

Cat and Bird

Kyoko Mori

ON THE CONCRETE FLOOR of the boiler room, the small, dark bird resembles a fan knocked out of a flamenco dancer's hand. Its curved wings, folded, cross over the tail feathers. The bird—a chimney swift—is about five inches from head to tail. Up in the sky, its wings would span twelve inches as it soars and glides, catching and holding two hundred midges or mosquitoes in its mouth. Chimney swifts cannot perch. They spend the whole day flying and rest at night by clinging vertically to a rough surface, such as the bricks inside a chimney. Their hooked feet can support their weight for hours in that position, but if a swift falls from its roost, as this one must have during the unseasonably cold night, it is unable to stand or hop.

In our brownstone, the bottom of the chimney is in the locked boiler room in the basement. Any other day, a trapped bird would have weakened and perished, but I'm here with the pest control guy to monitor our co-op's mouse and roach situation.

The pest control guy, Roosevelt, is over six feet tall. He can take down wasps' nests and move dishwashers out of the way to check for roaches underneath. He's cheerful and talkative, so when he goes quiet, I know that a bird trapped indoors makes him nervous.

The bird flutters up to the window, slides down, and falls on the floor, where it sits flat on its chest. The boiler room is separated from the outdoors by two double-locked metal doors I don't want to open with a bird cradled in one hand. "I'll go find a bag," I tell Roosevelt.

When I return with a small paper bag from my apartment, Roosevelt and the bird are exactly where I left them. I kneel on the floor and close my fingers around the bird's back. The swift doesn't resist being picked up; it makes no sound at all. But the moment I drop it into the bag and close my fist around the top, it spreads its wings and begins to flap. Through the heavy doors, up the stairs, along the side of the building to the backyard, I can hear the wings beating like Chinese firecrackers inside the bag.

I tip the bag and slide the swift out onto the picnic table behind our building. In the morning light, the feathers look sooty brown.

The swift pushes itself up off the table and ascends the clearing in widening circles. I count the spirals—three, four, five—until the bird rises over the treetops and disappears into the sky above our building, where every evening for the last couple of weeks, a small flock has appeared at dusk to circle, forage, and dive into our chimney.

It's the last week of May. Chimney swifts have left their wintering grounds in the upper Amazon basin of Peru, Chile, and Brazil to disperse through their breeding range. Some will nest here in Washington, DC, while others will continue up the coast to Maine or southern Canada. If the bird I held in my hand returns tonight, or if it becomes one of a mating pair and spends the summer raising its young in our chimney, just on the other side of my bedroom wall, I won't know it. All full-grown chimney swifts look identical, male or female, one-year-old or four-year-old. Still, any swift in North America this time of year, before breeding has started, is at least a year old, born the previous summer, migrated to the Amazon, and returned, so the bird I just released has traveled ten thousand miles at least.

In my apartment on the top floor of the building, on the bed adjacent to the chimney shaft, my two cats are sleeping with their light brown and dark brown legs tangled together. They've never been outside except in my car. Though the three of us run around the apartment several times a day with feather toys on strings, and Miles the Siamese loves to fetch his orange chew toy, the combined distance Miles and Jackson have traveled on foot isn't likely to add up to a mile.

In the small Wisconsin town where I lived in the 1990s, I raised the baby birds people brought to the wildlife sanctuary after storms or tree trimmers or their dogs had knocked down the nests. I was on the list of trained rehabilitators on call who took the birds home, cared for them, and released them back into the wild. I kept the nestlings in the spare bedroom, away from my cat, and fed them every fifteen minutes with a soupy mixture of protein and fruits in a needleless syringe. There were robins, house finches, waxwings, chipping sparrows, kingbirds, each kept with its own kind in a makeshift nest of a paper-lined berry box inside a plastic laundry basket. Most of them stretched their necks, opened their mouths, and clamored for food with little prompting.

I became a volunteer because, unlike my friends who had grown up on farms, I couldn't look at the barely feathered birds lying on my lawn and say, "For every bird that dies, hundreds will survive." After

taking several birds to the sanctuary, I wanted to be one of the people who came to pick them up, who knew what to do beyond lifting the poor things off the ground and sticking them in a shoe box.

I kept a daily log of what each bird had eaten and how it was developing, when it learned to fly around the room and was transferred to the large outdoor cage in my backyard to learn to forage on its own. There were pretty birds—cedar waxwings, Eastern kingbirds—I felt lucky to see up close and there were common birds I liked all the same because each had a distinct personality. Some robins were bent on trusting me too much and had to be discouraged from following me around; others screeched and backed into a corner, only to open their beaks, flutter their wings, and beg to be fed. The fear of intimacy and the tendency to give mixed messages, I could only surmise, weren't the sole province of humans.

