

Conversation Pieces
Volume 34

Birds and Birthdays

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For Richard Boves

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The Creation of Birds

The Bird Woman sits at her table with a long strip of parchment stretched out before her. She holds a quill between her thumb and forefinger, plucked earlier in the night from her own head. She has drawn the outline of a sparrow, has shaded in its curves and hollows. It has two beady black eyes that stare out from the page. This sparrow has spunk, thinks the Bird Woman. She licks her thumb, smudges a section of tail feathers to make them look fuller than usual, then nods, satisfied with the exaggeration.

The Bird Woman is not a realist. She has no time for that. She believes sparrows should have fans for tail feathers, that parrots appear more exotic when they hold silence as a virtue, rather than the prattle for which they are known. The one bird her imagination has left untouched is the hummingbird. Who would dare attempt to better such a creature with wings that flutter a hundred times with each beat of its heart? That's art, simple and evocative. It doesn't get better than that.

Beside her parchment sit two teacups. She cracks open a fresh egg, shuffles the white from the yolk, one shell to the other, then places a half in each cup. She licks her quill then, dips it into the yolk, and draws a small golden circle within the sparrow's breast. A moment

later the sparrow opens its beak to emit a warble, but only silence comes out. The golden circle trembles and begins to spin slowly, like a water wheel, within the sparrow's breast.

She paints each feather with egg white in long lazy strokes. The sparrow stretches its wings a little, clenching and unclenching its tiny claws, testing. "Tut, tut," whispers the Bird Woman. "Not yet, little one. I haven't even given you your colors. What would you want the world to mistake you for? A dove?"

The Bird Woman smiles down at the sparrow. In the next room, the cries and chirps of her most recent creations grow louder as the sun begins to rise. Today she will be taking them to the market. Usually she gives her birds away as gifts or as barter, but she's nearly out of money, and soon her landlord will demand what she owes him, which he's been kind enough to ignore for the past two months.

The Bird Woman hasn't been able to make birds for a long time. Nearly four months have passed without one new bird. The birds in the next room were the last to receive the required teaspoon of moon and starlight needed to give them life. The stars and moons, a lot of them have been disappearing. It's because of the Star Catcher—he's been out there again, in the night sky, taking them down, so many of them, as if they were mere ornaments or lanterns. Without them, the Bird Woman won't be able to complete even this sparrow, small and slight as it is. There isn't enough available light to make it live. Why do I try, she wonders. Habit, she thinks. Wishful thinking, she decides.

She tries not to attribute anything to hope.

A swan strolls into the workshop, sidling up beside the Bird Woman's leg, attempting to view the parchment, but its neck isn't long enough to stretch that high. "Shoo," the Bird Woman scolds it. "Back with the others, silly swan. We'll be leaving soon for the market."

She strokes the top of its head before it turns to leave the room. Her fingers come away damp, sticky with ivory.



It is a good day at the market—there are people everywhere, buying, selling, their voices clamoring in the dusty street. Love potions, jewelry, charms, braided rugs, velvet robes. Food from a thousand worlds, some still living, some long dead. The Bird Woman thinks she might sell a lot of birds in all of this din. A difficult feat, though, considering the Star Catcher has returned from another long absence. His booth sits directly across from the Bird Woman's stall. Even while customers crowd around his table, trying to haggle, he stares over their heads at the Bird Woman, his eyes cold as stone.

The Star Catcher is whisper thin, and his forehead is filled with creases. He sweats a lot for someone so skinny. He's covered in robes the color of night. On his table he displays an array of moons and stars kept in brass and silver cages. Half Moons, Crescents, Harvest Moons, and a Blue Moon as well. His stars are small and sickly. They wink and blink, but they are known to die quickly after a sale. The Star Catcher never sits. He stands behind his table, arms folded, and waits for buyers to realize no amount of haggling will force his prices down.

The Bird Woman pretends not to see him. She inhales a deep breath of the dry market air and avoids his stare. It's been several months since she last spoke to him, and though time and distance has made her days easier, he has not stopped taking down the stars. It is his way of punishing her, she thinks, for leaving. And yet... and yet, she thinks, he'd been taking them down before she even made the decision to leave him.

