

## The Carer

JoAnneh Nagler

**T**he flap.  
The flutter.

The unlikely bits of tuft delicately planted upon bone; the uplift underneath, my whole body soaring.

A snap, to the left, the resulting glide.

Then swooping, twisting just enough to fight it—the pressure of *woosh* upon my bean-shaped belly, the wall of nothingness coming at me.

The ground below, the earth's sweeping curve moving up fast in my conical sightline, a flash-frame speed, oxygen-pierced air forced up in gusts into my beak.

It's a thrill, it always has been, the magical nature of this lifting and gusting, tilting and surrendering: the ground-bound experience of beingness is nothing up here—all of it cast to the wind; a dream washed away with the wave of a wing.

Then, a gust—the sharp dip downward, dramatically pivoting face-first, the knife-sharp, prickling angle easing only when I alight on ground, fluttering down.

And not just me. We're landing, all of us. A flock.

My flock. Ducks.

One of us—my drake's mouthy mother—has spied this grassy expanse just a flight-hop from the huge bay we visit each spring. Woods a half-mile away, eucalyptus groves, the site of my losses. Babies birthed and ravaged, predators that ripped them from me seasons before.

And so, here I am—too close to those peeling-trunk trees—on the blades of this moss-colored growth cushioning my webbed feet. In seconds, I pop a worm, a seed into my beak in the lush field, a pull from my belly telegraphing a simple message: *fill me*. I peck at the ground, a little desperate. *Feed me*, my stomach says loudly, *more*.

Then, a noise, a rustling. I look up, curious. A human, on the side of this field with a sweeping object—*swish, swish*—tendrilling straw held together on a long stick.

We move in pairs, in quadruplets, our three-fingered feet traversing platypus-style, *flap, flap, flap*; raspy, two-noted calls from our mouths and throats. Mine are a loud whisper—not the cawing sound of the others—but there they are, just the same.

*What was that noise?* A wheeling object, a stone's throw and closer—big, cylindric—it squeaks when the human moves it, a receptacle for strewn paper picked from the ground in his hands and tossed inside.

We move closer, the expanse of weeds and blades under us, slivers of green on the ground: open, tufted, trimmed. This is a cared-for place. *Is the human the carer?* I see buildings. *Is it a male?* He is cleaning, primping the hard stone his body stands upon.

*Chick, chick, chick.* The sound of the broom of straw hitting the cement.

We move nearer—the jangle of a low reverberation in our throats—short hops of half-flight and waddling steps.

I see clearly now, yes, a human male—those twitchy, short-sighted, jumpy, impatient beings who cannot lift off the ground. Heavy, they are; gravity-bound. For all of their flightless weight and density, you'd think humans would be calmer. But they're not. Usually, when we're near, they startle; the very small ones run at us while the large ones charge to grab their littlest as if we had electric teeth to tear at their young.

But not this one. We hear him vibrating his lips—humming—from the green we've crossed—he's near the wall of a structure. I know a bass voice, the awakening that rifles

through my breast when a male sound resonates. The windy bay and lagoon are at our backs and twenty small buildings surround a courtyard, a leafy patch of ivy outside the one we stand nearest. A plot of metal play equipment rests nearby, untouched just now.

I have been here before. I feel it, like a *déjà vu* wafting through my memory in wisps. Small humans running toward the structures in the early morning light. Stray food at rough wooden tables where the little ones screeched and my mother swooped in for pieces of soft, white edible stuff with crusts of some kind. Oh, how that airy lightness, mushed in my mouth, slid down my baby-throat! I remember Mother scooting me out of the nest the more I grew, a stick-home lodged precariously on a drain pipe, way up high and teetering.

Now, suddenly, perched on the ground with my flock, there is a sing-song rumble—a louder one—musical and deep, near the buildings; a call.