At about two weeks old, a nestling would stand up in the berry box for the first time and climb onto its edge. There, it would lean first on one leg and then the other to open and preen its wings before hopping down to explore the paper-lined floor of the basket. Birds that left the nest never returned to sit in it. I let them fly around the room and peeled them off the woven tapestry, where they landed and clung. In the controlled environment of my spare room, more birds survived than might have in the wild, with parents who wouldn't have been able to feed their young if the weather was uncooperative or predators were prowling their feeding sites. The birds that died usually had something obviously wrong, like deformed legs or wings. Even I could say, then, that for every bird that died, hundreds would survive. The moment their nests got knocked to the ground, the nestlings had nothing more to lose: Any day they lived in my care was time they didn't have otherwise.

I gave up volunteering after my first book was published and I started teaching workshops at summer writing conferences. Eventually I moved to the East Coast to live in a one-bedroom apartment with two cats. The care of migratory birds is strictly regulated by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The license I had in Wisconsin, through the sanctuary where I was trained, isn't valid in Washington, DC. I'm not likely to spend another summer with birds clamoring for food inside laundry baskets in a spare bedroom. I regret the lost chance the way other people sigh over never seeing Paris again or having forgotten how to play the violin.

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The main ingredient of the soupy formula I mixed for the birds was dry cat food soaked in warm water. “Veterinarian-recommended cat food with high protein content, such as Science Diet,” our rehab manual—a huge black binder of mimeographed sheets—specified. Science Diet dry food was what my cat, Dorian, ate, so he contributed to Operation Bird Rescue by sharing his food. Dorian was an old-fashioned seal-point Siamese born in 1979, stockier and more violently committed to his one human than the cats that would follow him. He bit my friends and drew blood but sat calmly on my lap while I brushed his teeth and trimmed his claws. I could hold him upside down by his hind legs and swing him back and forth, or sling him over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry him around the house. Somehow, though, I assumed all this was about him and not about me. That cat would have let me do anything to him to spite everyone else.

But when Ernest and Algernon, the two Siamese cats who lived with me in Boston and then in DC, turned out to have serious stomach problems—feline inflammatory bowel disease, which is akin to Crohn’s disease in people—and required daily medication, I remembered the knack I’d discovered I had through my care of birds. Every year, there had been a few birds that didn’t open their mouths when I approached with the feeding syringe. I’d learned to hold each of these birds in my hand, insert the tips of my thumb and forefinger into the rubbery corners of its mouth, and press till the beak popped open, slide the syringe in before the bird could snap its beak shut, and shoot the food down its throat, careful to avoid the trachea. Both the rehab manual and the volunteer demonstrator at the training session had warned that too much force could break the bird’s beak.

Feeding a reluctant bird required dexterity, timing, and concentration, a combination that came surprisingly naturally to me. I had never before thought of myself as competent or capable. I broke knickknacks while cleaning the house and couldn’t hang pictures on the wall without hitting my fingers with the hammer. In cities I visited regularly, I got lost by failing to remember, or notice, some landmark that was obvious to everyone else (the bronze dome of the state capitol building, for example). I was flummoxed by tools, gadgets, and a host of inanimate objects large and small, but when an animal in need was involved, it was a different story. All the distractions fell away, and I found myself in a quiet space where every detail I noticed was larger-than-life and relevant: Together, the animal and I had entered a magic circle where I could perform any complicated task

with as little effort as would be required to thread a needle under a magnifying lamp.

Like Dorian, Ernest and Algernon followed me around all day demanding to be petted and picked up, so holding them on my lap and prying open their mouths was easy. A cat's mouth is huge and strong, with sharp teeth and a sandpaper tongue. I found it almost comical to stick my thumb and finger in, drop the pill, close their mouths, and stroke their silky throats to make them swallow. The whole procedure only took a minute for each cat. Ernest, the slender blue-point who was the picture of dignity and elegance, bolted if he sensed that I was about to give him the pill, but there was really nowhere for him to go in our small apartment, and as soon as I caught him, he went limp in my arms and assumed a resigned posture and expression on my lap. Algernon, the seal-point whose black face made him look like a little monkey, sat at my feet and watched while I pillled Ernest. Either he was more accepting or else, every night, he believed that only Ernest was getting the pill. Algernon never led me on a chase, but once I put him belly up on my lap and picked up his pill, he raised one chocolate-colored paw in protest. His claws were retracted and he didn't push my hand away; the gesture resembled the benign, desultory wave of the Japanese Maneki-Neko mascot in a store window.

