



THE PAWTUCKET PEREGRINES

In this, the *LBJ*'s second issue, we've collected writing about the *urb* bird: encounters in urban and suburban environments. You'll also find writing here that, well, is what we'd like to think as edging toward "urban" in style—you know, kind of cool—including Elena Passarello's essay "He Knows Me as the Blind Man Knows the Cuckoo," winner of our 2009 *Urb* Bird Contest. Congratulations also are due to Mike Freeman for his savvy runner-up contribution, "Amidst the Maddening Crowd," his second appearance in the *LBJ*. And, of course, thanks to all the contributors—Josh Winegar, in particular, for his provocative art—the *LBJ* staff, and the University of Nevada, Reno Academy for the Environment. Most of all, thanks to you, fine-feathered reader, for your enthusiasm: you made our first go a grand success.

As for number two, one of the emerging themes, as you'll see, is "Rescue," the title of Christine Williamson's short essay. Birds thrill us when we spot them—sudden dashes of color—in our yards and streets. But some of our most stirring meetings, perhaps, are precarious or tragic. Whether it's a robin that didn't see it was a kitchen (not an inviting glade) or a sparrow squirming in the muzzle of a blithe lab, we tend to notice birds especially when they're in distress. Or worse. How these small dramas resolve is a matter of timing and chance, and interspecific trust.

Almost all of us, I'm sure, can recall such an episode, and it was during what I'm fondly calling my peregrine summer—though only a year ago, it seems far off already—that I, too, took part in a rescue.

If you've driven I-95 between Boston and Providence lately, in any of the warmer months, then you may say with relative assurance at your next cocktail party that you've "flown" over a peregrine falcon. They live and nest under the highway where it crosses the Seekonk River in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, a sleepy place today, but the birthplace

of the American Industrial Revolution and, once upon a time, a humming mill town.

The peregrines sit on the maintenance platforms that hang below the overpass and cry out as cars rattle overhead. It gives the place a feeling of sublimity it may deserve—as tends to be the case at the feet or underbellies of our massive structures. The bridge echoes and groans, as if of another world—a dismal, odyssean cave beckoning adventure, Grendel's lair. The birds *are* ogreish, deftly crashing in and out of the shadows of steel rafters with small, feathered bodies in their talons. The banks are strewn with plume and bone. Standing below the bridge, looking up at the grated floor of a platform, you can see the shapes of anonymous wings—lost rock pigeons, sad starlings—poking through, too big to sieve out and be carried away by the river.

All this must terrify the avian neighborhood, but, naturally, it entranced the likes of me. This was the closest look at peregrines I've ever had, and ever expect to, because the bridge and Pawtucket's old mills aren't skyscrapers, one benefit of small-city birding. So I watched attentively as the adults beat into the bridge, soon to the raspy hurrahs of insatiable nestlings. Their diet? Ninety-five percent bird—a killdeer one time, its head, its red eye-ring, I remember, lolling pendulous on the edge of a beam. Usually, they carried their catch to an interior girder or straight to their young hidden from view on a cramped ledge: a foot-deep aerie (anything but airy). I would hear the nest's vicious begging, and imagine the adorable, deplorable frenzy. Feathers whirly-gigged to the water, first slow, then quicker in bunches. The breast of some sparrow—plucked—made falcon.

It *was* a peregrine summer. Day in, day out, I watched, wandering the streets in mornings and evenings—peregrining, in my way—in pursuit of the next look. I wanted to see the stoop—their notorious dive—and the *kill*. Peregrines, I'm sure you know, are the fastest animal in the world; in freefall, in pursuit of pigeon or shorebird, they sometimes exceed two hundred miles per hour. Fighter jets are modeled after the peregrine. From a high, ringing soar, see one tuck its wings. The bird closes to a black point and descends, at a slight slant, as if someone way up—an idle god, perhaps, lingering among the clouds—has just casually tossed a stone.

