

# The Birds: Toucan

written by Guest Contributor | September 9, 2021



*featured photo by Kelsey Keaton*

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This is our home, this large marble tomb. One way or another, we've all been brought here to share in something. A something called *science*. What science is exactly, well that's above my pay-grade. But there are some things that I do know: I know that the constellation Tucana, containing most of the Small Magellanic Cloud, is named after the Toucan. I know which fruits are best to eat. And I know precisely when a slice of sunlight will steal its way into the museum – and how to read the dust motes drifting through it.

Usually I pass the time on this shelf memorizing the phone numbers on the opposite wall. Over the last fifty or sixty years they've grown in an organic, nebulous shape around the guava-colored rotary phone. There are hundreds of them, the first ones typed neatly on a paper, then penciled in the margins, then scratched out by pens straight on the wall, spiraling out like a snail shell. I've named it constellation Phonica.

Today the man Jerry is here. He's been around for almost as long as I have. His expressive eyebrows have faded to goose down. His frame, always narrow as a sapling, is now bent. The joints of his hands are round and gnarled, yet so delicately he picks up the jeweled birds: ruby and emerald and cobalt. He treats them properly, as sleeping creatures.

I watch as he works his way through the row of metal cabinets. He unlocks each door and their maws open wide, they breathe out the smell of mothballs. There are thousands of birds, laying belly up, glittering in the darkness. He checks each drawer before closing up and moving to the next. They move in a rainbow wave. Wood slides against the metal rungs, over and over again, like wind rattling through leaves.

A young woman enters the hall pushing an old wood cart, it limps and squeaks in protest.

"Just returning the Birds cart Jer, thanks," she says, then pauses.

"What's all this? Giving a tour later?"

Jerry turns, squints, pulls his glasses down from the top of his head.

"Oh, Ingrid. Hello. Actually well, John lost his keys. Thinks he might have left them in one of these cabinets, he had to pull a whole bunch of specimens for a loan this morning. I'm helping him look."

He's smiling, chuckling. The woman laughs too.

"Really? Wow. Too classic. Do you need any help?"

Her voice rings through the Neotropical collection like a bronze bell. But the man's voice... if only I could hop closer. He flaps his hands, almost like a bird himself these days. No, no, he seems to be saying.

"Well, I hope you find them. But Jer, I thought you only came in on Wednesdays now. What happened to retirement?"

He shrugs and says something I can't catch.

The woman smiles. "Guess I'm not surprised. Coming by the Zoology classroom for Happy Hour then?"

He nods and her shoes click away down the hall. All at once I smell it: the strange cells growing in this man's blood and bones. Something sneaking and strong, like a parasite working its way through tree roots, damaging the system beyond repair.

Does he know?

If I told him, could he hear?

He stands there for a moment, stroking the breast of a small red bird with the back of his forefinger. And I feel certain this is the last time I will see him. His name and number burn bright in the constellation surrounding the guava-colored phone.

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