

Flight Risk, a dramatic monologue

One billion. Remember that number. One billion.

I like to pretend that I'm a bird. Who wouldn't want to propel themselves skyward? I could show off my plumage and my dance moves, sing melodiously, or squawk, or warn the forest with my chick-a-dee-dee-dee danger call. I could be part of a great movement of biomass, migration. As a migratory bird, I'd be an endurance athlete with a few billion others. A Wood Thrush, a Black-throated Blue Warbler, a Baltimore Oriole.

Let's say it's fall and I'm headed south. I've been eating tremendously, storing fat. The weather cools, the tailwinds are favorable, the sun falls. I lift off with the other migrants. The cloak of night protects us from raptors and the heat of the day. With my electromagnetic receptors, the special proteins in my eyes, I'll sense, perhaps see, the earth's magnetic field. I'll follow landmarks—coastlines, rivers, mountain ridges. I'll look toward the lights—the constellations and the moon. They'll guide me.

Then something goes awry. There is a giant glow that disorients me, it pulls me in. I'm mesmerized and I fly around and around trapped until I'm exhausted. I find myself in a strange boxy canyon. There are a few trees here, and I sink down and rest until sunrise. When I stir, I'm hungry. I see a bountiful tree. I fly toward it, but something goes terribly wrong, something has knocked me silly. I'm on the ground dazed. I'm dying. There is a large figure bending towards me. Is it going to eat me? I'm lifted.

I'm lifting the bird. I'm lifting the bird to save it.

When is volunteer work ever convenient? We do such things out of love. I don't want to roll out of bed at 4 a.m., but I do it. I throw on some loose clothes, clothes I can squat in. I reach to the ground, for something that lives on the wing.

I'm waiting for my walking partner at Charles and Redwood. Momentarily, my eyes are looking upwards toward the light pollution, the sky glow—my mood dampens a bit. I glance at the building design and see glass. I don't think it's beautiful, I think it's deadly, especially the first thirty ft., the average height of a tree. Notably, its reflection.

Here's Joann or today maybe it's Joan or Wendy or Lindsay or Aaron or Jon. We each have our kits. Plastic baggies, paper bags, paper towels, labels, pens, nets. We fall into the route we've walked many times. Our eyes have shifted downward, looking for small lumps. We circle the glass lobby at 20 S. Charles. Here is an Ovenbird, a chunky little guy with an orange-y crown stripe. In the forest it sings "teacher teacher teacher." It's a teachable moment. It's dead. You can see a tiny feather on the glass as evidence of where it struck.

Glass is invisible, so what did the bird see? It saw a clear passage to the tree on the far side of the building or a reflection of a tree. It should have been food and shelter. Instead, a cruel ruse.

My partner and I scoop up the bird and put it in a plastic baggie. We note species, date, location, direction. We photodocument and upload the info onto a collisions tracker app. This is citizen science. This data will go to researchers. The bird will go home to the freezer until enough are collected to make a museum drop-off. More research will commence. Some help will come of it.

Nineteen more buildings to go.

We circumnavigate 100 Light St., the Convention Center, Harborplace, the Science Center, storefronts along Pratt, and more. We climb up and down stairs to various terraces, venture into alcoves. Our group, Lights Out Baltimore, has worked with a number of these buildings to turn off key lights during migration, but the glass remains. It's expensive to retrofit. But what's the greater expense? We need birds. Do you know that doctors now prescribe bird watching to boost our immune system, to calm our anxiety? Birds pollinate our gardens, our crops, our forests, they eat harmful insects that cause diseases or decimate our food production. Think about it. They eat seeds and poop them out and regenerate forests, which will be a necessary defense against climate change. We need birds.

When have we ever been without them?

Here's a common yellowthroat. It's alive, but in bad shape. I think about how it flew head first into the glass. We pull out a paper bag and put a cushion of paper towel in the bottom. The opaque bag calms the bird. It's respiration and heart rate drops. We'll

transport it to a wildlife rehabilitator. They'll treat it with a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory for head injury. With treatment, odds are that it will make it.

The city at 5 a.m. It's dark in areas, brightly illuminated in others. It's quiet. Traffic hasn't picked up yet. The homeless are sleeping. The peace is misleading; there is unnecessary carnage here. Sometimes the little corpse you find is still warm. Sometimes a bird hits the glass in front of you; sometimes it dies in your hand. You marvel at their vivacity even in death. You gaze closely at the play of colors, the linkage of feathers, barbs and barbules. This tiny, strong thing, weighing next to nothing, made of air. Here is a dead red-eyed vireo. I stroke it and say, "I'm sorry," but I'll have to react later. There are more birds to collect or save. Why do I do this? Why do we do this? So many people say, "it's too sad." But it's reality.

I've had cancer since I was a kid, a chronic condition. It's unkind. What helped me through horrible treatments was getting out and finding birds. Learning to identify them by sight and sound and behavior—hear that? Chkkk. It's a brown thrasher. If I concentrated on identifying a chip note, I wasn't focused on pain. Birds saved me, I save them in my small way. One more bird rescued and released, is one more live bird in the balance.

I do react later. My friends and co-volunteers become even more dedicated with more time spent facilitating rescues or monitoring more, but I take photographs. The birds are beautiful in death and they tell a story. I couldn't have imagined it then, but the photos that I uploaded to an artist website won a prize. That prize led to an exhibit and a new audience. People were enthralled. They'd never seen such birds. They'd never heard of the problem. Why stop here, I thought, with solo shows? I'll curate. I'll find other artists to take on the issue. Baltimore is full of phenomenal artists. Am I right? My best effort landed at The Peale. Last year's exhibit, Birdland and the Anthropocene. What better place than the first museum building in the country, which showcased art and natural history? Birds. We filled all four floors and made the garden bird-friendly. All of this effort to address the leading causes of bird mortality—free-roaming cats, habitat loss and fragmentation, pesticides, building collisions. That is, collisions with glass. Remember

that number? One billion? As many as a billion birds are dying each year in the United States from building collisions. Each year, a billion, probably more.

Are there any architects in the house?