I was just down the street from the bridge one morning at a small park on the river, when a fisherman I knew, Eddie, ran up. (In addition to a peregrine haunt, this is a good urban fishing hole.) Out of breath, he asked to borrow another fisher's net. "Be back soon," he told its baffled owner. "There's a baby hawk in the river."

Eddie ran to his green roofing truck and sped the short way to the bridge. I ran after him down the street, hoping the falcon—*it must be?*—hadn't drowned. When we arrived, another fisherman had pinned the haggard chick against the concrete river wall with a branch, saving it from washing away. Eddie scooped it out as I watched—the fastest animal in the world, dripping, frightened—not yet able to fly.

What a thing. Though nearly full-grown, its feathers were still half-sheathed. Its storkish legs were a bare, brilliant, synthetic yellow. And *big-time* feet. Clown claws. The bird peeped quietly, then shrilly, as our fingers untangled it. Eddie bundled it in an extra sheet from his truck, while I called 411 for animal control.

Not long after, I found myself on the phone with a woman named Vivian, a rehabilitator. She was excited, concerned, and skeptical all at once. "How can you tell it's a peregrine?" she wanted to know. When I rattled off the right reasons, Vivian told me she would call back after hatching a plan with Fish and Wildlife. "These things," she said, "are very political, especially when a peregrine is involved." Meanwhile, Eddie gave us—the bird and me—a three-minute lift back to my studio. There I gently pried the wide-eyed falcon from the sheet (making sure to hold those lethal lemon legs), put the bird in a comfy box, and closed the lid—a cardboard hood to quiet it down.

Vivian called. A ranger called. I was to drop off this wonder at the Department of Environmental Management headquarters. A DEM officer would "take it from there" to Vivian. With that, I put the box in the front seat, turned the heat on full to warm the bird, and sweated the ten minutes to downtown Providence, imagining it was my one chance to cover a few miles apace with a peregrine. (So far, so true.)

The nestling had simply dropped from the bridge, stooping too soon. Perhaps it was all-consumed, wrestling a tough piece of pigeon, and accidentally wrenched itself right over the edge. Or maybe its sibling—peregrines usually bear two or three—gave it a diabolical shove. In any case, the only eyewitness said it "fell like a brick," *splash*

into the water. One of the adults swooped, but what could it possibly do? Eddie caught sight of the bird when it started to swim, sculling across the water as if doing the butterfly—the first time it made real use of those awesome wings. Right idea, *wrong* element, little one.

Then again, Pawtucket does mean “great falls.”

The best way to understand the life of a peregrine, I think, is to lean up against a lamppost and look straight up into the azure. Don’t move. That’s your society. That’s you.

They’re the alpha bird. Their territory, huge. We’re talking miles and miles, covered speedily. One minute, I would see the peregrines atop Town Hall, where they often were when not at the bridge. The next, *poof*—into thin air. Until, of course, I looked up and saw a pair of fruit flies—was it?—spiraling in front of my nose: the peregrines, far away, soaring against the clouds.

When it cooled in the evening and I opened the windows to my studio, I often would hear the falcons. They called me outside. If I was lucky, I caught a glimpse—the female winging over my building. The tiercel, her mate, might follow, racing by. Then, one might streak toward the other, who would flip in midair for an instant, drifting on its back, presenting its talons. Come on, the move said. I’m ready.

Down below, I would skip from one side of the street to the other, trying to keep them in view. Watching peregrines, even in small Pawtucket, is a game of constant adjustment, the same they play as they work the thermals of that upper world. It allows you to appreciate what it must be like up there. Wide open space. A falcon is always in the West, roaming. The people below—their city, their wealth, their drunkenness, their hope—none of it matters. Just prairies of blue, and that nervous flock of pigeons, preparing to leave a roof.

Vivian thought the peregrine was a she. She was hefty, and her feet—“mother’s feet.” Ten days later, we rendezvoused under the bridge: Rhode Island’s Department of Transportation, DEM, Vivian, me; seven people and two agencies (or three?) to send off one fast bird.

