedly, eating the seed with hesitant yet persistent will to live.

My God, how did he recover strength so fast? Tough, admirable sparrow!

When I near him, he hops off into the weeds. And the next day, he is around again---stronger, obviously, for he moves more alertly, though I still do not see him fly. He has survived the night, somehow.

And weeks later, he still around, crouching low in weeds and bushes, eating furtively on the fringes of the crowd, blundering through shrubs to escape my hand; at times, tipping over, tail up and beak furrowing the dirt when I approach him; and scrambling madly, unable to fly, till I am almost within reach; and then, summoning a crucial power, he takes off suddenly, low and furious-winged, and maneuvers a hundred

yards or more into a hedgerow.

Thank God! If he can fly, he has a chance this winter. I begin to love my runt more than the healthy birds; and daily I watch for him.

In that further country, I am swimming in an enormous quarry; the striated, heavily-faulted walls of granite and diorite rise up like the dusky, closed gates of hope in an unearthly

dream; sheer and terrible they loom to a small round opening at their jagged peaks, to a bloody sun breathing through misty-blue sky---an outlet, a vent that closes slowly, inexorably.

I swim toward the rock, the rank spiny plants jutting from the base, which bear the poisonous purple carrion-berries. The cold of the quarry water shocks my blood to numbness; I lose strength swiftly; I begin to labor in my strokes, to thrash the water and call out.

The awesome echoes bounce and ricochet within that tightening shaft of rock. There is derision in the sound.

Down, far down under me, through the pristine clarity of water, I see the saw-tooth, lacerating bottom, waiting; and caught here and there, the limp, bloated bodies of the drowned, which shift a little in the submarine current, leaking a gray pustulant substance.

In horror, I flail insanely; but the shore seems to recede; the opening of sky tightens more. I shall be in total darkness. Sharp-jawed fish rise toward me. My panic dims my sight, and as I falter and go under, I hear the cries of birds---the one-legged lark that had fed at my boards, the sparrow under the scrub-pine who had eaten my corn and seed in the merciless arctic cold dip down and surround me in some manner with the grace and force of their wings; they lift me to the surface and hold me there as I swim; and resuscitated, alive with faint, thawing hope again, I strike out more firmly, with control and confidence.

"Thanks, friends," I say.

And they reply:

"Thanks for past help in time of need, that comradeship we now return."

I attain the sheer polished walls of rock; I stretch my hands; the spiny sheaths, the cruel barbs of the carrion plant pierce my palms. I shriek; I bleed fiercely into the water, which clouds and thickens with my blood.

I cannot secure a grip on the rock. The opening above has closed. The jaws of the fish are about my knees and hips; I slip backward and under.

Then, wondrously, a scintilla of light emerges overhead; it descends; it sifts down like a sacred flake in a church ritual placed on the tongue. It calls me:

"That day I lay under the killing beaks of my own people, you rescued me; and after that your food and care were my savior."

And the runt sparrow drops to my side; he touches my upraised, groping palms with a beak that heals, instantaneously; he grips my shoulder and a mystical power flows into heart and limbs.

I climb the wall, gripping at the volcanic fissures, the faults in the glittering black stone; the sparrow expands to a bright, powerful size, and I grow in a new magnitude of confidence, virility, rejoicing. The sparrow soars high up to touch the drawn-together rock; it rips slowly, opens wide to let in light and sky.

Almost winged myself with energy, I climb through, I am in saving air and altitude, with a view of rolling, beautiful plains and woods, and flying ahead to lead me, all the birds I loved on earth; their words I understand; and I shall fly with them before long and speak their language and hear the stories of their thoughts and feelings when I knew them in the mortal world and helped them there but could not always grasp their communication exactly.

I am mowing the lawn; it is rough, mere clumps of grass and weeds here and there. The hand-mower bumps, chews off the tops of hummocks. I would prefer not to mow my lawns at all. I like all settings to be as natural as possible, and we live in a rugged, isolated terrain, bare and open with low trees and hedgerows and scattered bushes in the semi-arid rolling reaches of grass. But my wife, civilized still, wants the tufted, rain-scoured stretches near the house kept trim.

So, I labor away, now and then raising the mower sideways to prevent shearing off the tuft-tops. All about me are weeds, the plush-fuzzy bugloss with its little lavender, silver-tipped stamens protruding from the rich blue trumpets; the golden St. John's wort; the royal purple outbursts of thistle; the pink, feathery, shake-like puffs of low-growing clover; and as I mow, I feel the treachery and the stupid barbarism of slicing down all this beauty. It enjoys the sun and moisture, the shadowy, afterglow-tinted dusk, the darkness; food at its roots; sportive wind; the yielding storm; creative silences and the procreation of seed-time, as much as I enjoy all the varied thoughts and acts, excitements and quiet growings of my own life.

