

I HOLD YOU HARMLESS

Sixteen hours after my arrival, a car pulls into the parking lot—someone enters the building, a light goes on. From my sycamore, even without the binoculars, I can see movement through the blind, someone walking back and forth in the back room. With my Swarovskis, at last I catch a glimpse, after 32 days, of my lover, Matthew. Thirty-two days and he's back in my life. Oh my, he has let himself go—a new scruffy growth of beard, that old Marlins T-shirt that is the last thing he wears before he does laundry. Is that a new haircut? Or perhaps he simply has not combed it? Goth Girl has not been taking care of him. A few others arrive, more bodies pass by the window—a man, a woman, not Goth Girl. Distant, importunate laughter emanates from within, but I am not easily thwarted.

It was yesterday that I reached this last little strip of strip mall, this dusty parking lot, this shuttered up ranch with aluminum siding on Highway 29. I scouted the back area of the building—a gravel parking lot, a clothesline, a gas meter, and, lucky me, in the back window a partially collapsed Venetian blind. A screen door hung ajar against the tightly shut wooden one and next to a tiny strip of concrete a single white plastic chair awaited an occupant. Assorted cigarette butts were littered in the tall grass and a black bucket served as a trash can. Inside I found a white Burger King bag (empty) and a swallow of coffee, cream *and* sugar. Matthew takes both—so I knew it was a good sign.

I measured off 200 ft. and, *voilà*, there was the sycamore. It is taller than the rest and quite sturdy. After a climb, I could look down through the canopy at squatter trees with leafy

branches, at bushes and vines. Below me is a tangle of snarled woody strands and slender black trunks that sway in the wind. I settled in. To the west are ancient strands of barbed wire and a line of foliage running along that. To the east is a weathered gray fence, sagging in places. Beyond that is a trickle of a stream, which glints in the sun. As dusk comes on, a smoky band of blue snuggles up to the tree line. The narrow highway, faded asphalt, curves into the distance. We're in rural Pennsylvania, so even though an occasional semi might pass through at 3 a.m., my sleep was otherwise undisturbed

I told Matthew that I didn't mind about Goth Girl— she's a whim, nothing more. She's a rueful girl with heavy makeup, performing a silly masquerade. She won't last, but Matthew has so little willpower—he's a guy. *You have no impulse control*—that's what you told me. But I think that we're at our best when we act spontaneously, without calculation or design. My latest shrink told me that I had ADD, but I don't believe it. When I want to focus, I focus. What is love but the most exquisite concentration?

Sixteen phone calls, two lunches, a dinner, and three sleepovers are not nothing. I told you that you broke my heart and you said *too bad*—just like that, *too bad*, but Matthew, what I've learned since Vermont is that it's not the breaking that counts, it's the mending. I've read the text of what the sheriff delivered, I read it carefully. *You hereby agree to hold harmless . . .* Matthew, I hold you harmless, I know you never meant to harm me, and, frankly, there was no harm done. I haven't worn the sling since last Tuesday. *Matthew Logan moves the court to issue a temporary restraining order containing terms designed to ensure the safety and protection of the complainant*

The night I came to you, the last time you touched me (*I know you didn't mean to hurt me*) you said to me, *You're evil*. But, Matthew, I came with the best intentions—surely you know that. And you kept saying, *What are you doing here? What are you doing here?*

It took me 32 days this time—not bad. Thirty-two precious days and each one a bit closer to you. It is a pleasure, this searching, this finding. Matthew, *I accept no wrongdoing for loving you*. I embrace the thorn, the briar, the saw grass, the bee sting—the truest injury is manmade. Separation is the purest salt in my wound. You, Matthew, are wayward, peripatetic, while I am always homing home.

Why am I here? There's Queen Anne's lace, that sweet, smelly carrot. There's cypress, oak, maple, chestnut. Sparrows chirping at dusk; asters, apples, deepening shade; poplars, peonies, wild grasses, the banks of a stream; the lit rectangle of your window, lilacs, lobelia, milkweed.

After my ramshackle rambles amid weeds and brambles, swooning among the myrtle and wild roses, pricked by thorns, I'll come to you, perfumed and bleeding. Matthew, this looking, this watching with intent, is a kind of prayer.

All around me the woodlands are bursting into flower. I am lulled to sleep by cicadas and awakened by birdsong. At night I look up through the branches at the stars in their places and I know I am your True North angel, elongating my orbit, tilting always back toward you. By day, between sightings, I dream we two are trysting here, amid the wisteria, in the soft spring rain, two bodies grappling in the loamy soil. These are my gifts: I am blessed with inordinate patience, and I do not require much beyond the essentials.