The pill routine, which started when they were seven, became a docility demonstration my cats and I sometimes performed in front of our guests. By the time their inflammatory bowel disease worsened, the cats were ten years old. When first Algernon, then Ernest, started throwing up every day and losing weight, I gave them subcutaneous fluids and Vitamin D shots. Even though I had chosen to drive myself to the emergency room after a bee sting instead of sticking my leg with the EpiPen as instructed (I did put the pen on the passenger's seat, within easy reach, in case I started choking for breath while stopped at a traffic light), I had no problem putting first one cat, then the other, on my lap, pinching his skin, and inserting the hydration needle. When the tip went in correctly, the slight resistance felt right, like an embroidery needle sliding into a thick linen fabric. As the water began to flow, the cat on my lap closed his eyes and purred. Unlike the birds, Ernest and Algernon understood that I was only trying to help. If they could have lived ten more years, I would have sat with them every morning to watch the line of water descending the clear tube.

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The birds that clamored for food had instinctively associated the beak-like shape of the feeding syringe—and through it, me—with their parents. These birds gained weight more steadily, left the nest, and learned to fly sooner than those that had to be force-fed. In the outdoor cage, where I visited them a few times a day with the syringe of food, they lined up on one of the branches I had rigged up to flutter their wings and open their mouths. I had to make sure that everyone was eating enough to stay strong though hungry enough to start investigating the seeds, fruits, grains, and worms I'd left around. The birds that continued to come to me were easier to monitor than those that hid. Still, it's not natural for a bird to grow up perceiving a human as nurturing or benign. Rehabilitators who raise birds that are likely to be harmed by people wear disguises or use hand puppets.

The small songbirds in my care, however, had no value as food, illegal pets, or trophies, so they had less to fear from humans. The most important lesson a house finch needed to learn before being released, in fact, was how to feed itself from the ubiquitous cylindrical seed feeders in our town's backyards. I taught my finches by using the syringe of food to lure them to the feeder I'd hung inside the cage, getting them to perch on its metal rungs, and tempting them to peck at the seed ports by smearing the formula there. Throughout the summer, there were always six or seven finches in the outdoor cage. In each group, one finch figured out the feeder first and the others followed suit. I stopped going to the cage with the formula and watched the birds through binoculars. In a few days, every bird was eating from the feeder and the flock was ready to go. Not one finch came back to beg food from me, though more than thirty were released every summer in my backyard and, for all I knew, some were eating from the cylinder outside the kitchen window.

The finches in the outdoor cage learned through imitation, just as they would have in the wild from their parents, who flew with them for a week or two, showing them the food sources and roosting sites. Then the first-year birds would have dispersed among the larger flock, leaving the parents to lay the next clutch of eggs. Birds don't stay with their parents or siblings once they know how to feed themselves. A few species mate for life and many flock with their own kind, but not with their original family.

The summers I volunteered at the sanctuary, I was in my midthirties and married for nearly ten years. People were finally beginning to

believe my husband and me when we said we didn't plan to have children.

"I spend the whole day with other people's children," Chuck explained. "I don't have to come home to raise 'my own.'"

Chuck taught first-graders at an elementary school. He was good with children. If he had married someone else, he would have become a father. My job was at a college, where I taught mostly juniors and seniors.

"I'm the one who doesn't want kids," I said. "I'm uncomfortable with young children. I can't imagine becoming a mother."

I couldn't have been more explicit, but most people assumed that I was forgoing motherhood in favor of my writing. Only a few women, themselves childless, understood that human babies didn't appeal to me. These women laughed with recognition when I told them, "When I look at babies, I just think, *Why can't they be furry?* I don't get why people make such a fuss over them."

The presence of fur, though, wasn't the deciding factor. Dorian had been eight weeks old when I met him at his breeder's house. Like most Siamese kittens, he scarcely had any fur; his long pinkish tail resembled a rat's. In the spare bedroom where he was being raised, Dorian left his sleeping siblings, sauntered over to me, and began to rub his mouth against my finger. His lips were parted just enough to reveal his tiny teeth, sharp as dressmakers' pins, but he was purring. His whiskers vibrated as his wet gum slid back and forth. Though I didn't know as much about cats then as I would later, I realized that he was marking me with his scent and claiming me for his own. He was mine, I was his, and there was no going back. When I pulled back my hand in order to pet him, he bumped his forehead against my palm over and over and wouldn't stop. He wanted to be the one to pet me, not the other way around. I was amazed by the sense of recognition and inevitability that came over me. A few minutes into our first meeting, he was already my cat or, to put it his way, I was his human.