Why should I cut off the pleasure of existence of these weeds and flowers, merely to make my surroundings artificially pruned, to give a conventional stricture and falsity to my home's appearance?

And I am reminded of Robert Frost's poem, "The Tuft of Flowers," in which the mower,

"from sheer morning gladness at the brim," leaves the cluster of butterfly weed standing by the stream.

A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared

Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

And so, as I come upon these colorful friends between the grass clumps, my sympathy, my tender-heartedness get the better of me now and then, and I veer aside from this weed, I tip and lift my mower over the top of that flower; and my progress across the lawn is a weaving, irregular one; I stop suddenly on an impulse of mercy for a bit of vetch or a waxy aster-stem still to bloom at all its tiny, expectant, closed green tips. I back up; I go around; I cut ruthlessly for a short stretch, then relent again, curve around a thistle bloom or a black-eyed Susan.

And when I get the power-mower out to do the rougher, meadow-like lawn in the hollow beside the garden, I weave in and out, back up, circle, in the same way. So that all my travels that morning leave behind me little islands of color in the reaches of neat, short-clipped grass; and these gay escapees shine and arch and frolic in the wind, no doubt shouting silent praises to the Prime Mover, and I am happy to have permitted a few more things to live a few days longer. And how distinctive my house setting now is: my friends, when they visit, are amused by it; but I am spiritually nourished for weeks, in all shades of weather, by those splashes of color that other people would sacrifice to custom.

In that further country, I have been given the great mission of guiding wild natural creatures from one stage of perception to another, helping beings who were animals on earth to communicate here with other animals, with birds, fishes, humans, so that the great tide of cosmic process is facilitated, and all life moves along those roads of awareness, of understanding, which will bring to every species of life---animal, mineral, vegetable---the Utopian palaces of God that great minds

have glimpsed, have conceived in fragments and by their very will and earnest imagining have helped to shape into eventual fact.

But as I prepare for the vast, boundlessly exciting task I had longed for on earth---giving consolation and relief to bird or animal killed by autos, slaughtered for food, or tortured in science's laboratories, the ones who have died on the human globe and suffering in their transition from that former life to the place I now inhabit---before I can enter my service to the natural order in this new sphere, to the lasting beneficial results on behalf of wild things that I seemed unable to confer on mortals I tried to help in that earlier existence---as I get ready, I am obliged to pass through a towering mountain range to obtain knowledge of healing, to find medicine for the fatal wounds scientific scalpels have made, antidotes for the poisoning or the fake drugs, or cancer that science deliberately imposed on helpless mice, monkeys, dogs, to seek data they could as easily have achieved without brutal experiment, countless torturous deaths, incalculable suffering---and I find myself all at once in a chill, empty place, a shadowy chasm of rubble. The loneliness is strangling; I can see no hint of person, creature, growing things.

Then a bird like a vulture descends. It is struck with gobbets of blood; it stinks obscenely; it holds in its claws the knife of the human scientist, most evil and icily ruthless of all the beings sprung from the loins of life on any planet. I am seized in mid-air; an experiment is about to begin on me, such as those that have slaughtered, with little or anesthesia, millions of the small and defenseless in mortal-world laboratories. I writhe with pain. I shout.

Then, all at once, pouring up like a great fresh river from the sterile rockiness of the chasm, rolls wave upon wave of the flowers and bright-colored weeds I had spared in my mowing. They inundate the vulture and myself; I am torn from his grip; I slip downward in the cool, revitalizing torrent of God's hues; I rise up again to the surface.

Carol Belanger Grafton,
Old-Fashioned Animal Cuts.
New York: Dover, 1987

The vulture floats, bloated belly up, in the redeeming sun. And as the tidal force lessens and draws back, I stand on the chasm's now-blossoming, savagely-beauty-blazing land, and I take the impact of wisdom from the presence of those old friends, those former weeds and flowers; I receive the ultimate knowledge of healing from their words, their gently-stirring reveries, their radiance and vibration.

And so, I go to the chasm's gaping doorway, and here come the millions of creatures in the throes of their pain and sickness and torment, their violent passage from the human planet to this existence. And multitudes of them I can now relieve and comfort and ease into rest and a fresh growing.

And so, confident and powerful, imbued with the colors all about me from previous and renewed comradeship, tingling with victory, I stride toward that ocean of the in-pouring needy, the friends-to-be; and I reach toward them with the means of cure and wholeness at my finger-tips; and out of what I loved and spared in pity this talent is flowing.