My body bears the markings of my ardor: blackened nails, bloodied forearms, red welts from bee stings, chigger bites on my legs and feet. My teeth are full of seeds I cannot dislodge, my hair is matted with fronds and twigs. My right arm aches now when it rains and I've come to love that arm more than the left, since it bears the touch of my lover. I am a small, gentle person who means no harm. I am content to wait here for you to come to me. And you will.

A huge, glinting metallic green fly clings gemlike to a twig. Should it be chastised for its “obsession”? Of course not—its clutch is a matter of survival. And why this particular twig, why not another? We could impute any manner of scientific explanation and yet it simply is *this* twig. At this very moment it has myriad choices, and yet it stays.

I watch you standing and sitting and grimacing and running your hands through your hair. I see your visitors, but they’re just a series of T-shirts, jeans and big boots. They move so slowly and clumsily and they block my view—green T-shirts, blue T-shirts, a jean jacket, they fill my frame. Goth Girl visits once a day, but not at the same time. She is neither a habitual creature nor a tidy one. She is slow and heavy in a depressed sort of way; she stands outside a lot, smoking cigarettes. You cannot possibly love her—that much is clear.

I am a witness to everything that goes on, I keep watch over you from my sycamore. I love my leafy perch more each day—nothing comes between my tree and me: skin to bark and bark to skin. It sheds its bark in winter, but now, in late spring, it is adorned with great flat leaves like palms and heavy round seed pods hang from its branches. My sky is leaves, my leaf-green roof, my stirring, fluttering canopy. My bed is bark and beneath bark is wind. I dream amid branches and wind and moonlight, dream of my lover holding me here.

Your hand, the one that held me so tightly, lying on the pillow beside you. I kept vigil over that open, gentle hand until you awakened. It was so easy to slip in through the sliding door—the screws slipped willingly, eagerly, from their moorings in the wood. I touched things, but nothing important: your diploma from Missouri State, your remote, the remains of your dinner in the sink (pizza, as always), the Marlins T-shirt lying next to the laundry hamper (how I wanted to take that with me as I slipped away—it smelled so powerfully of you!). But as I stood near to you and then nearer, I could not take my leave of that open hand, starved for touch. I practiced restraint—I did not touch that untouched

hand and when you awoke and said *get out*, I did.

When there is no action from the building, I have my field guide to entertain me. *The bird watcher's thorniest challenge is the approach: how do we gain the best vantage on creatures that are wary of contact? Most birds will distance themselves from an observer either by taking flight or taking cover. Here are some tips for closing the distance: avoid obtrusive movement, minimize gestures, maintain a calm and steady demeanor.*

26 May. Dusk. Heard the *peent* of a woodcock. Elaborate swooping circles, soaring up high, plummeting to the earth. (*The male is a "demonstrative suitor."*)

27 May. 8:15 a.m. Loggerhead shrike, the little cannibal. Head and back is a bluish gray, black mask over one eye, dark bill. Dives from a low perch and then rises swiftly. Harsh, squeaky notes *shack shack*. Impales smaller birds on thorns or barbed wire. Makes an offering.

27 May. 2:15 p.m. Robin, the sign of spring. *Cheerily, cheer-up, cheerio*. Oh, the faithful robin!

In order to attract birds, first try thinking like a bird. For example, what sort of habitat would best support your needs? Explore that habitat and acclimate yourself to your new surroundings. Then try imitating birdcalls: chirping, squeaking, cawing, and squawking can all be mastered. The more quickly you are able to master these sounds, the more likely it will be for you to attract birds. For beginners, it's best to master what is called "pishing," a distress call that birds commonly use when they are alarmed or upset by your presence. This call sounds like the word "pish"—pronounce it as a drawn-out hissing exhale.

Piiisshhh. Try this technique especially when you can already hear birds in the area making "chirp" calls—these are short kiss-like sounds often emitted when the bird is already aware of your presence or has sensed a disturbance in the area. You can also try squeaking to attract a bird—you can replicate the squeaking sound by kissing the back of your hand.

Throbbing birdsong is borne upon the roaming, whistling, pishing, kissing wind.

The deer startle and then stay.

I have practiced restraint.

I have held steadfast but now all around me has changed. It was after hours—you had gone. And yet when I approached to do my trash check, there was Goth Girl standing in the parking lot smoking a cigarette. She flinched and gasped, letting her cigarette drop to the ground. She hesitated and then began to run and I quite naturally gave chase. I only wanted to tell her that I meant her no harm; I wanted her to know that I had even told Matthew that I accepted their brief liaison. But she kept running and then began screaming. I pursued her, this sickly, portly girl, but her extra poundage slowed her down. I came quite close; I could see her blue black hair bouncing, the black lace and netting trailing on the wind. She is a land animal, an eater of meat and starch, and I, a creature borne on the wind, my body hollow and light as feathers themselves, quickly gained on her.