*This is the human? Is he calling us?*

He is densely built, but not so huge as others, hair on his face. He sweeps, moves in lines, circles, piling up bits of detritus. It's early, the light crests over the buildings, *cluck-clucking* pricks our ears from his ridiculously thin and delicate lips. I stare at his mouth, thirty feet away. These humans! How do they pick up prey? How can they crack a nut or dig up an insect or bat away an annoying bit of flotsam off of their way-too-pink and translucent skin? How do they survive with only their see-through encasings stretched over pulsing blue veins? No wonder they are jumpy.

But this one. It's his quietude that stuns. He's still. Like a soft wave with no crest behind it. It's something inside him that compels me. *How can I tell?* I don't know, but I can.

I sense things. My drake says that's ridiculous, you can only know what you see and hear and taste. I've heard him with his blustering mother. "That girl will never know her place if you keep letting her talk about *feeling* things!" she says.

The man steps out farther from the building. It's an optical illusion, the place—the structures are set down in pods, with angles, funny-looking buildings. Children's coats hang outside from hooks. A school! Of course! From the edge of one hexagon wall he dips his body behind, not showing himself fully, watching us, but my eyes clock him behind his cylindric garbage cart; the angles I see are much wider than his flat-faced sight range.

He is *tranquil*, that's the word.

Humans are not usually like this. They bustle, they bang through doors and stomp into courtyards, bursting upon the scenes of their very ground. It's as if they think they own it—the firm under-supports of earth—as if they do not exist with us other species. They blow by us on their way to someplace else. *Look up!* We squawk. *See us, right in front of you!* But they shuffle along, a decrying shout along the way—"Ducks!"—and then they're gone, a puff of smoke; the natural world we're a part of a children's story book they've outgrown and can't be bothered with.

But this man can still himself and notice. I feel it. Invisible waves of something magnetic in him, drawing me.

I look around at my flock. We all feel it, don't we? But their visages are blank stares, quick twitching of beaks—the possibility of danger. *How limited*, I think. When did my whole species become afraid of *everything*?

No matter. I have always been an outlier. Why should this day be any different?

I stare, the man steps closer, a hop's length, twenty feet. I hold his gaze.

This is not just curiosity for me.

I will build a nest this season, and soon. I'll have only days to get them out of me, my eggs, and the stretching and lower-body-ravaging expelling will flatten me; it always does. I'll want a greening place, soft earth, a safe haven for me and the chicks. I need it like air, like water on the fluff of me, like cracked seeds filling my gullet.

Last year in the eucalyptus, my drake and I lost four of our birthed five to crows. The first time I was old enough to squeeze them out, these delicate creatures that came out of me, I lost two. I thought I would grieve forever, that the sheer push of them out of my insides (and the angst-ridden pain of it) should guarantee their life-blood and their free flight, unobstructed and endless. Shouldn't it be like that? The things we love, set free to be completely alive? Not prey for some mindless house dog or hyperactive squirrel, or those egg-smashing, haunted-eyed, garbage-eating raccoons.

Ridiculous how the world works. It stuns me sometimes, eats at the edges of my heart. But then, here is this man, before me. He stares, kindly. Is he the one who shepherds this place like a mother who builds a nest?

I feel the eggs fully-forming in me now, bits of gray and white grit that have conspired into crystalized cocoons inside my belly, the construction of them a prickling expansion, as if round-edged building blocks are being stacked against the walls of my organs and then pushed—hard—outward. The *tick-tock* of it is upon me, like it always is—this is my fourth birthing season—and I will have only half a day to choose where to do my pushing.

This time, I will not be led to those gladiator-looking eucalyptus groves. No. I have been there three years and have lost almost all, every time. Drake's mother be damned, I will not go.

Once I stake my spot, my drake will largely disappear. "No, no!" he's said. "That's not true! I'll come! I *will*." He's promise to bring bits of food.

Will he really this time? *We'll see.* (It's like that, isn't it? Mothers hunkered down and nailed to the earth; fathers not laden with stay-put glue the way our female hindquarters are when we're carrying.)

I'll need care.