My devotion to Dorian was instantaneous, all-exclusive, and everlasting—the way I imagined a mother's love would be for her children. No one else had a claim to that same bond with me, but sometimes, the nearly naked, lizard-like nestlings in the laundry baskets opened their mouths, fluttered their bony wings, and caused me to believe that satisfying their hunger was the most important thing in the world. With the birds, I knew that our bond was temporary, that loving them, or respecting their essential nature, meant letting them go in the end.

I didn't experience a fraction of my bird-nurturing urge—let alone my total obsession with Dorian—with any human child. Babies repulsed me with their faintly sour odor; when they cried, I wanted to run screaming from the room. I was keyed to respond only to the wrong babies, animal babies. Left alone with the young of my own kind, I panicked the way other people did when a bird flapped around the house and threw itself repeatedly against a closed window.

I didn't know that Chuck was afraid of birds until, a few months after we moved in together in our twenties when we were students, a starling and its fledgling fell through a hole in the siding of the house we were renting and ended up behind our dining-room wall. I came home from my morning class just in time to see the adult bird fly out of the space where the pocket door that separated the dining room and the living room slid in. Dorian, who had been sitting nearby, remained in his spot, too stunned to chase a live toy. I picked him up, carried him to the bedroom, put him on the bed, and shut the door. By then, Chuck was chasing the bird from the dining room to the kitchen and back, his head covered with an afghan that was usually draped on our couch. He had opened the windows of the dining room and was trying to direct the bird to them.

Our apartment was on the second floor of the house, with large sliding doors that led from the living room to the balcony. I ran to the living room to open those doors; the starling came soaring across the house, flew through one of the doors, and disappeared. We couldn't see where it went, which meant that the chirping that began a few seconds later and got louder and louder was coming from behind the wall.

We were afraid to move the pocket door and crush the bird by mistake, so we borrowed our downstairs neighbor's saw and cut a hole in one of the wooden panels on the wall. We shone a flashlight into the opening and glimpsed a fledgling with peach fuzz on its head. It was hopping between the exterior and the interior walls, chirping loudly. I tried to coax it out with sunflower seeds from our pantry, but every time I reached in, the bird hopped farther back toward the exterior wall. Soon, I had to return to school for another class.

"Dorian can stay in the bedroom till I come back," I said to Chuck. "Maybe the bird will come out and you can catch him." Chuck had gone canoeing in the Boundary Waters and spent a week sleeping in a tent. He had lived in the country, where he once helped a friend kill

some chickens because he didn't believe he was entitled to eat meat unless he knew where his food came from. It never occurred to me that someone who did all that would be afraid of a bird that was small and clumsy enough to fall through a hole in the wall.

Three hours later, when I returned, Chuck was sitting in a chair a few feet away from the opening we'd cut out, holding his tennis racket.

"The bird keeps coming out and then hopping back in. The next time he comes out, I'm going to block the hole with this."

Almost as soon as he said that, the bird emerged. Chuck sprang up and slammed the racket over the hole.

Startled, the bird fled across the dining room toward the kitchen, hopping, then flying low, landing, hopping, flying again. "Great, he knows how to fly," I said. "You can put him out on the balcony where the other one went. That must have been his mother."

When I went to the living room and opened the balcony doors, I was astonished by the loud clamoring—like a chorus of squeaky violins—of the starlings that had gathered in the trees.

I ran back through the house, relieved that the fledgling wouldn't be lost on its own. Though this was a decade before I became a rehabilitator, I knew that birds didn't abandon their young just because a human had touched it. Here was a whole flock gathered to take care of its own.

In the hallway outside our kitchen, the fledgling was crouched in the corner, rocking on its feet and screeching at Chuck, who was holding a broom.

"Come on, Buddy," Chuck said, reaching gingerly toward the bird with the bristles of the broom. "Let's go. I'm only trying to help." The bird lunged at the broom, causing Chuck to stagger backward, and flew into the kitchen, where it landed next to the stove. All its feathers were puffed up; its beak was wide open as it screeched. If that bird had been a cat, Chuck would have understood that the poor thing was hissing and growling and getting ready to pounce in desperation because it perceived the broom as a weapon rather than the helpful tool—similar to a traffic-cop's baton—that Chuck intended it to be.

