

# The Birds: An Inquiry Into Theft

written by Guest Contributor | August 25, 2020



The first thing I stole was an ashtray from the dollar store. I was too little to understand the concept of property. I believe such abstract ideas are grasped only at a certain age, and I was incapable of such understanding yet. It was there. I wanted it. I took it.

When I got home, I replaced the mortar and pestle my mother had been using to stub out her cigarettes with the ashtray. There were blue china ducks on the cheap new lidless pottery. Now that I remember that round-bottomed object in the center of the coffee table, I wonder if I'd actually stolen a plant pot rather than an ashtray. It was entirely possible that I'd wandered into the gardening section with the stakes and the watering cans and mistook one receptacle for another.

She didn't realize the swap until she was on her second, or third cigarette. Then her hand stilled over the new ashtray—or plant pot—as she studied the unfamiliar object in the waning evening light without touching it. She had a look of masked bewilderment. In the coming years I would be able to replicate this look with mirror-like precision. Only a twitch at the corner of her lips and her prolonged gaze gave away her emotion.

She summoned me, the obvious culprit in our two-person household, and gathered me into the beat-up Honda Zest. In the passenger seat I was stiff-legged with fright, like a small creature startled into a fight-or-flight response. I knew when she was this silent, she was furious. She avoided my gaze in the rearview mirror. She took two lefts off the highway and stopped just beyond the edge of the marshes where the land was swallowed up by vernal pools, overhung by stolid Indian gooseberries and snaking lianas. Only the ghostly white flowers of wild cinnamon and the deep purple depressions of the ground were visible in the darkness. The road disappeared up ahead into the night.

I wondered if she was returning me where she found me, as she promised she would whenever I misbehaved. "Back to the garang-guni man," she would hiss, or "Into the garbage bin." Perhaps she was finally following through with her threats.

She parked the car, killed the headlights and unwound the windows. The night

air that drifted in was sticky, sickly sweet. There were the baritone croaks of bullfrogs and the incessant chirps of cicadas. I waited for the storm to break.

But it never came. Instead, she confided in me, told me that she drove here often because it reminded her of her coastal hometown in Perak, before she came to an urbanized Singapore in the late eighties. The air smelled the same: fruity and briny. She could make out the tin roofs of the control stations further ahead, imagine them to be that of houses back on the northwestern coast of the Malay Peninsula. The rivulets that cut between the vernal pools might as well be the well-treaded paths between corner store and post office, between home and main road. One of her neighbors had a sapodilla tree, from which she would repeatedly pluck the furred, ripe brown fruits from the lower branches. Despite the immense sense of wrongdoing she continued straying beyond the open gate.

"Look," she said, extending her right hand beneath the dome light between us, which was beginning to attract a moth. "They caught me at last and look what they did to me." There was a faint ring where her thumb connected to the rest of her hand. It seemed to me curiously self-inflicted, perhaps because the burn looked small enough to have been caused by a cigarette and I associated her with smoking. How strange it was then, that she, too, had once been a child and subject to the tyranny of adults and their rules.

"When you steal things, more things get taken away from you. You become diminished in spirit. Then you need more and more things and end up poorer than you began."

I was too young to fully understand what she meant, but not too young to appreciate the sentiment. Don't steal—that was what she was indicating. Don't steal, because by disobeying the rules of property you left yourself vulnerable to the severity of law and the indignation of owners who veered towards violence. But I never asked her if this was a law limited to people like her and me; people who owned so little, we might as well have had nothing.

Between us, we possessed so little and above all, held sacred the memory of this place: In the daytime it looked enchanted, ioras darted between ferns in the tangy morning air. We took humid late-evening hikes beneath the canopy through which the sunlight glowed a surreal honey-gold. It was during these hikes that she taught me to differentiate the edible fruits from their poisonous counterparts, and to identify the calls of shrikes, oriental honey buzzards and coucals which were amplified between the still surfaces of vernal pools and rustling evergreens. Yet none of these were truly ours. We didn't own the long-tailed macaques or the drongos, couldn't keep them stashed away in banks to multiply as investments. Over the years, these marshes would begin disappearing to make way for more housing estates and malls in accordance to long-term development plants, almost as if these otherworldly landscapes had never existed in the first place and all along, for the eternity of time, there had only been these unseeing, hulking steel and concrete monsters. Eventually, looking outside the window, I had to strain to see a single leaf blade peeking out from between the vista of

scaffoldings, when before the view was a rich oceanic blue-green. I would swivel towards my mother, beginning a suggestion before I could stop myself, "Do you want to take a hike?" But what there was left? Only a soggy log, the remnants of a carcass razed by a bulldozer and a sorry placard full of bombastic words and descriptions of what once was.

