

The Birds: Alaskeros

written by Guest Contributor | June 30, 2021



I pull my gyrfalcon, Helios, off of Noel's rooster before he can break its neck. I'd thought the rooster dead initially but remembered that Helios was still fat and his hunger was a concern secondary to long lazy hours out in the sun. Falcons' high summer weights make them ornery. Helios foots me as I kick away the rooster. He keens for it but becomes defensive at the sight of its raised hackles and thick chalky legs. The falcon has put a thin gash across the top of my right hand. In my left, I hold his jesses tightly. My knee is bleeding; I'd run it into a stone.

Noel lurches from around the back of his coop, red in the face and breathing heavily. A straw hat falls away from his balding head. The rooster is still kicking at my rubber boots and the falcon is screaming when Noel runs to collect his bird.

He berates me angrily, but it is more a reflection of his concern for the rooster than an indication of resentment. I tell him we'd been hunting for grouse when Helios came in low from the east fence and surprised the rooster. Noel does not listen. He is combing feathers for blood and meat. He asks me what had happened, and I say I am sorry.

"You're lucky my bird's fat," I say, trying to make light of it. I almost say that he is lucky Helios hadn't broken its neck. The rooster is kicking and biting at Noel's belly.

"You're lucky. I would have falcon soup tonight if he killed my bird."

He is joking, but I don't like to hear it. I suppose I deserve it; I should not have hunted in summer, no matter how beautiful the fields are in flower. I shouldn't have taken Helios to where he could fly the east fence and take Noel's chickens. I ought to have tethered Helios and let the stupid falcon molt out his feathers.

"Stupid falcon," Noel says as though he has heard my thoughts.

Helios preens himself on my fist. He was an eyass when I'd gotten him; I raised him and he's imprinted on me. I'd been the one to take him from a sheer cliff overlooking the Pacific. His parents had keened high above me,

territorial and protective. I remember the cold swipe of his mother's talons on the back of my head, and a warm blot of falcon scat freezing on my parka. That had been two years ago, when I'd turned thirty-five and became a master falconer.

I suppose I'm not so much a master as my license states I am. I stand in my guilt as Noel rubs betadine over the shallow lacerations on the rooster's back. I ask him about his coop and how he's been faring, and he tells me the coop will be warm enough this winter for the chickens to stay outside. Last winter they had come in, and he was glad for their company, but they had crapped on the bed and in the sink. Noel laughs and shakes his head at the memory. He doesn't stay mad at me. Not like the time a hawk of mine had put her talon through the head of one of his pullets. Even then, he relented after I'd made him dinner. Chicken adobo. There's no point to either of us staying mad at the other; we are two Filipinos braving the Alaskan wilds.

Noel comes from a long line of Alaskeros salmon canners who had melded with the Tlingit, and in his brown face and flat nose I can see the two peoples' memories. Sometimes he speaks of his half-Tlingit mother as though she is still alive, still braiding spruce roots into baskets. A totem pole at the edge of his property looks out upon the taiga with its lidless birds' eyes.

Only a mile separates our homes. I've known Noel my whole life—he loved my father, who had come from Manila in 1943 to work at the gold mine. It then shut down a year later.

“And you, Shiloh. What'll you do this winter?”

On the morning of the first snow I will take Helios to the tundra and hunt ptarmigan. They make a tender, gamy kaldereta and will taste lovely on white rice. I may take a falconry apprentice—a young woman from Juneau who wishes to fly gyrfalcons on rock pigeons.

By now the rooster has had enough and bursts from Noel's grasp. It clucks loudly before running beneath the coop. Helios bates half-heartedly toward it and hangs for only a moment, his jesses caught in my gloved fist. He rights himself and rouses, a plume of fine feathers taken up by the wind.

“You should go back to the motherland. See Manila, maybe Cebu and Boracay. It'd be fun for you.”

There is no going back to a place I've never been.

“I can't—I've got no one to watch Helios.”

Noel offers but I assure him that one falcon craps more than two chickens and their waste spurts out three times as far. He is persistent only because he wants me to see what he has seen, as though I am incomplete for having not touched the back of a whale shark, or for having not eaten the suckling pig cooked with lemongrass.

Maybe I am. I haven't afforded much thought to the Philippines, yet it sits in my mind's ocean, over and under the tides like the spiny back of a dragon.

My father often spoke of it, of returning to it, as though his body were owed to its igneous soil. In the end he died there, surrounded by family I've never met.

"Everywhere in the Philippines smells like—like sweet smoke." Noel moves his hands as though there is smoke around us. "And you would love my family's Bahay na Bato. It's a cultural site, around three-hundred years old. We breed fighting cocks there."

I am told his house of stone is not so different from a cabin chinked with mud and moss; it is warm in the main room. It sounds lovely, like a dream. What is it like to step off a white beach into a blue ocean?

Helios bobs his head at a nuthatch clinging to a tree. I think of Helios pining for the bare cliff from which I'd taken him.

"Well, you think about it."

There is a noise coming from behind the coop. Two wild ducks fly in tandem. They'd likely come from an east-bound brook not far from here; I remember it bleeding into a pond, alive in spring with duckweed and algae.

Helios takes the startled duck by the head. I am there to chase him as he brings it down to a barberry bush. He kills it quickly.

"Duck adobo tonight?" I say to Noel over my shoulder.

"If you're good at making it, then yes. I have rice." A pause, and then, "What a fine falcon, when it's not killing my chickens."

I trade Helios for his kill with a bit of rabbit I'd brought in my hunting bag. He takes it eagerly; the duck and the rest of the world are forgotten.



Brianna Castagnozzi is a writer from Poughkeepsie. Her work often incorporates elements from Filipino culture, Asian mythology, spiritualism, and animals.

featured artwork by Brianna Castagnozzi