A long time ago, the Bird Woman tried to be his lover. She had tried to understand him like no one else before. But the Star Catcher, she soon discovered, didn't know how to love something he couldn't own. Her memory of their time together is like walking through thick forest, suddenly falling into a pit that's been covered over with sticks and brush to hide the hole. She tries not to wander through those memories. He kept her in that hole for long enough. He shouldn't still have that power over her, she knows.

And yet there had been moments that had come close to love and, yes, also passion. These memories the Bird Woman tries to leave pure and untouched. She keeps this one beautiful still: his eyes holding her gaze steady as he moved above her, the feel and smell of his skin, grainy and sweet like sugar, his breath fanning her feathers. "I love your eyes," he told her, tracing their contours with his finger, two perfect circles in an owl-like face. "I love your everything," he told her, and his hands moved down the length of her body as she sang, sang, sang, blinking profusely.

The Bird Woman knows where the Star Catcher likes to be kissed—on his forehead, like a child. She used to kiss each of the wrinkles on his forehead before they

went to sleep. He never attempted to learn her own skin though, or how to talk to her about her art. The Bird Woman learned so much about the stars and their placement and how the Star Catcher goes about displacing them, she could probably catch stars herself. For a while, she felt like one of his stars, clinging to his arm, on display for others. He never asked about her birds.

The market is busy this morning, which makes it easier for her to ignore him. She hopes he will choose to ignore her as well.

The swan goes first. Someone is here to buy it for a storybook for children. She wraps a blue bow around its neck before sending it off. Then her silent parrot is paid for by a young deaf man. His smile is soft and gentle. She imagines the two of them will keep a quiet house. There go the lovebirds as well as the cuckoo, which she notices is a little mad. It continually preens, stopping only to eat. Not a good sign. She is glad it found a home though. Soon it will be laying eggs in other birds' nests, allowing them to raise its hatchlings. I'm a bit of a cuckoo myself, the Bird Woman thinks.

She is busy tidying up her stall, sweeping out feathers and birdseed, when she hears his voice.

"My dear. Jessica. Jess. How have you been?"

The Bird Woman doesn't stop sweeping; she doesn't look up at all. She knows it is the Star Catcher by his deep, sonorous voice and by the name that he calls her. The Bird Woman doesn't have a name like that. She is just the Bird Woman. Her mother never gave her a name like the humans have. She is her mother's daughter. Her mother had been the Bird Woman also, and so she was called too, after her mother left this world for the next.

But the Star Catcher calls her something human anyway. A name he thinks she should like. She decides not to answer. She has principles. She's made a point of sticking to them for the past thirty years, after she finally gave him up. She will make a point of sticking to them still.

"Jessica, Jess," he says, trying again. "Why won't you talk? It's been so long. Look up, it's me. Ivan. I have a gift for you. Really. No kidding."

The Bird Woman looks up. She is not immune to gifts, nor to a possible reconciliation, a possible peace. She likes to think people can change. The Star Catcher stands just outside her stall, holding a small silver cage. Inside its bars sits a blue star the size of a pearl earring. He holds the cage out and says, "For you."

"I don't keep stars," says the Bird Woman. She looks down and resumes sweeping her stall. Shaking her head wearily, she says, "I don't keep anything."

"Keep this then," he says. "Please. An offering. For all of our troubles."

She is skeptical at first, but finally decides to take it, nodding her hesitant assent. She cannot imagine this tiny star could have much of a life with the Star Catcher anyway, and besides, its light may help her sparrow live. Perhaps she can teach the star how to live on land, away from the sky, though not likely, considering she knows sky better than land.

"How long are you back for?" she asks, head down, looking up at him from beneath her eyelashes.

"A few days," he says. "I need to go back out."

"Thank you," the Bird Woman says, her hope flattened by his statement. She keeps her eyes fixed on the

blue star in its cage. “Have a nice day,” she tells him, as if he is nothing more than another customer.



On the Bird Woman’s island, all streets lead to the same place—the center. The roads are cobbled, and they travel ever inward, spirals, all of them, one after the other. The Bird Woman’s cottage sits near the center of the city, built on the riverside. The river here follows the same pathways as the roads: it moves inward, spiraling. Between each street are canals, roads made of water. From above—and the Bird Woman has taken to the sky many times just to see this—the island looks like an orangey-pink seashell, floating in the blue ocean.