We never owned any of this land and were powerless to stake any claim to it, but it was clear that something had gradually been taken away from us. I could make a hundred arguments about habitat loss, or reduction in species diversity, but in this act of theft, legal theft, there was a sense of violation and desecration I couldn't quite rationalize.

But just for that night, there we were surrounded by the marshes, intact still, buzzing with countless small lives. There she was, instructing me on how to live among other people, the rules I had to obey in order to do so.

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I would continue stealing based on an uncertain, self-constructed philosophy: always, from establishments and people who could afford to be stolen from, but never from mom-and-pop stores or small family-run businesses.

My first job was at a fusion Japanese restaurant downtown that served overpriced sweet pizzas with candied cherries and Italian-style ramen. My supervisor, Marie Lee, informed me in undertones that the owners were embroiled in a scandal regarding several cocoa plantations across the equator. I later verified this on a search engine. The chain owners had been accused of extensive deforestation projects and were engaged in a legal scuffle having underpaid workers, so I imagined it was from these greedy, larger-than-life characters that I was stealing when I reached into the cash register at the end of my shifts.

I was usually the one in charge of closing up; at ten, the kitchen hands would leave in a flurry, flinging their aprons onto the counter, and the chefs would amble off together to a nearby pub along the well-lit strip. Marie Lee always had a long list of chores for me. She was firm, strict and took a no-nonsense attitude towards work that I found ridiculous at times. She reminded me of my mother in her unyielding, righteous manner. For Marie Lee, there was a certain way to live in this world, and one had no choice but to obey it. I didn't enjoy the grimy, pungent atmosphere of the restaurant long after the patrons had gone, but I found comfort in the series of small, mindless tasks: emptying tumblers, refilling cleaning canisters with soap, dusting the entrance.

More importantly, Marie Lee's demands gave me the opportunity to steal on the job. I would take my time stacking beer crates off the floor, with accordance to the fire hazard policy but strategically angle these towering stacks beneath the surveillance cameras so there would be no evidence of my crime. Initially, I was careful to limit my sessions to once or twice a week to avoid garnering suspicion. But I suppose I grew confident over time. I started helping myself to larger bills more frequently. The only witness to my action was the maneki-neko, the beckoning porcelain cat that was meant to

usher in prosperity and good luck. It would wave its paw at me unceasingly, perhaps a little menacingly.

Once I upset it and it skidded across the floor. I stiffened when I heard, in response, a cry from the back room where the employees took their breaks. I ducked beneath the counter and peered through the dimly lit doorway. I had assumed, as always, I would be alone long after closing hour. But there was Marie Lee standing by the time stamp machine, her hands snapping back from beneath her apron. Her time sheet, which recorded the number of hours she worked, fluttered from the jaws of the machine. She was glancing around, pressing her knuckles to her teeth. Then I understood.

Marie Lee stole also. I never knew if need or greed motivated her to alter her time sheets and exaggerate the amount of hours she spent on the job to receive extra compensation, but I assumed it was something like desperation for she was pushing past fifty and still working on the floor, managing small fry such as myself and the other waiters on rotational shifts. She was long overdue for a promotion, but she waited and waited and it never came. She was exhausted—that much was clear. Some days when I or other waiters confused the orders, she would put down her notepad and exit through the back door to bury her weary head in her hands.

I never asked her what it was, nor did we speak about that night. The following day, however, I saw that the maneki-neko had been returned to the top of the cash register, its broken paw glued back to its body. It moved slower now, against the substance that held it in place but there it was, back to ushering in prosperity and wealth that would never be mine, or Marie Lee's.

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On my way home I would take the long route to amble through the drier areas of the marshes. The land had been depleted only partway at this point in time, and the periphery of the marshes pushed back bull-headedly, disposing vernal pools into concrete pits and dispersing lalang seeds into infertile imported sand of construction sites.

