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...*Today* (Oct. 24).

...*Globe* (Dec. 19).

# 8

Emily Hiestand was born in Chicago in 1947, and she now lives in Cambridge where she serves as editor-at-large for the environmental magazine *Orion*. Her poetry collection *Green the Witch Hazel Wood* (1987) won *The Nation* Discovery prize and a Whiting Writers Award. As a committed environmentalist, Emily Hiestand makes the important point that "how we talk about the earth, what kind of language we use, powerfully affects what our species does within the compass of the earth, and what kind of ecosystem ethics we are able to conceive." An earlier version of the following wide-ranging essay on blue jays and the nature of cities appeared in her collection *Angela, the Upside-Down Girl: And Other Domestic Travels* (1999).

## 👉 Zip-A-Dee-Do-Dah

*Emily Hiestand*

Each spring for more than a decade, the canopy of the wild black cherry tree outside my living room window has appealed to a pair of blue jays, the showy bird with a smart crest and black necklace. This year's pair has arrived and the birds are commenced on the days-long project of making a nest, the task for which ornithologists have got the lip-pursing, Felix Unger-ish word "nidification." I'm watching the jays from a living room window thirty feet up in the trees, and I am fluctuating between a quiet panic at having a life so marginal that I can spend most of a day watching blue jays nest and the sense that to observe a bit of creation come close to your window is to be at one of life's hubs. (If by hub I can mean one of those many-faceted jewels that are said to fasten the sprawled net of the world.)

The youngest limbs of the black cherry tree have a smooth, lustrous bark flecked with the ruddy gold nicks called sap stripes. Over time, the swelling

cambium layer will cause the young sheath to burst, after which the bark will keep growing, thickening finally into the rough, deckle-edged plates in which the older limbs of the cherry and all of its trunk are clad.

I like this tree of two barks. Its leaves are slender boats—in fall a fleet of yellow. Fully leafed, the wild cherry filters the oblique sun of afternoon in such a way that light shimmers, dances on the walls of our rooms, and makes of a solid something more like water. The tree will also appeal to grackles when the hard green cherries of spring have grown as purple-black as the poison berries of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. In August, flocks of grackles will come flying to gorge on the cherries, so many landing at once that they shake loose the fruits and cause a steady rain. The sidewalk below will gradually become first a deliquescence of pulp and then, as the cherries rot, a pratfall terrain dotted with hard, ochre pits as round and slick as marbles. Anyone might slip on a pit and fall to a hip operation, so in late summer someone from our house will be out sweeping.

In spring, however, the black cherry belongs to nesting jays. To observe them you must slo-mo to the window, for jays, otherwise so tolerant, will not abide fast or sudden movements. As usual, this year the birds are nesting in a junction where three limbs meet and make a shallow pocket. Everything about this wooden pocket must speak to blue jays, must say in their pattern-language “perfect,” much the way we may walk through certain rooms and while speaking of something else—a pocket tidetable, the Bodhisattvas—know that we are moving in.

The birds labor over their nest for three days, and they work hard, pausing only to review their construction, to emit their *queedle queedles* and namesake *jeaahs*. A couple building a barbeque over a long weekend, you think, in the decadent nanosecond before you remember your scientific manners. About midway through, when enough material is mounded up, the female jay begins to shape the interior—which she does by plopping herself in the nest, squirming and shifting about in it, pressing and molding everything to the shape of her breast. Whenever the male arrives with more material, she hops out and helps him arrange the new bit. The female also gathers material, but I think she is the only one to fit the nest to her body. I am not sure about that. I am not a student of birds, though I have on occasion traveled with serious birders to blinds and sanctuaries and have watched them (the birders) for many hours and been very moved by their behavior.

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But I am going to go out on a limb here, and guess that almost certainly the kind of nest that these blue jays are making has never moved anyone to an encomium to nature's symmetry and perfection. The thing taking shape outside our window is no chambered nautilus shell, with its faultless, secreted spiral of form often invoked when someone wants to take seriously the notion of a great designer—the this-is-all-too-exquisite-to-be-random argument. Nor is the blue jay nest a Greek vase of a nest like that of the cliff swallow, whose small-mouthed, jug-like creations hang in clusters under eaves as well as cliffs. The blue jay nest is not a teacup like the nest of the ruby-throated hummingbird, who binds its concoction with threads from spider webs, finishes the outside with lichens, then slicks down its fancy china with saliva. It is not lined in soft wool like the chough's nest. Is not a fey evening bag of a nest like the nest of the Baltimore oriole. It is not a public works project like the nest of the rufous-breasted castle builder, who erects two chambers and a connecting tunnel, or that of the hammerkop, which smoothes eight thousand twigs into a flying-saucer dome strong enough for a man or woman to stand on. The thing outside our window is not even as organized as the lumpen paper wasp's nest which holds a comb of crisp octagons within its bulbous exterior. None of these possibilities for smoothing out chaos have much impressed the blue jay, and at the end of all their labors the jays' nest most resembles a heap of trash.