When the falconette was borne out of the river, she was part downy, soft white feathers spilling from her growing plumage here and there, as if all her pockets had been emptied. Her retrices weren't full-in. Flight was out of the question. Now, the only visible "poof" was a cowlick on the crown of her head. She was handsome, serious—a day or two from taking to the air, when she would be "like a ten-year-old in control of a sports car," Vivian's analogy. She was, indeed, a confused, surly-looking pre-teen. I got a good view of her in her carrier in the backseat of Vivian's station wagon; like a wet dog, she seemed ready to shake off the cumbersome civilization of the past week. She had the beginnings of her stripes, the telltale markings of a falcon. And an eye—it was an eye more watchful than one could ever know.

With a quick thrust of the arm, Vivian grabbed her feet and brought her screaming into the day. She held her while Mark, of DEM, secured three aluminum bands around those fearsome legs with a rivet gun. She's now known, in certain circles, as G/8—black over green on the left, silver on the right. (Keep an eye out.)

DOT had brought a bucket truck for the bird's ceremonious return. As Vivian held G/8, Emilie, DOT's environmental specialist, wrapped her in a scarf—"a bird burrito." Stepping into the bucket, Emilie was lifted up to the bridge's maintenance runway, and G/8 was carried across those traumatic waters to the top of a pier holding up all those whizzing cars, Boston-bound. The nymphal G/8 bounced fiestily about the concrete when Emilie let her go, but we had reservations about leaving such a *rara avis* so close to a road, tucked under the bridge. Would the parents find her? Would they take her in?

"It's so hard to know the right scenario," said Mark.

"With their eyesight and their hearing, they'll find her," said Vivian, reassuringly. "All the parents will know is that she's *back*. Their whole purpose is to reproduce. Their purpose is *her*."

We left her looking forlorn, parentless, under the dank canopy of the bridge. A tiny bird on a hulking shoulder of concrete.

Within a day, G/8 was flying, and reunited with her sibling. Who knows what might have "gone down" up under that bridge, in the heat of a hungry moment, but there seemed to be no bad blood between

them (I think it was a brother). From then on, their exuberance often reconciled the square, human scene I had in focus through my binoculars—the aged brick of Pawtucket—with the wispy depths beyond. And they *loved* their fun. Pawtucket’s town hall, with its tower, soon became a penthouse playhouse, and in late afternoon, I would watch them horse around its roof. Falcons aren’t made for walking, nor trotting, but the young tried. They rushed back and forth at each other in hops and skips, or even an awkward gallop, wings raised, bluffing—developing?—ferocity. They were fencing, beak-to-beak, leg-to-leg, the way boys pick up sticks and jab and swing and run at each other, just because. What else does one do with these things?

And once I saw one—maybe it was G/8, getting some payback—push the other off a corner of that roof. It waddled nonchalantly up to its unsuspecting sibling and, as if breaking down a door, extended an insouciant talon, kicking its kin into the air: *Kar-a-te chop, brotha!*

The adults, meanwhile, sat respectfully atop town hall, minding their own business and the economy of songbirds in all directions. But they wryly perched on the stone relief of an eagle that adorned the tower’s crest: our nation embodied; the power of government; a symbol for all symbols, wings wide and stylized. As they sat on the wrists of their likeness, I fancifully wondered what they made of this imitation.

After a time, however, this droll juxtaposition began to represent, for me, the peril inherent in idolizing birds, or anything. My tendency was—is—to make those falcons into emblems of unearthliness; to turn them to stone, monumentalizing that unbridled nature in them that we, humans, have neither lost, nor ever had. Yet what was most striking about my peregrine summer wasn’t its ethereality, but its *reality*, its ironies. I had my pupils glued to the clouds in a town where few could, perhaps; there were bigger concerns to stare at, all around.

Rhode Island has the second-largest unemployment numbers in the country right now. While in Pawtucket, I heard about and saw foreclosures in the neighborhoods over which those brilliant falcons flew *before* last fall’s mortgage crisis and market crash. What must it be like to glide across and look down upon still more clusters of boarded-up houses and un-mowed lawns, the tribulations of a pigeoned

people? Though in this decade Pawtucket has experienced a modest “renaissance,” walking downtown you see vacant rooms behind dusty glass. And there were many characters adrift who, though not representative of Pawtucket’s population as a whole—the town is rich with community—can only be described as down-and-out, as broken windows. They were also Pawtucket peregrines.