Time moved differently in the marshes at night. There was never a lack of it, as opposed to the hurrying-about within the restaurant, always a sense of urgency, of never having enough time. Here, everything was right on time. Creatures crawled slowly through the undergrowth, half-blinded in the moonlight. Nocturnal birds ziplined between trees, pausing to line their nests or preen leisurely.

One of these nights I spotted the eyes of a nightjar glinting red in the headlights of a passing car. The nightjar shot off into the dark. Where it had lain, pushing away the spidery fronds of a fern, I saw some brown-speckled cream-colored eggs in the crook of a fallen branch on a bed of dried leaves. They were swollen with promise, with new life.

I woke my mother up to show her the eggs. She was so excited, overfull with the raw anticipation of a child. Her hands were shaking. "Burung tukang," she

said, recognizing the eggs, the way they had been nudged into a corner on the ground. "Tukang means craftsman." Yet these birds constructed no nest. She had to smoke to calm herself down.

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On my last day on the job, I waited on the table of dine-and-dashers. They were young women, about my age, and one of them looked me in the eye, as if in recognition. She turned away quickly and asked for the teriyaki-drizzled veal. "Not too tough," she instructed.

"Not too tough," I repeated.

They were well-dressed, overly and nervously so. The rhinestones set in their ears caught the LED lights of the restaurant, creating several small brilliant points about them. I thought they looked surreal, sitting there surrounded by dimpled blue-rimmed dishes with streaks of sauce, like gods of otherworldly terrains.

They ordered the sesame jellyfish salad, the green tea with cinnamon flakes, the tofu drenched in olive oil. Then for dessert they had cold gelatinous cheesecakes and ice cream filled with bean paste. Their conversation ceased. They exchanged the slightest of nods, and off they flew through the glass doors.

They looked back, beatific. Their light cotton clothes billowed in the wind, ghostlike.

In the aftermath of the event, there was a police report, an exchange between the enraged manager and a pacifying police officer and there was Marie Lee standing aside, almost in tears of panic. I realized I had been dry-mouthed with suppressed delight. I had been rooting for the women all along, not out of sheer spite towards the owners of the restaurant, but because they encapsulated playful, chaotic, sparrow-like natures that were refreshing. Plus, I couldn't have asked for a better last day on the job.

I gave the investigation officer an inaccurate description of the voices and hands of the women, although anyone would know that one whose middle and ring fingers were of even lengths did not necessitate her being a thief. I don't believe it was a matter of keeping an illusory thieves' honor. Had their presence been odious, had they demanded rather than chirped and quipped curiously, I would have run after them myself.

What was that look that one of the women had given me in passing? As if in mutual acknowledgement that we were both people who were too powerless to prevent having things taken away from us, so we sought underhand methods to retrieve them, playing tricks, scrounging for paltry compensation. If we were petty thieves, at least none of our crimes were historically memorable nor created long-lasting damage. How could anything I'd done measure up to the five thousand units of detonation velocity used to clear the marshes of my childhood? How could the accumulation of cash I'd taken compare to the stolen generations of frogmouths and kingfishers that would no longer arise?

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When I walked home, taking the long route through the marshes, I discovered that the heavy machinery had laid to waste the familiar fertile landscape. It was all a scorched gray flatland now, barren and dusty beneath a gray, silent sky. I paced through the area feverishly heading northeast, then back again in sheer disbelief. As far as I could see, the land had become an unending extent of lunar, uninhabitable gray within a day, punctuated by distant silhouettes of cranes and bulldozers. Then I stilled, feeling the unrelenting ferocity of the sun on my scalp.

My mother told me that nightjars ferried their eggs in their mouths from areas of danger. But how could the nightjars have predicted such an explosion? If it was an earthquake or a storm, they might have sensed it and left in advance. Not this time, however.

I don't pretend that their lives could have been smooth sailing without the interference of people. There had once been predators such as owls and eagles in the evergreens. Infant mortality rates were high in the wild. The odds were already stacked against the nightjars. But had they not been stolen of a chance to fight valiantly, there might have been alternate endings for them.

Back at the apartment, my mother was tipping out the ashtray to mark the end of the day. When the ashtray was restored on the coffee table, it was empty—not even light reached the bottom of the receptacle. There was nothing to be said or done.



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*featured photo by Erika Loh*