Chuck was eventually able to get the bird to turn around, to hop-fly through the house onto the balcony. As soon as we closed the doors, several starlings landed next to the fledgling and flew with it into a nearby tree. Dozens of others were waiting. The fledgling hop-flew to the higher branches and disappeared among the leaves.

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"You should have told me you were afraid to touch that bird," I said to Chuck. "I thought you wanted to be the one to let it out, after waiting all those hours while I was at school."

"I don't like handling little animals," he said. "I'm afraid they're going to bite me and I'm going to freak out and squeeze them to death by mistake."

For years afterward, Dorian and I played a game called "Chuck and the Bird"—in which I chased Dorian around the house with a broom, calling out, "Take it easy, Buddy. Don't bite me. I'm only trying to help you."

I occasionally play "Chuck and the Bird" with Miles and Jackson, though Chuck and I have been divorced for eighteen years and he hasn't met the current loves of my life.

We got divorced because after thirteen years of marriage, I decided I was happiest alone. I didn't want to live with anyone, not even Chuck, who was easygoing and accommodating, willing to give me all the time and space I needed. I moved to a small apartment across town with Dorian, who was by then fifteen.

That's how I wrote about my divorce in one of my books, making it sound like Dorian was a colorful minor character in the story of Chuck and me: I was married to a schoolteacher from a small town in Wisconsin and we didn't have any children but we had a Siamese cat who terrorized everyone who stepped foot in our house; the cat became a mascot, a symbol of the choices my husband and I made to be different from the people around us; when even this childless marriage began to seem oppressive, I decided to live alone.

The truth is more like this: Between the ages of twenty-two and forty, I lived with a Siamese cat who loved me and hated everyone else; for thirteen years in the middle of his reign, I was married and the cat came to tolerate my husband, enough to sit on his lap if I wasn't home or sleep on his chest till I too retired for the night, at which time the cat walked across the bed, crawled under the covers into my arms, and put his head on my pillow; in the last two years of the cat's life, we were alone together—as we had been at the beginning—and he and I were at our happiest. The cat in this revised story is no mascot. He is both the symbol and the partner of my solitude. What he gave me was fortified solitude, not a distraction from it.

When Dorian finally died, I cried so much for weeks that the man I was dating then—who was hoping that I might move in with him

and his three well-mannered felines once I didn't have to worry about Dorian—said, "Maybe you should get another cat, a cat of your own." We were crossing the street in front of my favorite restaurant in town, where he was taking me out to eat. I had stopped in the middle of the road to remark, "If a big truck came and hit me now, it would be no loss." There was no vehicle in sight. What I'd said was utterly ludicrous and a total insult to my date. No matter how many cats I had in the future, I would never again be with Dorian. All the same, I couldn't go on the way I had been.

"If I get my own cat," I said, "I'm never going to move in with you. I probably won't even stay at your house overnight because I'll be busy trying to bond with the kitten."

"That's OK," he said. "I just want you to be happy."

He was letting me go. By the time we got across the street and entered the restaurant, my move to Boston two years later was a foregone conclusion. Dorian had guarded my solitude until a successor could be found. The second half of my life would be a cat relay, with me as a baton passed from paw to paw. I would learn in time that if I had two cats, I would never again have to be catless.

The Joint Reign of Miles and Jackson began with twice-a-week baths and daily pills because the bald spot that Jackson, the Burmese, had on his head turned out to be ringworm, a highly contagious fungal infection. Jackson came to me in January of 2011, at twelve weeks old. Miles, six months old by then, had been with me since July. The veterinarian said I could keep the cats separated for sixteen weeks—the length of a semester—or treat them both. Even if there had been space in my apartment to quarantine Jackson, I wouldn't have. The cats were getting along well. Separating them for so long would have ruined their relationship.

I had been brushing Miles's teeth every night since he was eight weeks old, so opening his mouth and cramming a pill into his throat was only a minor adjustment. Like Ernest—whom he resembles, though, in addition to his blue-gray "points," Miles was developing shadowy ripples of lynx-point stripes on his cream-colored coat—Miles ran if he sensed that the toothpaste and the pill were in the offing but relaxed as soon as I caught him. Jackson, glossy brown like a little prince dressed in a mink coat, had been raised in a house piled with old photographs, magazines, fabric scraps, and unopened boxes of cat-food samples—I suspected his breeder, a retired middle-school

teacher, was a hoarder though, thankfully, not of animals—nursing from whichever mother cat happened to be nearby. He was the mellowest, most confident cat I'd ever met. Whenever he wanted attention, he clawed his way up my legs onto my lap and demanded to be petted. The pill regimen didn't faze him a bit.