She ran toward the highway and I knew that was mistake; I tried to head her back, which is the only reason I grabbed for her. I swooped toward her and came up with a fistful of netting—black, synthetic netting, trimmed in midnight blue rickrack and shot through with sparkly jets. I grabbed the netting and it ripped as she screamed. She fell then, hitting the pavement in a great thud, skidding along. And then she lay there, her smoker's lungs collapsing in on themselves, wheezing, terrified.

The netting is now part of my nest. I have added it to pine needles, bits of yellow-lined paper, and many Burger King bags, torn carefully, which make a very nice lining.

After the incident with Goth Girl, I could see Matthew out on the little concrete

strip the next day, searching the area. He hiked around a bit and looked behind some wisteria, but I could tell that his heart wasn't in it. It was exciting to see him in my element! Scanning with my Swarovskis, I watched him stride and stoop and twist his head around, but he never once looked up. No signs of Goth Girl whatsoever; she quite wisely disappeared after making such a fool of herself. I will give her that—at least she knows enough to be embarrassed.

Once she disappeared, Matthew did too. After the day of seeing him so close, he came in and packed up his stuff, leaving only empty tables and a trash can piled high. I came up to the blind the day he left and saw the room all in one piece. It was not a healthy environment for him, I could tell. He will move now to a more habitable place, a climate where I can live more comfortably. He knows that our situation here has become untenable and he is signaling me to follow him to a better place.

And so we've landed in Florida and I'm glad of it, since I was ready for a more tropical locale. It's not the Northeast anymore, so things are different. Here I notice that it isn't coffee cups in the trash—it's beer bottles. And I am positive that Goth Girl did not follow him, clear evidence that she does not truly love him. True love travels, true love boards the Greyhound if it has to.

I met a woman on the bus who had left her husband of eight years. She told me that once you cross the state line, what restrains you in, say, Pennsylvania, no longer applies in Florida. I feel so liberated here; although I keep my 200-foot perimeter, within its bounds is paradise. When I awaken in my new perch on these cool, windy bright mornings, cottony clouds hovering, the astoundingly blue sky is just one more reason to be in love. Amid the palms and loblolly pine, I snack on oranges from the tree across the road and I squat to pee.

Here I've settled on marshy, yielding ground with the bay to the east. Frank Hubbard

Rd. is between me and the bay, but traffic is so infrequent on the skinny, bleached road that I can go a whole day without seeing a single vehicle. Except Matthew's car, the blue Saab with the Vermont plates. What I've got to work with here is a pink-stucco two story directly to my south. From my perch I have no vantage on the lower story, but the upper story—oh, how I love those broad panes, a full 50 square feet! Nothing but glass between my man and me.

I am careful and orderly like any other creature in nature. I keep my notes, I live in harmony with others, I adhere to the plan. *Chance favors the prepared mind*—it was Louis Pasteur who said that.

Pennsylvania.

24 May. 8:32 a.m. Arrives and unpacks the trunk. What's he bringing in?—can't see. Eat at Joe's T-shirt, royal blue, freshly shaved.

24 May. 2:45 p.m. Cigarette break. Half a cup of coffee? I think he's eating better, maybe at home, seems a little less skinny. Wearing new jacket—a gift?

24 May. 1:00 a.m. Trash. Burger King, his favorite. Whopper, large fries, milkshake, vanilla. Six cups of coffee.

Florida.

17 June. Trash. Ranch-Style Doritos, Kiwi-Strawberry Snapple, a bag of Jolly Ranchers, a few remaining (apparently, the grape ones are not worth eating) and the remains of two microwave burritos.

19 June. 11:05 a.m. He's getting a bit sunburned—maybe went to beach yesterday? He's been working too hard. Upstairs at desk could see more lines under his eyes.

Like a cradle, a hand spread wide, the live oak supports me. It rocks me to sleep, makes a mockery of my vigilance. Above me is a hardscrabble nest, strands askew, at a precarious tilt. What bird builds higgledy-piggledy like that? What creature is so careless? What I've seen the most of so far are jays. I've lined my nest here with Spanish moss and big, shiny Magnolia leaves. The fork of the tree dips into a prong that fits my backside perfectly. If I curl up on my right side I can wrap my right leg around the branch directly below me for balance. When I sleep I do not dream; instead, I listen all night to birds, to the rustle of leaves, the chirping of crickets, to the sighing of the wind. Twigs and leaves flutter down from above and alight gently on my chest or stomach. At first light I begin to listen more intently to the sounds of the night as they give way to daytime melodies.