It is a temporary, provisional architecture made of material plucked from the yards and gutters within a one-block radius, a landscape that is, thanks to a nearby mom & pop store, teeming with the detritus so attractive to a blue jay eye: glinting lottery tickets, popsicle sticks still sticky with grape or orange goo, newspaper twine, and candy wrappers, especially the Kit-Kat with its shookey silver lining. The great man of birds placed the blue jay on the same page of his *Guide to Eastern Birds* with the black-billed magpie, the creature of this and that, of making do with scraps.

What it creates is a motley jumble, but the jay is surely guided, no less than the meticulous nautilus, by some inscribed-in-chains-of-nucleic-acid knowledge. So the bricoleurs of the upper canopy know a good heap when they see one. And they know when that heap is fully realized. When it is, the female takes up her residence, and at some point she lays her eggs. During the next few days, for the rare, fleeting moments when she hops off her nest, anyone sitting close by the window and waiting will see four tiny ovals—smooth, with

a faint gloss, some years olive in color, other years the blue of a blue-green sea on a partially cloudy day, shadows stippling, speckling the waves.

And does the blue jays' affection for the motley give them an edge in the urban world, an advantage over fussy, fastidious birds like the lazuli bunting? I must ask a serious birder, a man named Emerson Blake and known as Chip (which is not so unlike the *Cyanocitta cristata* being called Jay). The answer from Chip is yes—an elaborate yes which also tells why birds are particular in the first place, why some are disadvantaged by an urban scene, and why some are having a hard time making any nests at all these days. One hard time is illustrated by the spotted owl, a bird who wants peace and quiet and who wants it over an immense territory, over a great big quiet forest. When it does not get it, the bird's endocrine system simply clams up and its hormones cease to deliver the old imperative.

Other birds, Chip tells me, can be fussy about building materials, may not nest at all without the right twig or grass. It's not whim. Absence of the proper materials would be a sign that larger conditions are not right, that the effort to make young would likely fail. Birds that won't breed unless specific materials or foods are present are specialists. The advantage of being a specialist is to thrive in some uncontested niche, to smoke not only one's competitors, but competition itself. Thus Bachman's warbler prevailed in southern canebrakes. Thus the ivory-billed woodpecker lived in virgin pine forests. Thus snail kites in Florida eat only the apple snail, for which purpose they have grown in a special beak. The risk can be high, of course, for if canebrake, virgin forest, or apple snails disappear, the specialist is, as Chip puts it, "out of business."

That was the fate of the dusky seaside sparrow, perfectly adapted to certain tidal salt marshes along the Florida coast, and not counting on Cape Canaveral or the draining of the marshes for mosquito control. A little planning could have spared the niche of this sparrow (whose name alone is worth sparing), but a bird like the California condor, whose idea of what Southern California should be is profoundly at odds with what Southern California has become, can probably no longer survive without perpetual human assistance.

My birds, the blue jays outside the window, are neither specialists nor maladapted to this century. Blue jays are the most general of generalists. More intelligent than many birds, they are able to withstand competition on several fronts, and if out-manuevered, they think nothing of taking up life in another

site. "The blue jay," Chip muses, "is almost too adaptable." By which he means, he explains, that the success of generalists can mask the demise of specialists, who have the more sensitive bonds to place. Birdwatchers like Chip know what once existed, and they miss it. The way you may feel at a McDonald's if you remember the diner that had red-eye gravy.

Adaptability, however, is what allows blue jays to nest on the margins of an industrial metropolis, and I am glad for that. Naturally I gasp at the colorful gems of rural glades—the rufous breasteds, the golds, the waxwinged, cerulean, and painted. But on this street, where the airborne population is pigeons, grackles, and the occasional blimp, the blue jay passes for beauty. And although I (who require *petit pain* for breakfast, classic-style, *not* sourdough, who will go miles for red-eye gravy) am much in sympathy with the specialists, I do study the blue jay's resiliency: this is the bird of the postmodern, of invention and recycling, of found art.