The Bird Woman’s bones are hollow, and because of this her step is light. She moves through crowds quicker than others. She hops upon wagons and barrows as they wheel by, then wings her way to the other side of the street. Today, she needs to stop by the market, as well as the banker, to deposit the money from the sale of her birds. She also has an appointment with the psychoanalyst, that old man with the long white beard. He wears wizard caps, tall and pointy. For him, the mind is the same thing as magic. The Bird Woman has a friend who sees the psychoanalyst on a regular basis. This friend is an artist as well—a bit of a loon, really—but she swears the psychoanalyst is saving her life, little by little, one hour a week. She’s suggested the Bird Woman see him herself. *For the sake of your art, if for nothing else*, she’d explained.

The Bird Woman is more than a little reluctant. She’s never needed therapy before. But lately she’s not been so

sure of herself as she used to be. Perhaps, she thinks, an objective opinion is exactly what's needed.



These names are poetry: kookaburra, cardinal, cormorant, kestrel, nuthatch, warbler, flamingo, thrush. The Bird Woman keeps each name tucked under her tongue. Better than locking them inside her brain, where she might not be able to retrieve them, depending on her mood. When the Bird Woman is happy, she'll make Phoenixes and Thunderbirds, which exist only in poetry and dreams. When she is merely content, she makes birds that are real and not imagined. When the Bird Woman is sad, she doesn't make birds at all. She explains all of this within the first fifteen minutes of her session with the psychoanalyst.

The psychoanalyst stares at the Bird Woman through round, foggy spectacles. He rubs his hands together like a fly. "This, my dear," he says in his old man's scratchy voice, "is why you can't work. You're depressed. Sorrow can make any of us stop in our tracks. Of course you can't make birds."

"But there isn't enough light," she explains. "The Star Catcher keeps taking the moons and stars. I need them. It isn't just my own state of mind. The problem is out there in the world. How do you say it? Circumstantial?"

"Yes, yes," he says. "That's the word all right. But really, you must stop blaming others. If you are to help yourself, if you are to break this pattern of self-indulgent sadness, this apathy, then you will have to stop blaming others and be able to point your finger back at yourself."

For example, have you ever done anything to the Star Catcher that would make him deprive you of stars?"

"Moons too," she adds quickly. "We were lovers once. It didn't work out. But surely that isn't a reason to strip the sky?"

"Well now," says the psychoanalyst, "even the Star Catcher has feelings. I think you should set aside time to think about that. As an exercise in self-abnegation. It can work miracles, really. I've seen patients recover in no time flat once they've considered themselves as the source of their own problems."

The Bird Woman considers this carefully, rubbing the side of her long, beaky nose with her thumb. "I did end things awfully fast," she admits. "Cut and dried, you know. That's what mother used to say is best in matters of the heart."

"But your mother wasn't a psychoanalyst," the psychoanalyst points out, and the Bird Woman can do nothing but nod.

Before she leaves, the psychoanalyst stops her in the foyer of his office. "Wait," he says. "You forgot your bag."

"I don't have a bag," says the Bird Woman.

"Oh no, it's just a little something I'm sending you home with. You might need it. In times of distress."

"I won't take pills," the Bird Woman says. But the psychoanalyst shakes his head.

"Not necessary at all, in your situation," he says, and tells her to come back again in a week.

"Thank you," says the Bird Woman, noting that he has unconsciously admitted that she has a *situation*. She nods weakly before opening the door to leave.

In the cobbled square outside the office building, the Bird Woman pauses before continuing home, wondering what the bag holds. She reaches inside and feels something hairy. She grabs hold of the hair and pulls out the psychoanalyst's head by his beard. The head hangs upside down from the beard like a pocket watch, dangling and swaying.

“Hello again,” the psychoanalyst's head says, looking up (or down, from his own vantage) at the Bird Woman. “Are we home yet?”



The Bird Woman loves three things best in the world: birds, the stars that give them life (that give her life), and flying. When the Bird Woman learned to fly, her mother worried and worried, she cried in joy and terror to see her daughter soaring higher than even she herself had ever dared to go. On her first flight, the Bird Woman brought back handfuls of clouds for her mother, a shard of sunlight, and two swathes of sky to match her mother's eyes. She wove the sky into a robe, and years later, she wrapped her mother in that cloth after she died, offering her back to the heavens.