One evening, G/8 was sitting on the eagle’s noggin, finally hunting. Suddenly she bent low and looked directly at me. With a single flap, she dropped into a dive, wings tucked. Her pinions were spread just enough to stay straight, as if she was sliding, face-first, down a long, invisible banister. A terror of gravity, she came crashing into my eyes, with her eyes, and, for an instant, I felt what it must be like to be prey. When I frantically lowered my binocs, it was in time to see a robin dart my way in escape, and the peregrine abort, in an abrupt shift—V—just missing a bus roaring past the curb at my feet.

While I was still reeling from this close call, a thin man walked by, slowly. No shirt, low pants, a dazed, almost-pained expression—another Pawtucket wanderer. He looked to me as he passed and asked the time. “5:12.” Then he asked to use my phone. He dialed slowly. His belly button was distended, his stomach swollen. I noticed a marijuana tattoo on his shoulder, its once-crisp leaf now faded and wrinkled.

“Hi Jenny, it’s your uncle Stan,” he said. His words were staggered, slightly jumbled. “I’m calling you to . . . to come pick me up. I’ll call from . . . from the police station at six. I love you.”

Thanking me, he shuffled across the street, where he sat on a bench, below G/8, who had returned to her perch. Rocking faintly, he sweated in the sun, hands on his knees. Then he slept, alone.

Just as when she narrowly avoided that bus, I remember holding my breath as G/8 was fished from the river. I had felt a clear purpose then, if only for a few hours. There was urgency to my actions: line the peregrine’s box with a towel, fill a hot water bottle, keep her warm. Small gestures, of course, but they grew into a fascination, a guardianship. I looked out for her all summer, in more ways than one. What was it, though—what complexity—that compelled me to feel so protective of a bird that had almost drowned, when men I walked by

on a daily basis were treading water, leading lives of not just quiet, but public desperation? Rarely did I let myself feel an urgency for them.

Certainly, G/8's needs were basic, then and now. This man's, probably not. But it makes me think that though there's a time to lean up against that lamppost, and watch the sky, there's also a time to *feel* the lamppost, on the back of my head. To think of the many shapes of those lost wings—both avian and human—caught in the sieves of our infrastructures, built and ideological. It's when these moments are coincident that you're urban birding.

Despite my relative vigilance, I never saw that kill—that acrobatic capture in freefall. It was always just out of sight, I guess, an impact behind a brick facade that suddenly swerved, jutting monstrous, into view through my trailing binoculars: a lesson in positioning, in patience. But what I caught—the full breast of the falcons' experience, sunup to dusk, on-and-off for months—was pretty good. Plenty.

As for rescues, there'll be more, I'm afraid, for us all. You'll read about them here in the *LBJ*, in just a few pages and in the future. I suppose it's not how they turn out that ultimately counts—though every success makes a difference—but what few observations we take from these trials, regardless how small, or poetic; what feelings of empathy or purpose to push us, down the line, toward that bigger rescue, whether quietly conscientious or overtly political. Whether it's buying an accipiter cutout to affix to a sliding door, or walking through the gargantuan doors of Capitol Hill to testify for habitat protection. Whether it's to save the lives of birds or people. Both, I'm sure.

If G/8 survived her migration south and returned to the vicinity of Pawtucket this summer—a big *if* for any bird, a reminder that our rescues are ephemeral (or all the more special)—she has at least one human, likely several, that admires her individuality, along with her intrepid, talented species. One that might act on that appreciation, moreover, and extend that effort in new directions, human and non. I will think of G/8 often—whenever I see a pigeon, walking a city street. Then I hope I'll remember the people of Pawtucket—their city, their wealth, their drunkenness, their hope—all of it laid out before me on the ground level, still real, before walking on.