Above all, this is the bird that comes to our window. It comes like the puppy that toddles across the room from the cardboard birthing box, puts its head in your lap, and chooses you. When life comes to you like that, you refuse it at your own peril. So I am partisan to the jays, and root for their eggs. And however successful in the larger picture, here jay eggs are greatly endangered by the Visigoths of the urban forest—the bushy-tailed gray destroyers who travel the telephone cables and who can turn a nest of eggs into yellow slime in less time than it takes to say "Great Geometer of the Void," less time than it takes to see Samuel Beckett's *Breath*. (The action: curtain rise; cry and one breath; curtain fall.)

It can be just that minimalist, that swift and iconic with these nests. Sometimes a nursery, sometimes a bare choir. In ruin, however, the blue jays do not stand around in stunned silence, they do not reel between the great equanimity where all is balance, and the small, immediate realm where they have been roughed up. They do not mull the more-than-human scheme of justice, variously felt as a benevolence whose eye is on the sparrow, as a magisterial indifference, as a mocking voice in a whirlwind. They just fly away, on those coveted wings.

Eggs, they know every well, are fair game in the gulping world. The eager mouth of the ocean swallows most of its own children, and, it turns out, the blue jay's own favorite food is other bird's eggs. "Trash birds," says another of my bird-world informants, "like the roughnecks of Dickensian London,

doing whatever they can to get by, and not thinking much about the ethics of it. Not pretty." (Do Americans deny that class exists so that we can have the fun of projecting it onto flora and fauna?) Well, obviously I do not defend the jays' eating other bird's eggs. They should stop, and should eat more bright-orange and leafy green vegetables, more soy, less fat. And I honestly don't know what trashy things the blue jays do when not by our window being hard-working postmodernists or brooding on their four cloudy-sea eggs, conveying warmth through the ovals, being brave, warm, patient, being all that parents can be, settling over the delicate shells just so. Let's just say that when a creature lays four speckled eggs close by your house, you like for those eggs to hatch.

Because the odds for our local blue jays' eggs are always longish, I root for them with a certain kid of hope. Not the usual sort, which is desire combined with expectation, or even expectation *without* desire—sheer prospect. But the kind of hope that seasoned fans have for the Red Sox and the Cubs, a brand of hope far from pie-eyed optimism, closer to the state of mind that the French call *une douce resignation*. In our new world, the adjective that most often appears before "resignation" is "bitter." But *une douce resignation* is not the defeated mood so repugnant to the American spirit. Although it is of course resigned to the fact that the world is, as Margaret Thatcher put it the week she was (hooray) booted out, "a funny old world," this mood is *douce*—sweet—from kindness and time, says a Belgian poet friend, who also says that if Americans are too doggedly, even eerily optimistic for *une douce resignation* (she doesn't know about baseball), her people, the Flemish, are too taciturn for it. The mood rises most in southern France, in Corsica, also in Italy and Spain, and a Buddhist friend tells me that it is very close to his practice of detachment—a way that fuses passionate caring and letting be, a way of existing within the world's own quite motley assembly of nests, violence, and summer games.

This year's nest is a beauty, an extravagant assembly, a miniature L. A. Watts Tower of a nest, a work that might make Joseph Cornell smile. *Regardez*: A few twigs for a foundation. Then snippets of fine green, and red, and black telephone wire. A yellow plastic garbage-bag tie. Another layer of twigs. A Doublemint gum wrapper. Some shreds of computer paper. Some weeds. Part of a pre-tied drugstore bow. With binoculars, I can see that the birds have incorporated most of the label of a good Beaujolais, George de Boeuf's Brouilly, 1995. The *pièce de résistance*, the thing over which the birds have

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queedled and queedled, is a plastic picnic fork; over the course of two hours, they have gotten it angled into one side of the nest, with the tines pointed outwards, bristling like a pitchfork.

Something to make the destroyer pause? It is a large white fork, a piece of debris that came, I will guess, either from Marcella's on the avenue (which makes the Classico sandwich of prosciutto sliced to translucency) or from the House O' Pizza, where they will, if you ask, make a meatless, cheeseless sub with all the condiments, a delicacy that Sal and I have settled on calling a Nothing With Everything.