In the Bird Woman's memory, her mother is who loved her best. She had warned her not to fly too high. “The sky is not always filled with beauty,” she told the Bird Woman. “Sometimes danger lingers there, my daughter, like storms and lightning.” Always her mother had been saying what seemed to be most obvious, and yet the Bird Woman had flown into her share of storms, had barely dodged several bolts of lightning, no matter that her mother had warned her, and each time her breath would

catch in her throat and she would wish, wish, wish that she'd paid her mother more attention.

She'd found the Star Catcher like that, pedaling through the sky in a mechanical contraption, the wings made of wire and leather, with pulleys attached to its wheels, which pumped the wings to take him higher. She stopped mid-flight and hovered, as if she were a hummingbird, to watch him for a while. She admired a man who wanted to fly. And later, after they had met and the sky and clouds had trembled as they touched, she brought him home to meet her mother. Her mother, though, had cast a crooked finger at him immediately, one long talon landing on his cheek. "You have the stars in your eyes," she told him. But it wasn't meant as a compliment. "This one," she said, turning back to the Bird Woman, "will take what he wants."

The Bird Woman's mother died two months later. The Star Catcher brought a star to the funeral and placed it alongside the flowers from the other mourners. The Bird Woman thought this a grand gesture. He had flown higher than she had to bring this gift for her mother's funeral, even after her mother had judged him so harshly. As he approached her in the long, twisting queue of mourners, she burst into tears, shocked by her own display of emotion. The Star Catcher slid his arms around her, though, held her close to him. "Be still," he whispered into her ear, like a command but gentle.

And so she was.



At home, the Bird Woman's sparrow is still struggling to lift itself out of the parchment. She holds the

psychoanalyst's head by his beard in one hand and the caged star in the other. She looks at both. Both look back at her. The psychoanalyst says, "This would be a perfect opportunity to practice appreciating the Star Catcher. Put the star he gave you to good use."

The Bird Woman sets the psychoanalyst's head on her kitchen counter, next to the cutting board. She takes her star to the worktable and opens its cage door. The star doesn't attempt to escape. It sits inside, softly glowing.

She reaches in and pulls it out, fitting it inside the palm of her hand, like a stone or a kitten. She strokes it, and it vibrates in return, growing warm. She reaches for a teaspoon, spoons up some of its soft blue light, and sprinkles it over the sparrow's struggling body. The sparrow pulls itself the rest of the way out of the parchment, stretching its wings, clenching and unclenching its tiny claws, blinking. It cocks its head toward the Bird Woman, waiting for her to explain its existence.

The Bird Woman places the star back in its cage. She's delighted that it actually worked. Here is a new bird, a new creation, waiting. Waiting for her to add the final touches to its life.

She takes down a violin from the top shelf of her closet, propping it between her chin and neck. A long plastic tube dangles from the front of the violin. The Bird Woman pinches the end of the tube between her fingers, brings it close to the sparrow's small head. "Please," she says, and the sparrow's beak creaks open.

The Bird Woman slips the tube into the sparrow's mouth, like a mother feeding a worm to her hatchling. She lifts bow to strings and begins to play something sweet and lilting, but no music can be heard within the

room. The music slides down through the tubing instead. Sometimes green and sometimes golden, it moves through the tubing into the sparrow. The column of the sparrow's throat moves up and down as the little bird drinks the music up in greedy measures. When the Bird Woman finishes her song, she lays the violin aside, pulls the tube out, and the sparrow begins to sing.

"Lovely," says the Bird Woman, nodding her approval.

"Indeed," the psychoanalyst's head says, beaming along with her from the kitchen counter. "See, my dear. You just have to get on with things. Stop blaming others. You couldn't have done this if the Star Catcher hadn't given you that star."

Reminded, the Bird Woman looks back to the star, but the cage is empty. Only a small pile of ash lies steaming in the place where it had been glowing just moments ago.



"This star is dead," says the Bird Woman the next morning, pushing the cage with the remains inside it toward the Star Catcher. "You gave me a dying star."

"I did no such thing," says the Star Catcher. He stands in the frame of his front door, holding his hands up to his chest, embarrassed, worried that one of his other customers might be passing by and hear this accusation. "That star was fine when I gave it to you," he says, pointing a long finger toward it. "Did you use it to make a new bird?"

"I used a bit of its light to finish a sparrow," says the Bird Woman.

“Well there you have it,” says the Star Catcher, throwing his hands in the air. “You killed it for the creation of your birds.”

