



DEAFENED IN ACADEME: FOR THE BIRDS

Monday, April 23, 2007

This is something (an essay? a story? a rant or ramble?) that I've been writing for my own amusement, or as a coping necessity; today I realized I could just dive in and toss it into the blog.

Three weeks left in the school year, and the energy is intense at the arts and communications college where I teach. I have a severe, bilateral hearing loss; I read lips. I can't hear in groups, in noise. All year long, I attend meetings, meetings, meetings where everyone talks at once for hours at a time, but both the intensity and pitch rise significantly as the semester draws to a close. It's the same on the streets (there are no campus grounds, just multiple buildings spread over the south loop), in the studios, halls and everywhere in the buildings. The uproar approaches its yearly crescendo.

A large urban art school reminds me of nothing so much as a gigantic colony of raucous sea birds, like those that cling to the sheer, jagged cliffs towering over the Atlantic in the Hebrides. Thousands upon thousands of birds of multiple breeds, some who feed off others; all of them squawking incessantly.

In meetings, I'm some kind of diver bird. My eyes are focused intently on one speaker's lips, as if the words forming there are a prize bit of juicy, mutilated fish flesh. I swoop through the beating wings of cacophonous sound, snatch up and gulp the meaning as quickly as I can, in order to be able to immediately pinpoint another word forming. Sometimes I break through the sound barrier and squawk loud enough for my own voice to be heard, but mostly, I'm foraging for that next morsel, and always, always avoiding becoming prey.

Except for a precious and appreciated few staff and faculty, several of whom are located near my immediate nesting area, of all the birds gathered, my students are the most courteous. They are aware of and easily adjust to my lack of hearing. Perhaps that's simply because in this colony, they are fledglings who suspect that I may be carrying some essential sustenance in my gullet to regurgitate for them to feast on, but the contrast to the behavior of the bulk of the colony is marked. For whatever reason, perhaps because I do listen with my eyes, the students hear me.

A fearful amount of noise is essential to establish the literal pecking order in the colony. To achieve a place in one of those spacious nesting areas high on the cliff, a sea bird must either kill and eat its competition, or it must perpetually, continuously shout out its self-interest, drowning out the cries of all other birds nearby. If it's loud and persistent enough, it may have a chance to display its plumage, be invited to move to a sunny, dry nest.

If a diver bird does this, it can quickly use up the energy and concentration it needs simply to find food for itself and the fledglings in its charge. Though nurturing the young is the colony's alleged and much-touted purpose, those who devote the bulk of their time to doing so will find themselves nesting in the dank lower areas, the rocks slimed with tons of guano that perpetually slithers down from above. Such a bird, who does not call out and will not kill, is not allowed to rise.

Still, a diver bird seems more fortunate than an adjunct bird, who has no nest at all, and so makes the easiest prey.

Now, as the end of nesting season approaches, the voices are ear-splitting, the motion incessant, frenzied. The predator birds dart in for final kills while their potential victims are still densely gathered; one lucky slaughter, and the predator not only eats, it can claim the dead bird's territory next nesting season.

Oblivious to all this, the matured fledglings display their new eloquent plumage, and add their fresh, enthusiastic cries to the discordant chorus, as is their eternal, sacred right.

The second weekend in May, amid great fanfare and the most deafening clamor of the year, the colony rises as one and flies off, migrating

to scattered individual feeding grounds.

My own summer domain is quiet, peaceful, colorful and lush. The flocks I join are composed of fewer but convivial birds, those who sing with a radiant purpose: the fluid, uninterrupted process of making new songs of their own. Summers feed me, very well.

Migration season is short, though. I have time to eat barely enough to sustain myself through the next nesting. Each year that I return to the cliff, the noise seems denser and more incomprehensible, the guano more rife and thicker, and my own voice becomes more and more stifled.

I wonder how many fledglings a deafened diver bird can nourish in a lifetime. I wonder how to remain in my feeding grounds. And always, I wonder if enduring a harsh, lonely winter, with food spare and difficult to find, would still be better than returning to another season on the rocks.

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