I look, the man's eyes flutter. *Will he help me? This nurturing-the-ground man? This human who makes a place for the littlest children?*

I see him shuffle from the side of the building, two children run at him laughing. He laughs back, a low rumble, shoes them away gently. He is loved, this man. A little hairy on his face and arms, bright eyes that follow everything, watching.

I know I must surrender to it: the days of hunger, of not being able to forage for myself, just bits of sustenance, whatever is two steps away—seconds off my egg-sitting nest—which never sustain me. They call me “the delicate one” in our flock; an unfair moniker, as if caring about my losses, the drake's and mine, as if, having to be the one responsible for the saving of these creatures, is somehow overkill. A kind of unnatural hysteria.

“Death is just a part of it, dear,” the older hens tout. “Nothing to quack about. Deliver, then detach,” they say, a bellowing in the backs of their throats. But these are bright deaths, not dull, these miscarriages; a betrayal in a world that asked these gestations of me then didn't let them lift off or soar, the way they were meant to.

I call it unnatural, a stupid waste. *Anathema*, if you want the truth.

Now, in a few delicate steps, the man approaches gingerly, his soft-heeled shoes crunching upon tiny twigs. My flock flutters quickly; they jump back. Two at a time they pulse themselves backwards on the grass, alighting, hop-flying, squawking at me. “Fly! Move back! Don't trust that human!”

The man moves again—I see his maleness fully now. He hums, some sweet lyrical line that tickles my ears and makes my head swivel. His voice is warm; it has strength in it. Usually, if any humans are gentle, it will be a female, and a small one. But here he is, noiseless, placid, a fully grown masculine thing, standing by a patch of ivy nestled against a wooden structure with me planted near him. His cart stands behind, resting.

He catches my right eye. No movement. Just quietude. He wears blue canvas fabric on his lower half, the mound between his legs the indication of his sex, then a soft cottony fabric on his chest, bright blue, like the sky. Like the water in lakes far south of here where the warmth comes up inside me—a wash of emblazoning heat in winter. His chest looks like a place to curl up, to burrow into the softness of what he wears and *rest*.

My flock squawks. “Get out of there! *Now!*”

I twitch. *Get a grip, bird!* I say to myself. *What makes you think you can curl up on the chest of a human and lie there?*

Hawking from my flock now—big barks of warning. “Get away! Don’t go nearer!” My drake’s mother, too—big surprise: “Hen, you get back here!”

I stare at him, his still form, now crouching. My head flips to the ivy. I inch nearer, one foot, then two, placing myself atop the green-vined leaves. I shoot a quick and defiant glance backwards at my flock.

“Fly back!” They holler. “Are you crazy?”

The sharp, blistery sound of my drake’s mother shouts out through the clatter, “What is *wrong* with her? For the love of God! Can’t you make her—”

But the man clucks again. *Chick, chick, chick.*

It is not a large space where I stand—sixteen feet long and no more than twelve feet wide, but large, pliable, cool leaves fill the space and press against my feet and feathers. There is wood along the edge of the building, and the level of the dirt is full, but

soft. I like the wood, the naturalness of it, the safety of a backdrop; the elemental essence reminding me I'm a part of all of this, trees and air and sky and life fulfilling its arc every birthing season.

I flip my feathered head: there's a gate nearby into the courtyard with miniature picnic tables, a walkway on one edge. Surely this means children will be here, and soon. How, then, if I stay, will I protect myself from these little humans with their grabby hands and stomping feet?

*Am I thinking of staying?*

Drake will make a big show of appearing once or twice, as if his presence is God's gift. He may bring food, he may forget. Then he'll disappear. I can't count on him.

I waddle my rear end into the pliable and warm dirt under the ivy. *Yes. Woo. Ah.* Feels good.

I see my drake watch me settling in. He backs up, then hops forward and yells, "You've got to be kidding! Not *here!*" He cranes his neck to his mother, twists it. "Do something, please!"

But the old crone—barking is her default indulgence—just grumbles. "You're her drake. Leave her be or stay, it's not our problem. We're leaving."