“They aren’t *my* birds,” the Bird Woman corrects. “They’re just birds. And no star should die from giving up a teaspoon of light. Believe me, I’m the expert on that. I’m the expert on *something*.”

“Sorry,” says the Star Catcher. “But that star would have been fine if you’d left it alone.”

The Bird Woman clenches her lips and grips both of her hands together, flexing the muscles in her fingers. She wants to lash out at the Star Catcher, but she’ll hold her hands to each other rather than touch him like that. The Star Catcher likes to be treated as a child. Violence toward him will not help matters at all.

“I’m sorry,” she says, finally. “You’re right. My fault, my fault,” she mutters, and turns to leave, shoulders shrugging. Why did she even try?

“Wait!” the Star Catcher shouts behind her.

And the Bird Woman turns back, startled, to find him holding his front door open wide. “I think I can help you,” he says, moving aside, waving her toward the dark foyer behind him. “Please. Come inside.”



The Star Catcher owns a lighthouse on the edge of the island. Made from chalky white stones, it nearly touches the sky. It continually sends signals out to nearby boats to warn them away from rocks and dangerous waters. All of the boatmen appreciate the Star Catcher’s tower. They call him brother, Guardian of the Light. The Bird Woman has passed by ships in the boatyards, docking or

unloading goods from other lands, has heard these men praising the Star Catcher's brilliance. Unable to remain quiet, each time she has called out, "Fools! You thank the one who possesses your constellations!" They forget the troubles they and their fathers have had navigating without them. How in the last ten years, as the Star Catcher has taken down the stars, more boats manned by their brothers and sisters have wrecked upon the shores of foreign lands, never again to be seen or heard from. He has not only taken the light from the skies, thinks the Bird Woman, but the light from their minds. As she passes the wharf, she opens her beak and caws a short, shocking curse. Some men look up from their nets, but she carries on, not looking at the Star Catcher, who has led her here from his apartment building, until they reach the lighthouse, that gleaming tower at the end of the last curl in her island.

The Bird Woman has forgotten how much space the Star Catcher's lighthouse contains. She herself makes do with that little cottage on the north side of the island, consisting of only two rooms. The Star Catcher's lighthouse, though, goes up and up, catwalks climbing level after level. He ascends a spiral staircase that begins in the center of the first floor, his boots thumping every step of the way, and the Bird Woman follows behind his dark flowing robes.

As they climb to the top, the light inside the building grows stronger, and the Bird Woman's breath grows shorter with each step that she takes. Her cheeks flush, warm and ruddy under her feathers. Finally she asks, "Where are you taking me, Ivan? I haven't got time for your games."

“Just a little further,” says the Star Catcher, looking over his shoulder and smiling. His smile is innocent and earnest, which makes the Bird Woman smile back. She always liked it when the Star Catcher was happy or excited about something. He was always very sincere at those times.

They reach the top floor of the lighthouse and stand before a door where light for the signal originates—the lantern room. The door to this room is closed, but light seeps from the edges of the doorframe, outlining it in the dark stairwell. The Star Catcher flings the door open and steps aside, so the Bird Woman can enter before him. And as she does, the Bird Woman throws her hand to her mouth, gasping.

Inside, stacked up in large mounds, are heaps of moons and stars, no lighthouse lantern at all. The stars and moons lay together like pieces of gold in a cave full of stolen treasure. Or, the Bird Woman thinks, like bodies. Dead bodies. Together the stars and moons sigh and shuffle a little to one side or the other, bumping into each other weakly. But even if they *could* move, where would they go? She almost retches.

“Ivan,” she whispers. “What have you done?”

The Star Catcher looks back and forth between the mound of stars and the Bird Woman, grinning. “They’re for you, my dear,” he says. “All of them. Everything.”



Down, down, down. Then down even farther. The Bird Woman hops and flutters down the spiral stairwell, still aghast at the thought of the stars locked inside the Star Catcher’s tower. Already she knows she will not

be able to live with the memory of what she's seen, of what he's done, the memory of what he's taken from the world, from its people. Imagine their upturned faces, staring into emptiness, the sky reflecting nothing of their lives below, providing no guidance, no hint of life outside their own world. It is my fault, thinks the Bird Woman. Even if they've forgotten.

