

Birdkeeper
David Rome Prize, Fall 2020
Adi Thatai, Class of '23

I noticed that you fell in love with the birds this summer. As your kidneys shrank, I think your interests did too.

It started small. You started by looking out of the window. You never did that. Or perhaps, more truthfully, I never bothered to notice. After lunch, every day, you stood at the kitchen window, looking at our backyard, your upper back hunched as always, your thinning, graying hair messy over your scalp, peeling an orange and eating it slice by slice. Your wrinkly fingers moved, but you didn't look down.

The days you stood there longest were the warmest ones, the days of streaming sunlight when the romping sparrows weren't afraid of the hawks and even the cowardly cardinals would criss-cross through the trees, blood-red spots flitting against the sky for what could be no reason but fun. You planted your feet and looked out. I don't think you noticed me watching. Those were the days you called me over. You handed me an orange slice. *Do something nice for your father. I want a birdfeeder. Did you know we live across from a bird sanctuary? I never noticed.*

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My father never does that. He's the kind of man who keeps his head down. At least that's how I know him. I remember one night on a family vacation in Maine, I was out late on the deck, resting my elbows on the railing, staring up at a pinpricked, moonless starry sky cut open by the white arc of Milky Way. He came out and stood next to me in silence. He glanced up, breathed in, and said, *When your great-grandfather turned 80, I got him his first pair of glasses. He put them on for the first time at night in the village and began to cry. He paused. He said to me, I never knew that this is what the stars look like. There were only a couple coughing stars visible in the polluted Indian sky. I didn't have the heart to tell him that he could have seen so many more here.* My dad clicked his tongue, disappointed. He bent his head down, and he walked inside.

I don't blame him. My father knows how cruel the earth has been to him.

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You asked me to buy the birdfeeder. I didn't. I'm sorry. You ordered it and it came in the mail on an overcast Saturday. I didn't assemble it until you asked. I'm sorry. We laughed at how it looked, a wide plastic cylinder covered by a translucent, red pyramid meant to keep squirrels off – like a plastic man with a sombrero you said. We laughed harder when Mama said she would buy a BB gun to shoot off any adventurous squirrels. We only laughed because she was serious.

Once you had asked me to, I hung the birdfeeder on a hook right outside the window. Soon enough, the birds came. Squeaking and chirping flurries of gray, yellow, red, and green. *Look, look, look! Look at these two. They keep coming back, always together!* You pointed out two, small chubby golden birds with orange beaks, dashed with black patterning and gray highlights. *I think they're a couple. I wonder what kind of bird they are.*

For your birthday I surprised you with the *Birds of Massachusetts Field Guide*. *American Goldfinch*, you identified quickly. *That's the couple. Those are my lovebirds.* You smiled as the two played around the feeder, circling and chasing each other like ribbons of streaming gold. They warbled with lightness. You let loose a back-arching laugh. *Amazing.*

I didn't tell you, but I remembered then the last time I watched birds with you. I was young. We were walking the dog quietly in that big meadow across from my elementary school, the dry leaves of early fall crunching lightly beneath our feet. Suddenly, in the distance rose a cloud of small black birds, flapping and squawking together in a rogue dark storm against a cloudless sky. We both looked. The dog barked. They disappeared into nothingness as soon as they came. You waited in silence. You clicked your tongue, inhaled, and said, *I learned something today. My father died in the coal mines. I read it. A study found that coal miners are at a higher risk of multiple myeloma. He died of multiple myeloma working in the Bihar mines to give me my life. I look at this country and think what could have been different if he lived here. I think about if he would have let me bring him here, if he could live here. Like I do. If I didn't leave him.* You paused. *No son should die a decade after his father.* You took a deep breath of the crisp autumn air, turned around, and we walked home silently. You were talking about your father, but even then, I got the sense you were talking about yourself. A canary in the coal mine. A warning. I should have known.

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My father was diagnosed with Chronic Kidney Disease when he was 30. He didn't tell me until he was 55. A part of the reason they left India. His kidneys were shrinking. *Your sister almost died*, he told me when I asked why we were here, in the States. *5 near-death asthmatic attacks. Delhi pollution was horrible. We had to leave.* He only later told me they also needed to seek more advanced care for his disease. Under the clean skies of suburban Michigan, my sister's asthma left, and the progress of my dad's disease slowed to a halt. That is where I was born, my first breaths. Clean air.

I think about what could be if my father were born here. Like me. A 2018 study showed that increased exposure to particulate matter pollution increases risk of Chronic Kidney Disease. I don't think my father knows. 30 years of dirty air is what did it. That is where he was born.

We had to leave. He lowered your eyes when he said that. *I think about who couldn't leave. I think about Karan.* Karan was my cousin. He died in India when he was 10. Childhood leukemia. Studies link increased incidence of leukemia with exposure to traffic-related pollution.

My father knows how cruel the earth has been. He's knows it will get worse.

He told me about his disease in my senior year of high school. He only told me because he had to. After 20 years, his kidneys had begun to shrink again.

I will live. I should be fine. Dialysis will start in the next few years. Surgery too. It will disrupt everything. Mama will be the donor. No, you can't be my donor you're too young, you might need your kidney later. Mama and I will both have to stop working. We need to pay off the mortgage first and keep enough aside for your college and our retirement. I want you and your sisters to be secure and safe before I go into this. This is what stresses me.

I wanted to tell him that it didn't matter. That we would be fine. That he didn't have to sacrifice his happiness for my comfort like he always did. That I just wanted to see him happy.

I said nothing.

I'm sorry.

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You used to say something in the car on pretty days, when the highways felt long and the horizon lay in repose, the world stretching out before us. *This country has so much*, you would

notice, always clicking your tongue in disappointment. Always disappointed with the beauty you get to live through, as if the ugly was your fault.

You were never disappointed when you watched the birds.

You asked me to buy a hummingbird feeder. I didn't. I'm sorry. I put it together when it came, though. I mixed the sucrose and water and filled it up the hanging glass jar, a little sweet water spilling out of the red plastic flowers at the base. I hung it up outside your office window. The hummingbirds came that day. *How fast news spreads*, you marveled.

You said they moved like dragonflies. I thought they were hard to spot, but you always noticed them fly by. Glinting green bodies streaked with red and buzzing with electricity, up, down, forward, and backward, levitating in all direction as if pulled along by an invisible thread strung around their chests. *They move so strangely*, you said. You watched as the hummingbirds floated up to the feeder, shy at first, sticking their long beaks into the plastic flowers to drink the sugar water. They became your favorites almost immediately. *Look at their red throats*, you called me over. You opened the *Birds of Massachusetts Field Guide*. I hadn't noticed that you kept it on your desk. *The Ruby-Throated Hummingbird. Native to the Americas*. You smiled quietly. *They don't live in India*. You kept smiling.

Birdkeeper. That's what you called me. The only one tall enough to take down the feeders to clean and refill them. I complained, but you said, *What's the point in having a son if he won't do your work? I'm old now. You're young. Use your energy*. I grumbled and groaned at first, but soon, I began to like it. You stopped needing to ask. I remember leaving for one weekend trip this summer. I stopped you as we pulled out of the driveway. I realized I had forgotten to refill the feeders. I made you wait in the car.

You really care about these birds, you observed as we left.

I want you to know that it wasn't the birds.