I look out over pine at the spiny outcroppings of palm trees; they're like stair steps—it's as easy as a ladder to climb. Directly below me is a Magnolia with its big, waxy green leaves, its undulating lower branches, its new buds, and huge pink blossoms. The spiky fans of the palmettos are green and brown, as well. Nature isn't in a hurry and it understands, as I do, the necessity of change. The bud blossoms in its time, the supple leaf withers and dies to make room for the slender shoot. Nature adapts, just as love does, it abides, it relocates in time.

My live oak is huge and it makes a lovely canopy. Directly in my line of sight is a smaller scrub oak; I must look past it to do my work. It's dying in its own good time—one green nether branch lives on like a phantom limb. On the lower extremities, clusters of Spanish moss hang in gray filaments like tangled neurons, like the blasted hard wiring of the tree. The scrub oak's dying seems a painful thing. There's a reason we bury the dead: with stately green boughs swaying above and the buoyant deciduous green of new growth below,

its spastic gray branches are an affront. Dying in the center of my vision, making its case for death, the body still stands, the corpse silver and radiant in the moonlight. I say, die away. I won't give up that easily.

As the sun goes down, a distinct chill is in the air. It's the time when darkness tightens its barely perceptible hold on day: you can still detect motion—an upturned wing glints among the grasses. I can feel the ground rising up, the tides turning toward my perch. I can feel the whole flock of jays stirring even before they make a sound and then they're rising, wheeling upward wing on wing. Eyes closed, fingers stroking bark, I can sense the spaces among the fluttering, can hear the rush of air among the wings.

No longer restrained by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I entertain the possibility of venturing toward the pink stucco two-story. The South is a rebel and so am I. But when I venture too far from my nest, one jay has taken to harassing me: I know it's the same one because in addition to his regular markings, he has one pink tail feather. His wingspan must be 17 inches! He's my competitor, since we both hunt for insects and seeds. He's very territorial and lets me know when I overstep my bounds, circling and diving, threatening me. At times he yells at me, saying *jeer jeer jeer*. He and I have a lot in common: we're both omnivores, but we're very specific about our mates. We're nothing if not selective. Jays mate for life, I know, and I've seen Pink Tail Feather fly with his partner, touching wings.

My protector is a barred owl—while I'm in my perch she keeps Pink Tail Feather at bay. She won't let him or me near her, but she hasn't moved her roost either. If I crawl out from my own roost and crane my head I can see her quite clearly. At first she would retreat, but now she stands her ground and stares at me with big, golden eyes. Last night at dusk I was meandering about, hunting and gathering, and suddenly she whooshed past me. It

wasn't even a noise, but just a rush of wind and a dark body with wings extended in flight.

Each day I come closer to violating the perimeter, even when he is in the building. We are so close now, Matthew and me—a pane of glass seems nothing more than wind. He spends most of his time in the lower story and my Swarovskis won't allow me access there. So in order to do my work I need to get closer. I have taken to prowling an ever-widening perimeter, moving in an arc from east to west. Like the loggerhead shrike, I sometimes leave an offering. I place my gifts very carefully near the blue Saab: a Magnolia blossom, blushing pink, a perfectly symmetrical branch laden with red berries (edible—I tested them first, of course), a Burger King coffee cup filled with the purest rain water, several downy, striated feathers from the owl who sits above me. Each time I leave one of my treasures, I check the following morning and find it gone—he cherishes each gift and studies it with care in order to decipher the clues I have placed for him. He reaches out to me in his own way and I respond, gently, patiently, in my own way.

Then I left a final clue, a permission slip, really: a long blue feather barred in white and black; it could have come from Pink Tail Feather or any one of his kind. When I found it had disappeared this morning, I knew it was time to make my move.

Yesterday at dusk I descended and approached the house from the deck along the side. From my original vantage, I could not see in from there, but it felt so exciting to know that for once we were separated by only 12 inches of fragrant wood. Perhaps this house, this deck, was made from an oak like the one that is now my home. Small, skinny trees grow here by the deck and they're covered with lichen—pinkish splotches, green barnacles, ghostly white outlines. *You're so complicated*, you said to me, but I am no more complicated than the whorls growing here.