The Star Catcher follows with his robes flapping behind him. "Jessica! Jess! Wait! You don't understand!"

"I understand perfectly," the Bird Woman squawks over her shoulder. She grabs hold of the brass knob on the front door and pushes it open. Warm sunlight pours in. On the street a wagon pulled by two oxen creaks by. Two children, a boy and a girl of ten or eleven, sit on the back of the wagon, waving and laughing, legs dangling. The Bird Woman waves back, breathing deeply, sighing. She turns around then to face the Star Catcher once more. "Never speak to me again," she says.

"But—" the Star Catcher reaches out to touch her.

"No, Ivan," the Bird Woman says.

"I did it for you," he says. "The stars are yours if you want them."

The Bird Woman cocks her head to one side, studying the Star Catcher's face in deep curiosity: the wide-set eyes, unbearably blue and seemingly innocent; the wide forehead, wrinkled in earnest confusion; the cherub lips; the hands, too soft for the sort of work he does. The Bird Woman sees what he says is the truth. How can he speak truth though, she wonders, and still pry the stars from their homes? The Bird Woman suddenly wishes the psychoanalyst's head were there with her. He would

have answers. Possibly not correct answers, but answers nonetheless.

“For me?” she says, repeating his words, and the Star Catcher nods. “If they’re for me, Ivan,” she says, “then I suggest you replace them. Put them back where they belong.”

“No,” the Star Catcher says. He shakes his head and shrugs. “They’re for you, Jess. But here. You can have the stars here, if you like.”

The Bird Woman looks past the Star Catcher’s face, over his shoulder, at the lighthouse towering behind him, beaming, light stockpiled at the top level. For a moment, she considers what her fate will be if she comes to this place. She will have to have things brought here from her own cottage. She will not be able to do this without help. Finally, she turns back to the Star Catcher. “Here then,” she says, brushing past him, head held high as she returns to the lighthouse.



Doves, bluejays, cardinals, canaries, jackdaws, falcons—soon the lighthouse is filled with the flapping of wings, the flash of feathers, the screech and holler of birds. Two owls call back and forth to each other, measuring the night together. The Bird Woman sits cross-legged on the cold flagstones at the top of the lighthouse, sketching, shading, painting, filling the mouths of her creations with notes from her violin.

The Star Catcher brings her tea, plates of toast spread with cream and honey. “Busy, busy,” he says, stroking her cheek with the tips of his fingers. Then he disappears for an hour, only to return with his hands empty,

smiling, waiting, peering over the Bird Woman's shoulder. "What's this one to be?" he asks.

"An ostrich," the Bird Woman tells him. "Please. I need space. I can't work with you looking over my shoulder."

"Sorry," the Star Catcher says, stepping backwards until he reaches the door. "I'll just be downstairs, then, if you need me."

"I don't need you," the Bird Woman mutters, after he's closed the door.

The Bird Woman stares at her canvas until tears begin to fill her eyes. "Stop that," she whispers. "Stop it. There are better things in this world that deserve your tears."

"What a situation you've gotten yourself into," the psychoanalyst says. His head sits propped up on a nearby bookshelf, his beard trailing over the shelving, almost touching the floor. "I'm beside myself," he tells the Bird Woman. "Really, I can't believe how you put up with his constant attentions. It's disgraceful. You'd think he were some sort of sentinel."

"I tried to tell you," says the Bird Woman.

"But—" says the psychoanalyst.

"But you wouldn't listen," the Bird Woman tells him.

"Yes, well," says the psychoanalyst. "But really, my dear. I've never encountered anyone like him. Whatever attracted you in the first place?"

The Bird Woman considers this question for a moment, one finger placed carefully to her lips, eyes rolled up slightly, as if the answer to that question remains somewhere outside, far up in the sky above. A moment later she begins to stroke brown into the ostrich before her. "I think it was his passion," she says finally.

"His passion?" the psychoanalyst asks.

“His passion for me,” says the Bird Woman.

“That’s not passion, my dear,” says the psychoanalyst. “That’s obsession. They can seem like the same thing.”

Footsteps sound on the catwalk outside. “Wonderful,” says the psychoanalyst. “He’s back.”

The door opens on its oily hinges, and the Star Catcher pokes his head inside. “Still working?” he asks, tentative, cautious. The Bird Woman doesn’t look at him. She only nods and continues painting.