For the baths, I carried both cats into the bathroom and shut the door. It seemed prudent to start with Miles, the older and more cautious. "Wet the fur thoroughly," the directions on the medicated shampoo bottle said. "Apply and lather, being careful to avoid the eyes and the mouth. Leave on for ten minutes and rinse." I dunked Miles in a dishpan full of warm water, doused him with the shampoo I'd shaken to a full "lather" inside a plastic bottle made for squirting barbecue sauce on spare ribs or chicken wings, then wrapped him in a towel and held him on my lap for ten minutes. He only started squirming and meowing about eight minutes in. By the time he was being dunked again for the rinse, he was yowling, but he never bit or scratched me. I towel-dried him, put him on the bath mat, and repeated the process with Jackson, who was so small that he resembled a hamster when wet. I'd have to be an idiot, I thought, not to be able to handle him. The cats scampered out as soon as I opened the door but within ten minutes, they came up to me, purring. I petted their still-damp fur and told them that the whole ordeal was a team-building exercise. Unlike the pills, which had to be given for sixteen weeks ("A semester of pills," I said), the baths could stop after six weeks, when Jackson had had three consecutive "negative" readings on his skin test. Miles and I never developed ringworm. After caring for Ernest and Algernon, who had gotten sicker as time went on, it was a relief, even a pleasure, to bathe and pill these young cats at the beginning of our time together.

On the wall opposite the door in my foyer is the black-and-white photograph that Chuck took of Dorian in 1986. Dorian is sitting on the bed, mouth open to expose his pointed teeth like a vampire's. He was actually yawning but he could easily have been roaring. The quilt billowing around him has patterns of lion heads.

"That's my first cat, Dorian," I tell my guests. "He's my household god."

Dorian is my One God of Solitude, though his successors too have fortified the happiness I discovered in living without a human partner. My favorite day is one on which I don't go anywhere except to run

in the morning: I can spend hours afterward reading with the cats on my lap, writing with them by my side, or puttering around the apartment with one of them on my shoulder. Like Chuck, or the man I was dating when Dorian died, my current boyfriend understands that I am more like the archetypical cat than my cats actually are: finicky and independent, needing to be left alone until I decide it's time for company. The cats like him enough but they keep him at an ideal distance, three and a half hours by Amtrak: He has to come to us since pets aren't allowed on the train.

The difference from the Reign of Dorian is that Miles and Jackson—as did Ernest and Algernon—enjoy occasional entertaining. Because Dorian hissed, growled, and lunged at everyone from the meter reader to my in-laws, Chuck and I seldom had any guests. We believed that only boring people got all dressed up to make small talk around a dinner table, so we didn't care. With Chuck and later without, I went to the movies, concerts, restaurants, and parties with a group of friends I'd known for years, some of whom liked to organize outings and get-togethers so the rest of us didn't have to. Although, or perhaps because, I didn't intend to move through life partnered, I valued having a close-knit group of friends.

When I moved east for a new teaching job, I suddenly had no one to call me every week with plans for movies and dinners. My new colleagues and neighbors were always saying how busy they were. In the brief conversations we had by the mailboxes or in the laundry room, they expressed strong, even heated, opinions about what they liked or—more often—what they couldn't stand. Inviting these people to dinner in my apartment seemed less daunting than asking them to a cultural event or an eating establishment. Many seemed to soften, or at least be amused, when I said, "I live with two amazing cats. I'd love for you to meet them. We'll make you dinner." I started announcing that the cats and I liked making rhubarb pies (a Wisconsin specialty), that they'd mastered a repertoire of vegetarian recipes, and took turns baking to keep our sourdough starter going.

Food preparation has turned out to be another exception, besides caring for animals, to my general ineptitude. Last August, I spent the whole morning failing to learn the computer program the colleague who'd volunteered to teach me had assumed I would master in ten minutes and was relieved to stay in my kitchen all afternoon assembling a trifle, for which the cats and I first prepared an angel food cake, lemon custard, raspberry jam, and whipped cream. We'd volunteered for the dessert portion of our co-op's backyard cookout. Instead of

carrying the heavy glass dish down to the yard, I invited my neighbors to my apartment so the cats could host the finale. About twenty people sat in our living room eating the trifle and drinking sherry.