I stole closer and rounded the front of the building, nearer to the room where

Matthew works. Large, sliding glass doors impeded my progress—there was no way to pass these without being seen. I circled round the back of the house again and came along the western side of the building, where there is one small window onto Matthew’s room. From there I could see tables, a doorway into the bathroom, and—where was Matthew? I stood higher and higher, craning my neck to try to see behind the stacks of equipment. Suddenly, I heard the door slide and he emerged in front of the building, only 20 yards away! I stepped back, teetered there, yearning to go to him, to rush into his arms, knowing he would welcome me, but before I could move I heard him say, “Hey” and saw a man approaching the front steps. It was Big Belly, one of his regular visitors

“Z’up,” Big Belly said and they walked back inside. I was not disappointed: I had heard his voice, the single, soft note—“Hey”—and I had stood nearer to him than I have in months. I hurried back to my roost to record the encounter, knowing that I still had time. He is moving closer to me and I to him, and when it is time, we will both know it. Pink Tail Feather continues to shadow me—I am coming to believe that he is jealous of Matthew and me. When I come near the building, he flits about in the grass, squawking and calling to me. I ignore him—can’t he see that this is far too important a moment for me to be paying attention to him?

Gradually, though, I have come to be grateful for the presence of Pink Tail Feather—he is teaching me a lesson: love is demonstrative. He is goading me, telling me to stop waiting and to declare my love. Still, he’s noisy and he’ll give me away, so today I make sure that he is nowhere around when I venture even closer, inching toward the doorway. Nothing—no squawking, not a feather in sight, so I approach silently, making my way nearer and nearer to the sliding glass door. When I am upon it I realize that the door is ajar—this is too much temptation. How can I not slip through it? I enter silently and for the first time in

months I am closer than 200 feet. At first all I can see is computer equipment arrayed on tables and desks. This must be the smallest room in the place. It's nothing but white walls and large, folding tables with computers. On one table is a paper plate with a few remaining French fries and ketchup, several cups of coffee, and an open bag of Doritos.

Matthew appears from behind a bank of computers. He seems much larger than I remember, more sinew and muscle. He's wearing a too tight T-shirt that says *Pink Flamingos Bowling League*. His jeans ride low on his hips and between the shirt and the denim is a white hairy strip of hard male flesh. It's so breathtaking to see him whole this way. I have become so good at observing him that once I stand before him, I cannot speak or act. I feel only fluttering inside me.

He sees me, stops and stands stock still.

I want to go toward him, tell him that all around him is a paradise he knows nothing of, I want to say, touch me and I will form whorls, I will lay down lines. I will let my petals overlap and divide. I will pish and pish and kiss the back of my hand—for you and only you. Let me be your wild carrot, your cow parsnip, your spring beauty, your dewdrop.

Matthew, I've been transformed, I want to tell him, it's not like before.

He moves toward me. He throws his hands in the air, his beautiful, open hands. His face is not the face I've studied all these days, it's even more beautiful, even gentler.

Before he reaches me, Pink Tail Feather swoops in through the open door and goes for the bag of Doritos. *Dammit*, Matthew yells, and the bird begins to dive-bomb us, circling and swooping and cawing.

It's OK, I tell the bird, he's mine. But he dive-bombs Matthew again.

Jesus! Matthew says and cowers under a table. Pink Tail Feather comes back toward me, he's cawing *jay jay jay*, he wants me to know it's him.

I don't move at all and when he swoops back toward me I stand completely still. His foot rakes through my hair as he skims over my head. I don't move. He comes back at me, *jeer jeer jeer*.

Get down! Matthew shouts, but I stand my ground. Spanish moss for hair, seeds for teeth, bumpy, red flesh, blood trickling down my face—what more proof could he need that I'm a girl in love?

Matthew scoots out from under the table and moves toward me. He lunges at me and hoists me over his shoulder. Light as the ocean's salty updrafts, bones hollow, my right arm curved like a wing, I'm back in my lover's arms.

They mate for life, I say, as we move out toward the parking lot.

We two are speechless among the cawing. I want to tell him, Matthew, I hold you harmless, I hold you fluttering, I hold you soaring, I hold you here.

Pink Tail Feather has come back home, along with his mate, and now the whole flock has come too. I've never seen them roosting this way in my tree, but there are hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. We are quiet now, waiting for dusk, when the whistling and pishing will begin. Matthew, I am waiting here, waiting for you to come striding, stooping and turning to me. I am content to know that all your life you will think of me and grow lighter, you will think of me and look up at birds waiting to take wing. Matthew, this is my tree, but if you want to move on I will gladly vacate it, for there are leaves everywhere, branches everywhere, lovers everywhere: the whole world is green and stirred by winds and deep, abiding loves.