Ridiculous, the stuff that comes out of her mouth. So stupid when the species you're drawn from has no real love for its own. I wish, in this moment, to be a human, like this man near me. Surely, these huge beings have outgrown the idiocy of a mother-in-law's shrieky bark.

The crone became my drake's mother when his own was killed (she bashed into one of those mirrored buildings in bright sunlight and a strong wind.) He's been tied to this old hen ever since, even though she's never been particularly nice to him.

*Good riddance*, I say under my breath to the old blusterer.



The drake is another story. He's not clingy—he's funny, goofy sometimes, listens when the crone isn't around. But I need him now; I'll be perched on my eggs *pressing, pressing, pressing* from my insides—vulnerable, a target, no matter where we land.

I flash him a look; he shudders.

I wait.

*You coming?* My eyes read. We'll see what the bird is made of.

A beat goes by. No stepping forward, no standing by. *Yeah, that's what I thought.*

Now, my human is squatting down before me. I am just feet away, my flock inching backward by the second—fluttering, jumping, flapping, some of them already halfway across the field.

My drake barks, a loud one; I torque my head. "What?" I say. "We've lost most of our eggs three seasons in a row! How could this place be any worse?"

"Get away from that man!" he barks.

The human has seeds—not many, but some. Black stripes on the outer edges of them. He cracks them with his thin-lipped mouth, and the sweet tan-colored inside pieces fall into his palm. Then he chucks them, *one, two, three, four*; I flutter, landing, scoop them up with my beak. They are sweet, grainy, smooth in my throat. Oh, yes. I know these—from the huge yellow-leaved flowers on tall stalks, suns with black casings in their centers, tiny rocks with delicious insides.

*There is food here*, I know it in a flash. Seeds, worms in the grass, crumbs from the children's picnic tables. And there is this man who seems to feel my presence. It could be just this day, only this moment, but something tells me this is more. Perhaps because he gives himself to the cleaning of this place; perhaps he shuffles about seeing its beauty, a simple act of giving and beholding.

"Come now, Hen!" I hear Drake caw. "Enough of this!"

There's a buzzing of gossip now, a murmuring in the wind. "She's gone and done it now!" I hear the old crone snap her jaw and cluck—a loud crack of a sound that stings my ears even from a distance. "I told you this one would land you face-first in the dirt. Let's go!"

I spin my head from them as they take flight, a rush of wings and pulsing feathers.

I sigh—just once. A quick tear stings my right eye. Loss. I'm not unaccustomed.

The human cracks more nuts, I scoop them up. My head flips up, my flock's bellies visible now as they flit away from me, the drake the only one still standing. He stares, and my eyes whips back and forth one last time: *the human or the flock? The drake or my own instincts? The woods to birth my eggs, as the crone insists—three years of baby deaths—or this man and this ivy? Seeds from this human or nearly starving to death while I birth?*

All at once there is a tug between my legs, a yank and a pinch. The eggs are threatening to come. I turn to my drake and bark, just once. Then I waddle into the ivy and plop myself there.

My drake calls out—a cry, pain in it—and I don't think I've known until this moment that he's felt that much for me. But it is done. I've decided.

**D**ays later, I've made a nest. Small twigs, broken leaves, bits of strewn paper wrappers, tufts of grass in the ivy. I feel hopeful. The tranquil man pattered nearby while I built. Truth is, not much is required here. The ground beneath the fat green ivy leaves is wired with the plant's roots—it makes a natural foundation to sit upon. The earth beneath it is soft, damp, mossy-feeling. The man has left me bits of puffy cotton in balls, pulled from one of those terrible whisp-y plastic things that float in lagoons and

look like fish from above, but choke one to death if swallowed. I like the white puffs he's offered—they're pillowy; they feel full and soft on the edges of my nest.

I sense the push coming, the *tic-tic-tic* of time and nature undulating through my fullness, the pressure threatening to tear me from the inside out.