“Could I bother you for a bite of dinner?” the psychoanalyst asks from his place on the shelves. He raises his eyebrows plaintively.

The Star Catcher nods. “Of course,” he says. “But really—where do you put it?”

“Trade secret,” says the psychoanalyst.

“Jessica,” the Star Catcher says. “Tell me again why this person is here.”

“He’s my therapist,” says the Bird Woman. “Please bring him some supper.”

The door swings closed as suddenly as it opened. Footsteps echo, grow softer, and the psychoanalyst—ahem—attempts to clear his non-existent throat. “You must do something about this,” he tells the Bird Woman. “Things can’t go on like this.”

Just then she is helping the ostrich out of its parchment, pulling it out by its flightless wings, one hand tucked under its belly.

“I have a plan,” she tells the psychoanalyst, grunting. The ostrich separates from the parchment with a satisfying pop. It peers around the room, looking for a hole to bury its head in. The Bird Woman directs it to the piles

of moons and stars, and it saunters over, thrusts its beak into the glowing chips of light.

“You have a plan,” the psychoanalyst curls his lip into a mock sneer. “I’m sure this will be interesting.”



The Star Catcher used to always bring the Bird Woman love tokens. Packages of exotic seeds from across the ocean. A new glass filter, through which she could direct starlight. Two lovebirds which she herself never made—they had hatched on their own, in the wild. “Like us,” he told her. “Wild,” he’d said, nuzzling her neck feathers, and she had pressed herself closer to his hands.

When the stars started to disappear, though, the Bird Woman asked him to stop taking them. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” she said. “People are talking.”

“What do I care about people?” the Star Catcher said. “I have you, Jess. What business is it of theirs?” He had placed one hand around her neck and brought her face to his to kiss it. The Bird Woman had pushed him away.

“The stars belong to no one,” she said. “And neither do I. I *choose* to be with you, Ivan.” She had looked down at her feet because she couldn’t stand to see the Star Catcher when he behaved this way, which, she discovered over time, was a common occurrence.

“They belong to me,” the Star Catcher had said, his voice firm.

“You can’t take them with you,” the Bird Woman whispered.

“Where?” he had asked, as if her statement was truly a mystery.

“To the next world,” she had said.

But her answer had only made him grin.



Throughout the day, the Bird Woman rests on a nest of blankets, next to the mounds of moons and stars. She barely sleeps, though, because the Star Catcher insists on sitting next to her, cross-legged, hands folded in his lap, telling stories. His favorites to tell are from his childhood. This is nothing new to the Bird Woman. Back when they were lovers, the Star Catcher had told her stories all the time. Now that she's back, living in his lighthouse, he's resumed telling them as if he'd only been temporarily interrupted by her absence. They are not lovers this time around, though; they are simply inhabiting the same space together. Along with the psychoanalyst, that is.

The Bird Woman is glad the psychoanalyst is with her. Not for his advice, but because his presence means she never has to be alone with the Star Catcher. The psychoanalyst is not glad of anything, really. He sits on his shelf, rolling his eyes as the Star Catcher tells his stories, sometimes snorting.

“When I was a little boy,” the Star Catcher tells the Bird Woman, “I used to love summer best of all seasons. I would wait until the sun began to set and the fog rolled in to the island, and then the fireflies would appear, flashing their tiny green sparks in the mist, signaling back and forth to each other. They were so beautiful, the way the glow came from their own bodies. I wanted to glow like that, too. I used to try to catch them and put them in glass jars to make lanterns. I liked the feel of them in my hands, crawling on my skin. I'd set the lantern on

my nightstand and watch them glowing on and off all night, until I fell asleep. In the morning, though, they were always on their backs, their legs sticking up, dead as dead can be.”

“How sad,” the Bird Woman tells him. Her eyelids flutter, heavy with sleep, but she continues listening. She’s heard the story before, among others, but the Star Catcher continually returns to this one, polishing it over and over as he tells it.

“It’s funny, though,” says the Star Catcher. “Because it became harder and harder for me to catch the fireflies. After a while, I’d try to catch them, but they’d lift into the air just before I could get hold of them. They’d be just inches above my reach, and they’d float higher and higher, until they disappeared into the night sky. That’s when I noticed the stars. That’s when I started to catch stars instead. Stars don’t move, unless they’re dying.”

