

CREATOR BIRD
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As soon as the tide got low enough, I snuck away from Ma and Pa and the fish nets, and I crossed the mudflat and saw my creator bird. I climbed way up Oystercatcher's rock and laid me down, and she bobbed frantic on her ledge beneath me, flashing flaming-red rims and hot-yellow rings around jittery-black eye-dots. She stuck out her red-blazing bill, and it seemed so long and heavy I couldn't see how it let her fly, or why she never tripped on it, running racy on the black-bumpy rock, and then she screamed like the time the lava chased the first girl oystercatcher down Salmon's Big River.

The world had been nothing but night forever, and she and her ma and pa had shot out of a snow peak, their eyes and bill-tips zipping around the dark, glowing like sparks. The whole mountain exploded, and the birds flew away with lava boiling after their tails, burning their legs bare and feathers black like now. The lava made the dip-netting sites. It left the water its thunders, its sizzling whispers, its crackling and humming and rumbling. It poured out the river-mouth, boiling down the beach, and the girl's wings gave out, and her pa carried her, and then he put her on her ma's back, and he tumbled away, and the lava didn't stop until it got way down here, and then it dimmed and smoked and shrank, and the beach rocks took their shapes, and the girl bird slept.

She woke in the dark beside the mouth of Eel Creek, and she screamed, but her ma and pa didn't answer. She poked her bill hungry into the sand, and tiny-dark crabs swarmed out, racing into waves, and Surf took their songs, adding her hisses and howls, her swoons and dreams, and now crabs have no voices, they don't shout any warnings, they just pinch me bad.

The girl bird took her bath, wading belly-deep in the creek-mouth, flapping, and drops spilled off her, and she screamed them into robins and jays, Chinook and Sockeye, halibut and whales and bears. Her drops made every living thing, and when she got quiet, drying and fluffing herself, the creek-mouth turned the palest-smoothest gray, and three boy oystercatchers stood in a row, each fanning out a wing, hiding his face. The girl bird yelled, and the boys tore after her, and all their screaming burned away fog, and then the sun was there, and those four bobbed on this rock, yelling all day, shaking like that volcano, and then the moon came up and pulled the

tide off the beach, and those four found their first food.

Oystercatcher still proved it. A wave hit her ledge, sprinkling her, and she footed around calm, sticking her bill in mussels and barnacles like she had a secret way of getting their meat, and the tide table was all her doing. See, we'd named her wrong. She never ate that many oysters.

She shrieked and flew suddenly with her husband, diving down, and something brown streaked into a crack, and then a rat shot out, a chick hanging from its teeth, peeping, beating stub-wings, and I jumped up, and rats scattered all across the ledge, and I turned, and a tail swept my feet, and my face hit Ma. I bounced hard from her. She grabbed and yanked me high, whacked my behind, shoved me against rock. "You climb up here and fall off, who you gonna blame?" She hit my head. "We might a' chased you and licked you!" She slapped my cheek. "We ain't `nough rope to tie you, do we?"

Pa aimed his shotgun and then held two oystercatchers dangling dead-duck like from his fist. "Here's your reasons to stray, see `em?"

My first finger turned into a volcano-bill. I touched Pa, and his shoulders slumped, and his gun dropped. I touched Ma, and her lips wobbled.

Ma and Pa fell off. They shrank into tide slugs spongy and soft and gooey and stuck to rock, poked by crabs, stung by salt, whiskered by rats. They stopped screaming. They just waited around for waves and rain and air and flies.

I walked up the beach at night, avoiding the wind and law.

I laid me down on top of a sea cliff and pulled spruce branches over myself, and I began to sleep, and then a thrush sang, dripping his flute through fog. His song leapt between trees, ringing forward and back, loud then muffled, and it circled and echoed, floating low and then high, and I became his song. I was nothing but in it. I fluted above beach cliffs to a town on a river--the biggest log mill and cold decks I'd ever seen. Locomotives. Docks and sea steamers. A man and badge and Tin Lizzie.

My flute got weak, and another thrush heard and sang me into one of the cinnamon drops on his breast, and he flew me across the river to a cedar tree and landed above cinnamon-colored ground, and I dripped out and perched tawny, a thrush complete.

Dusk, it was, and I couldn't gather anything: hundreds of Injuns danced by the tide, hopping and shuffling between rows of drummers, their singer swaying above a beach fire, her

chin-stripes blurry and dark. Her nose-shells swung crooked, reflecting flames, and her dress rattled of bones, and everyone was off their reservations, but she didn't mind. She moaned slow and low at the horizon, and specks came dark through the last glow--canoes.

They skimmed waves, hitting the beach, and skeletons tumbled out, falling in firelight, and Oystercatcher screamed, her bill glowing against a skull, and a warrior leapt up, filling with flesh, powder balls spraying backward from his head. Eye-shreds sucked backward into his sockets. Blood and innards gushed into his brow. His skin closed up tight, and he sniffed mad at the woods, smelling me white, I bet.

The red bill zigzagged from skeleton to skeleton, and braves and squaws jumped up, sabers and measles-spots and cannon-shot flying backwards from bodies, blood-wounds sealing healed. There were more Ghost Injuns than real ones, dancing in old-time leggings and braided skirts right beside those in logging pants and catalogue and flour-sack dresses. Everyone lit torches and waved pitch-point arrows and muskets, and then they got dead quiet, creeping toward the mill town, and I sung my flute, and those Injuns got misty, shrinking into fog-wisps.