I waddle in place, rocking. I learned this last season: swaying back and forth relieves the bloated feeling—a ballooning as the eggs move downward, pressing and insisting. It's only fake labor now; the actual slicing as bulbous eggs rip me will not appear for days. But it hurts just the same.

Then, there is a loud clanging, a cacophony of metallic shrill that rattles the ground beneath me. I look up. There is a sound-maker, a shiny round thing from which the clanging emanates. I jump and scream, "Aaaaawk!" My body flutters up, I scramble from the vines.

But there is the man. He speaks calmly, two-beat sounds, and though I form them in my brain, I don't know what they mean.

He stands near, blocking my route away. He seems to know that if my skittishness sends me flying, my eggs will die inside me. He has a disk, a white paper thing, a plate: on it are a pile of seeds from the sun-shaped flower. A *pile*. Not three, not four. But dozens. He stands back, the seeds are on the hard ground now, the clanging has stopped, and I stare. *Keep that sound away from me*, I say with my eyes.

The human gurgles, his velvet tone easing the fear in my throat. He goes back to sweeping. He has taken to doing it where he can watch me—close, nearby enough to step in if one of the little humans come bolting for me. And they do. Dozens of them running for the little wooden tables in the courtyard, small bags of food in their hands, distracted only by my fluttering. "Look!" they shout. "A duck in the ivy!"

But the man shoes them, makes them laugh. He is gentle, even with the little terrors. “Off you go, now! This is her place, so we’ll leave her be. No touching! That’s it. Go have lunch!” They like him, I can see. Little ones always know kindness when they see it.

Three hours later, I’ve been sitting on my perch. I’m undulating in circles on my nest, content with my birthing place. The first egg is pushing, it’s prickling inside me, fire-flames in my groin, like a sharp bit of rhubarb stick I once landed on as a chick, wounding myself badly. With these eggs, I wish not to bleed this time. The first time I bled well, and it was only later I learned its cause: bullying by another hen. No surprise who it was, who was doing the heckling.

I have two eggs out—thank God they are okay. I am pushing, and the man is near. He sits on a wooden perch, low to the ground, watching. *Will my ducklings hatch? Will they all press out of me or will I die expelling them?* I stare at the man and it comes to me quickly. He will let no one near. *Ah, he is guarding me.*

The third egg comes with a strong stinging up my midsection; I hunker down over the pain, squawking. The man is close, two lengths of his own arm from me in the ivy. I have to trust him now—I have no other choice.

I am at five eggs and the sweat of it has drenched me, there are sharp shards of light from the sun moving toward a sunset; they sting me in my left eye.

I am bear down, I feel more coming—is it one more? Two?

All at once, a fountain of water gushes out from a metal contraption the size of a small rock two feet from me. It hits me, the gushing, I am drenched in two seconds, and I squawk with all my might. “*Eaaaaaaach!*” I want to jump, but I cannot move, I can barely breathe.

“Off!” I am screaming in my own language. “Make it stop!”

The man bolts from his perch, yells so loudly it makes me quiver, but he presses his feet to the disk-thing, his body hovering over it and hands covering, and the jolting spray fans the other direction, away from me. I am so grateful I could peck this man's lovely hands, could kiss the ivy he stands upon.

I hear him yell behind him, another human comes running—a female—and in two minutes the flow of gushing stops under his limbs and whimpers into the thick leaves, his strong palms barricading the last of it.

More eggs. Six, then seven. Damp now, all of them. Then breath, then crying, then, *Oh, God, it's done, but I am alone here*; the wave of it so strong it's crushing my heart.

Seconds later, though, there's this: warm heartbeats beneath me, pounding softly inside their delicate spheres of minerals; the eyes of this soft-eyed man who has sat with me—rapt—through the whole otherworldly thing of birthing these babies.

**W**eeks go by, I have sat on my children all these days, the man has fed me each sunrise and sunset, has guarded and protected me. He goes about his cleaning, his custodial caring of this place, sweeping and hauling and shepherding the small ones to-and-fro. There are no more clanging bells, no more flailing waters gouging toward me. I sit, in peace. The little humans know to go around me; they have been taught by the man.