“It’s hot in here,” the Bird Woman says. She scratches under the ruff of feathers circling her neck. “Please. Open a window. Or else bring me a fan.”

“Why not go out for a walk instead?” the Star Catcher offers. He lifts one eyebrow and motions with his hands toward the door.

“Too tired,” says the Bird Woman, punctuating her explanation with a long, elliptical sigh. “I’ve been working so hard, so very hard,” she tells the Star Catcher. “Please, Ivan, bring me some fresh air.”

“Of course,” the Star Catcher acquiesces. “Besides,” he says, “this room is beginning to stink of your birds and their dung. You should think about selling some of them, Jess, really.”

“Why not release them?” the Bird Woman says. She looks down into her folded hands, locked together in her lap. If she looks at him, he’ll see through her; if she doesn’t look at him, he’ll know something is not right. Without knowing her at all, the Star Catcher knows *some* things about the Bird Woman. He knows the details she wishes other people would overlook: escape tactics, white lies, kindnesses to brush tension under a rug.

For several moments he is silent, so the Bird Woman finally looks up, blinking. The Star Catcher meets her stare.

“Release them?” he asks, eyebrows knitting together. “Wouldn’t you rather sell them at the market? They’re *your* birds, after all. You made them.”

“But I’ve made so many,” the Bird Woman says. “And anyway, why not? I’m here now, instead of renting the cottage. And sometimes I like to make birds for no good reason. Let them take to sky instead of hobbling around in this tower.”

“As long as you’re sure,” the Star Catcher says, shaking his head. He searches the folds of his robes for a set of keys and, finding them, opens a box on the floor, next to the doorway. Inside the box is a long lever. Kneeling next to it, the Star Catcher pulls back on the lever, using all of his weight. The lever click, click, clicks into position. Gears churn, grinding beneath the Bird Woman’s feet. She can feel the floor trembling beneath her as the dome of the lantern room slowly slides around her, until suddenly a sliver of black sky appears, its shadow deeper where the stars have been plucked. Slowly the gap widens until the lantern room is half-exposed to night.

“Ahh,” the Bird Woman breathes deeply. The air is cold, salty on her lips. It tastes of feathers floating to earth and fish leaping in spangled light.

“Better?” the Star Catcher asks, still kneeling next to the lever, smiling.

“Much,” the Bird Woman says. Her birds flutter and hop around the room in anticipation. She holds both hands in front of her, then, palms up, open, a private signal only she and they understand, and the birds rise up—all of them, except for the ostrich—each with a star or a moon clenched in its talons.

“Stop that! What are you doing?” The Star Catcher stands from where he’d been leaning back on the lever, stretching his arms out, grabbing after the stars and moons that hang lowest in the air. But each one eludes him, floating up and into the night air like the fireflies of his youth.

The birds spread over the city, the island, past the clouds and even higher, spreading outward, like fireworks opening above the boulevards and boatmen, until each star is set back into its proper niche. There are so many holes in the fabric of darkness, and each one fits like a jewel in an antique broach.

“Call them back, Jessica!” the Star Catcher pleads. He stands in the center of the lantern room, staring up at what took years to collect, then collapses into a pool of black robes like a melted candle, and begins to weep. Openly, fitfully.

“Time for me to go, I think,” says the psychoanalyst, and the ostrich saunters over to pluck him down from the bookshelf by his beard. Then the two of them trot

down the stairwell, and the psychoanalyst's voice echoes back, "Call if you need any more advice, my dear."

The Bird Woman crawls on hands and knees to where the Star Catcher sits on the cold stone floor, his head lolling to one side, his arms splayed out in front of him, drooping like an unstrung puppet. "All gone," he mutters. "All gone. I'll never be able to collect them all again."

"No, Ivan," she says, pulling him backwards to rest his head on her lap. "They're still here. Look up. See them? See how brightly they shine on us?"

He isn't listening, though. It's obvious from the way he shakes his head in disagreement, with dissatisfaction. "No," he says, wincing with tears. "Gone, gone, gone. What am I going to do now?"

Stroking his forehead, she leans down and kisses his worried creases. In her head, the psychoanalyst's head is still talking. He's telling her that what she's doing will make everything happen again. *It's a pattern, my dear*, he explains. He's right, she knows that, but she says what she wants to say anyway.

"Let them go," she whispers into his ear. "Some of them might come back."