I had been "clicker-training" Miles and Jackson. Cats respond more to hand gestures than to voice commands; there are dog tricks you can never teach a cat, such as "Wait" (look longingly at the offered treat but refrain from eating it till the trainer says, "OK"). Still, it had taken Miles and Jackson only a few minutes to understand the basic concept: A "click" from the clicker I wore around my neck meant they would get a treat; to cause me to "click" and toss them a treat (dehydrated shrimp, recommended by our vet), they had to do something. They learned to come, sit, stay, stand up like a bear, shake hands, high-five, and even jump over a pole.

Jackson was eager to show off in front of the guests in our living room. By far, the pole jumping earned the loudest applause, but people were amazed just to see him jump up on a chair on command, sit, and raise his left paw (my fault: I got confused which hand was which when I was teaching him and, rather than retrain him, decided that feline handshakes should be the reversal of the human version). Miles waited until only a handful of our close friends from the building were left, but he did his routine too. He's shy with strangers and clings to me. He can jump straight from the floor to perch on my shoulder like a pirate's parrot, Athena emerging from Zeus's forehead, or, for that matter, my conjoined twin ("My True Siamese," I call him: "Two heads are better than one."). My friend Pamela Petro, who stayed with us to give a reading at my school last fall, took a photograph of Miles on my shoulder and me slicing apples at the kitchen counter and e-mailed it to me under the title "Sous-chef." I'm pretty sure she meant that Miles was my helper, but since I was doing the prep work and he was watching, the title should, more logically, refer to me.

At the peak of their migration in early October, five hundred chimney swifts circle our building every evening at dusk. Over the loud chattering, clicking calls they make, you can hear their wings slapping together as several birds hover above the chimney's opening, maneuvering around one another as they wait their turn. They dive in one at a time while hundreds swirl above like smoke blowing into the chimney instead of out. I don't know how far down the chimney shaft the birds go to roost. The chimney rises above the building's

roof and there is a crawl space between the roof and my ceiling. If the swifts filled up all that space, then some would have to cling to the bricks next to my bed.

In their sleep, I've read, swifts continue to chatter. Some nights, I stand on my bed and put my ear to the wall. So far, I haven't heard anything. I've held my cats—Ernest, Algernon, Miles, then Jackson—aloft in my arms and pressed their ears to the wall, hoping their keener sense of hearing might detect a faint bird chatter. Each cat has looked down at me in total incomprehension.

Chimney swifts were once called "North American swifts." They roosted in tree hollows across the eastern United States until the European settlers cleared acres of forests to build houses—at which point the birds started using the bricks inside their chimneys. It's a story of adaptation, of wildlife managing to live at close quarters with humans, but only a few ornithologists with special mirrors and cameras have been able to observe their nesting and roosting habits inside chimneys. Although the swifts' general migration pattern is known, how far south they travel in the winter is up for debate. Swifts eat flying insects in the air, so—unlike birds that can be fed on seeds, grains, or mealworms from a dish—they cannot be kept in captivity to be studied. They nest and sleep practically inside our houses and yet they remain mysterious and elusive.

That's the traditional view of cats too: aloof, independent, mysterious. Recently, when some indoor-outdoor cats were outfitted with cameras around their necks to assess their environmental impact, many owners were surprised by the distance their pets traveled daily, the frequency of the skirmishes they got into with other cats or predators, and the number of birds, rodents, insects, and lizards they hunted. Some people also discovered that their cats had another family who fed them, let them sleep in the bed, and considered them their own. Apparently, a cat can have two of his proverbial nine lives simultaneously.

The owners in the study let their cats out believing it's cruel to keep these natural predators from following their instinct. Most were not convinced, even afterward, that their pets should remain indoors. It must be that the appeal of an indoor-outdoor cat is precisely its freedom: The cat goes to places we cannot follow, does something wild and dangerous, and still comes back to us—like a kite that soars above the trees and power lines and returns in one piece.

Still, cats are products of ninety-five hundred years of domestication. Miles and Jackson shouldn't have to fulfill themselves by roaming

the neighborhood, any more than I have to go wilderness camping to realize my human potential. In some areas of the United States, indoor-outdoor cats pose a significant threat to ground-nesting birds whose numbers are diminishing. I wouldn't let Miles and Jackson loose to eat even the common, abundant birds that frequent our yard, but more than that, I don't want my cats to *be* birds.