They run to him in the morning, they want to see me and my eggs. He holds his hands open to bar them from advancing too near, talks to them in soft tones, invites them to look. They get still, like him, and stare. It's *wonder* he's teaching them, and it touches me.

A *peck-peck* begins—a soft tapping on my underbelly. It will take a day for them to get out, depending on my babies’ aliveness, their life-blood.

I wait, I feed. The man is now so familiar I can eat from his hand. He does not flinch, does not jump. He stays until I have gathered sweet seeds from his palm. His eyes—I have been watching—are a soft brown like the bark of redwoods up on the crest, just a mile away. Trees so solid nothing could knock them down.

One egg, my first, unpacks itself. I am amazed. Love pours out of me as if it had been stored up and now must burst. *Look at it! I made this child!* Gray, mottled, slick and wet, like a tiny fish caught in my beak, slippery—this child of mine is here!

Time ticks, dark comes, and—four, five, six—they are opened to this world! They are alive! It is more than enough. Still my heart calls out, *All of them, please God. This time, all of them.*

By morning my seventh is awake, aware.

But where is my human? I want him to see! I have piles of seed he has left for me within beak-distance: I chew, masticate, place the mashed food in my babies’ mouths.

I have curled the webs of my feet under me, a prayer of sorts, on my knees.

But, my man? *Hurry! Come! See my babies! Leave your shuffling cart and your cleaning corners and see!*

My ducklings will walk within hours, I need my human to see what he’s helped to do, before the pulse of nature’s arm chugs up under us and pushes my newfound family to the lagoon.

Suddenly he arrives—it’s early, before the school children come—and he finds us, squats, leans in. He sees. There are tears in his eyes, a bright bolt of light catching the wateriness of them; and yes, there are tears in mine, too.

*We have done this together*, I whisper, though he can't understand. I want to reach out and kiss his palms with my beak in thanks, but instead I rise, my chicks waddling out from under me. *One more gift—please*, I ask, sending him my silent message as best I can.

He stands, this being who has cared for us, turns, considering. I follow, step off my nest, then twist my neck to my young. *Come! Now!*

I remember, from my own birth—it comes to me sharply as I walk—a busy street with speeding metal carriages for humans, the only route to the lagoon for babies who do not yet know how to fly. Dangerous.

I follow, tentative, trusting, wanting it be fine, to be all right. *For God's sake, after all of this, let it be all right.*

It's his calmness. That's why I follow. He walks—slowly, deliberately, his body swaying softly—and so I imitate him. Slow. Deliberate. Effortless. *Why not? Why shouldn't it be this way? Why shouldn't we walk smoothly and fluidly through the world as if it offers us no resistance?*

Then, the cement lot, and we are through it. There running children now, exiting from metal vehicles. They shriek and point, exclaim at our presence.

My man waves. Smiles at them. He stops at the corner, halts the flowing vehicles, waves his hands until every one of the children is static, still.

We cross that street together, a line of human, hen, and seven ducklings—walking and waddling—proud now to be here, together.

The water comes up under me at the lagoon's edge—a shallow bit of wetness that I roll in, the first cleaning I have felt in so, so long. It's glorious, the sweet damp under me. My chicks follow, testing—a foot here, a wing there. Then all seven of them are plunked

in, pressing at the wetness, flapping, delighting, dipping their beaks, grey mottled feathers plastered to their tiny forms.

My man drops to his knees. I feel it, what he must be saying. Wishing me well.

*This was a journey for you and me.* My eyes lock with his. *Thank you,* I whisper.

He will not know it now, but I will—I swear—return to him. To generosity, to kindness. It is what I will seek from now on. A carer, a nurturer, a being who sees and helps, who beholds and gives.

*I will see you again,* I whisper. *Next year, my kind carer.*

My feet flip--webbed paddles now—and I turn and swim, my ducklings with me, grateful.