They wiggled beneath sand, nothing but beach worms pecked by plovers, and I fluted their canoes into spume and spray.

I walked up the beach strong again, knowing her bill and eyes had glowed in the dark, but she was only Injun Oystercatcher, not the real one, not ours.

I looked back, knowing no one ever should, and fog-wisps swarmed me, moaning like that singer, and then I was whirling up. I was climbing through dawn mist. I was groaning drones with thousands of mures, stretching out gurgles and growls, crying long-low howls that cocooned us raspy and reedy, swirling around airy and then thick, thick then airy.

We mures stood on a big-tall surf rock as crowded as mussels, warming one egg each, puffing snowy breasts proud. We waved night-dark bills, moaning the long-ago lava, opening mouths a ghostly orange, and our husbands fetched us fish a-plenty.

Oystercatcher landed in the middle of us, and her eyes bugged out nervous, and she swung her bill across her back, and rats dribbled out, dropping dead in a dull-wet glaze, slipping slimy down a fissure.

She flew off, and mures turned and looked at me, knowing I'd known rats previous...

I watched the sea for some ship that might wreck against our rock and spill vermin, but I didn't see any. No murre saw anything coming, no meaning to Oystercatcher, and we crouched

lower on our eggs, and there were knocks! Splashes! Dories around our rock! Men in oilskins!
Faces right here!

A million wings flew up--me with them--and I looked down, and my egg rolled and spun on the rock, and a man with jerky shoulders bent above it, stepping on two squealing chicks, balancing himself. He put my egg soft-handed into a bucket. He piled others on top of her and passed the bucket to a man in a mackinaw, and that man roped it to a man in a dory, and I dove at the dory-man's neck, bit it, and other hands grabbed me, squeezing, and I pecked and shat and puked, and then I was up and free, and the dory heaved from surf, buckets fell, and my egg broke, running with yokes across half-made chicks and water-sloshed boards.

Men in hip boots met dories, and we chased them to wagons and teams, and gunners stood quick, blasting us. They put corpses in beds two-by-two, mothers-beside-fathers--murre, blue-mouthed shags, orange-mouthed and red-mouthed shags, big-mouthed gulls, blond-haired puffins, blue-striped falcons, ravens and fish crows and eagles.

We half-crouched with our husbands, pacing around empty spots, and we couldn't moan, couldn't drone, couldn't lift our bills.

Chicks cried hungry from waves. They'd jumped off as soon as they'd seen men, and now they were floating with parents, not flying yet, and their cries whistled brief and broke high, piercing us chilly, rippling lonely in me, wrapping us damp.

Those chicks cried the cries we'd lost, begging for feedings, lifting fuzzy-little stub-bills against the whole gray bigness of the sea, the dimming and dropping of the sun, the whole black world of land beyond.

I woke dull.

Oystercatcher was screaming, bowing with her husband above an egg. They called moonbeams down into cracks, and they zigzagged our rock, tapping corpses, and nothing sealed up. Their tails popped high, flaming and clapping, and nose-shells and dress-shells spun smoking in their eyes, and they leapt down into the rat-fissure. Hideous screeches! Desperate screams! The vermin had come alive, biting and battling them, and the oystercatchers flapped out furious. They bobbed before us, shaking rats down their throats. They shook off their feathers and screamed off their bones. They flung off their bills and bobbed away their innards, and then everything blew back into the fissure, and thousands of us waddled hesitant to the edge.

Gray-blue forms appeared above gray-black rock, and there was Pa kneeling behind a big-

box camera, a thumb poised on a shutter-cord. And Ma crouched beside a box of glass plates, holding a pencil above paper. The sun washed the rock, the camera click-clacked, the plates clunked in and out constant:

Chicks with twisted necks, mashed skulls, bloody stub-bills, innards spilling.

Yokes and shell-bits all over the rock.

Broken eggs blowing end-over-end.

A live chick huddled against a ma with a caved-in breast.

A man's glove left behind, bloody and gooey with yoke.

Gulls quarreling over a half-eaten chick.

Shags' and gulls' nests busted flat.

A puffin stepping around with a bill dangling from his clown face.

Birds shot all across the whole rock-top...

These pictures and more would show up backward on the glass plates, and so I posed on a ledge, crossing my knees, tossing back my hair. "Take me?"

"Our girl!" Ma and Pa beamed fondly at me. "She walks off, she sure lets her mind fly!"

We hauled everything to our field tent, and Pa got out magazines and showed me his pictures a-going all across the country. And Ma read us the laws she'd written. *No climbing on seabird colonies. No shooting seabirds. No taking eggs or fashion feathers or specimens.* Pa was gonna show the president, and the president was gonna sign the papers.

We waited together between surf rocks, and Oystercatcher landed beside a pool and poked her bill beneath seaweed, and I saw how she had pulled Ma and Pa back out from the tide slugs at her rock. They'd appeared as rats, I bet, and she had swallowed them and had flown them back to me, and then she had taken in all their jitters and had shaken them away, and now they didn't hurt so much anymore. I ghost-moaned. I murre-moaned, and the reflection of Oystercatcher's bill met the reflection of my nose, and she winked with her red-yellow eye-rings. She flew off, and a whole flock joined her, beating wings against the wind, screaming, just dying to announce all the new things that would happen yet today.