I released the birds I'd raised, knowing that most would not survive their first migration. To care too much about their individual fates would have been unnatural, even unkind; kindness to wildlife means respecting their freedom. Every summer, chimney swifts return to the chimney and hummingbirds sip sugar water from my window feeder. Cardinals and woodpeckers frequent the sunflower-seed feeder year-round, but I cannot tell if the same individuals are at my window from hour to hour or season to season. Birds are ephemeral, and our encounters with them are fleeting. That's the essence of their beauty. The goal of conservation is to save the species, not each individual bird.

Living with a pet, by contrast, is all about caring for a specific individual. Before the word *pet* became popular in the late nineteenth century, a companion animal was referred to more often as a *favorite*. A favorite dog or cat was an animal set apart from all others of its kind by being given a name and being invited to live in the house as a member of the family. I'm not sure when people started making a huge distinction between dogs and cats, when pet owners became polarized between dog people and cat people. We don't have to clicker-train our cats to understand that a favorite cat and a favorite dog are more similar than different. They are two types of music, classical and jazz, say, the opera and zydeco. With each pet, we make a commitment to the individual: We love this dog and no other; this cat is mine.

Unlike the chimney swifts beyond our bedroom wall, my cats are only as mysterious or unknowable as people are. Miles and Jackson haven't learned to speak with words, but I grew up in Japan and spent two decades in the American Midwest. No one says what he or she means in either place; that kind of disclosure is simply not expected. Here on the East Coast, people express their opinions and feelings more readily, only to insist later that at the time of their previous comments, they hadn't known all the relevant facts or they hadn't been fully aware of their own motives and intentions. No matter where you live, it seems, understanding another human being requires both a leap of faith and the act of imagination. At least with my cats,

I know everything about them already. In our 660-square-foot apartment, not much happens to Miles and Jackson that I don't witness firsthand; due to the guilty choice I made to acquire them from breeders instead of from a shelter, I was able to learn where and how they were born and raised. It's not difficult to observe their behavior and deduce their intentions or feelings.

How freely we should ascribe human motives and characteristics to animals—anthropomorphizing them—is an interesting philosophical question. But in practice, we anthropomorphize other people, in a manner of speaking, every time we ask ourselves, *What would we do in their place? If I said or did that, what would I really be trying to communicate?* We routinely fail to understand others because they are not us, and yet we have no other tool besides observation and imagination to bridge the gap between the self and the world.

Our sunflower-seed feeder is in the window next to my writing desk. The cats like to sit between the window and the desk, on the shelf my boyfriend—who is very handy—built for them. The feeder hangs from a flower pot a few inches outside the window, but the birds either don't see the cats and me or else they understand something about the windowpane's impenetrability. Though prettier birds often perch on the flower pot and the feeder, mourning doves are Jackson's favorite. They are big and fat, move slowly and sit in one place for minutes at a time, and make a lot of noise when three or four crowd the feeder, jockeying for position. Jackson, no longer hamster sized, sits with his face pressed to the glass, his muscular body compressed like a torpedo ready to be launched. His eyes, the color of gooseberries, register the doves' every move.

Miles lounges next to him, with his back to the window, his blue eyes on me. Sometimes, he falls asleep while watching my fingers on the keyboard. He's just beginning to doze off again when Jackson rears up on his hind legs and thumps the window with his front paw. The doves scatter; Miles startles awake but doesn't look back. I don't think I'm committing a flagrant act of anthropomorphism to say that Jackson studies the birds, ever hopeful he might catch one to eat, and Miles could care less about birds because he'd rather watch me.

The doves don't return right away. Instead, a single chickadee lights on the mesh tray and picks up one seed in its beak—a seed it will crack against tree bark, to eat only the kernel at its center—and takes off. Some abstract longing or regret flutters up into the air with that

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bird. I think of the chimney swift in my hand and the dozens of other birds released in the garden that is no longer mine. No matter how hard I tried not to get attached, of course I felt sadness and worry when I let those birds go, as though a part of me would disappear with their flight and eventual demise.

Jackson crouches down on his perch. A thousand miles away, a few descendants of the birds who learned to fly in my spare room might be building their nests. Miles settles back on his post too to resume his scrutiny of his favorite subject: me. Jackson is my sentry, my outward eye; he watches the world for me. Miles is my twin, my familiar, the one whose inward gaze gives me back to myself. Anchored between them, I am exactly where I should be, alone at home.