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Author, Cenizo, and a brace of starlings. Photo by Kathy Stohrer.

Rain Sage

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I did *not* want an aplomado falcon. It represented the elements of falconry that I wanted to sever from my life: the complications and responsibilities. It was the part that needed to be fed and cleaned and weighed, meticulously documented in handwritten notes, and always worried about. It was the part I managed a tight schedule around—rushing home from work to fly before the daylight hours ended—and feeling frustrated when the sun set before me, knowing I had lost the race for time. It was the part that made me shy away from people to lead a lonely life among birds, in search of forgotten, weedy fields and dark woodlands for slips. I didn't want that kind of accountability or isolation any more. After a quarter century of flying falconry birds and constructing a life around their needs, I felt I had learned all I needed to know. I had accomplished enough to be considered a true hunter among my colleagues. That was all I ever expected in return, and it was enough to satisfy me. Being middle-aged now, with a solid military career and retirement just five years away, I was ready to move on to other things. My priorities in life were changing…

The preceding winter I had flown a redtail hawk and a sharp-shinned hawk while still holding down a full-time job and night classes at a private university. These weren't regular classes that unfolded sluggishly during the course of a whole academic semester, they were condensed into one-month formats that demanded all the intellect and all the free time I owned! I was exhausted from the fast-paced, constrained itinerary that left no room for friendships, coffee shop invitations, reading, or other self-indulgent pleasures. I became filled with a strange apathy whenever I saw my own hawks in the mew. It wasn't some simple,

Rain sage in full bloom after a Texas thunderstorm. Photo by Tony Gallucci.

irritable thought at having to perform additional chores; it was an oppressive, heavy burden that made me drag my feet and angrily slam the door after I had collected my birds from their perches. I didn't like the person that falconry had forced me to become.

For the first time in my life I wanted to concentrate on graduate school, a career, and people, not raptors. It was a goal that I had struggled with for many years. That paralyzing storm of emotions that precedes abandonment of the familiar to seize the unknown had always strangled my attempts to do otherwise. But, that spring I finally decided to release the redtail and give away the sharp-shin and live a life without birds—and then the e-mail from Steve Bodio arrived.

Steve had just been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, a progressive and debilitating illness that had already robbed him of his ability to rock climb, travel and hike. He thought falconry would be his next immediate loss and pleaded with several readers, including me, to donate an aplomado falcon on his behalf. It was to be his memorable "last bird." His salary as a professional author was never great, and now he was forced to pay exorbitant sums of money for medical care. He couldn't possibly afford such a falcon, even in better days, but it was always his dream to fly one. He wanted to experience an aplomado falcon before the disease robbed him of that small hope, too. I was touched by the simplicity and sentiment of Steve's plea. Despite his poor finances, he had always been generous with me, mailing signed copies of his books as gifts and corresponding regularly. I wanted to help him and return the favor. As random chance would have it, I knew a wealthy doctor that kept a tiercel aplomado but had no opportunity to hunt with the bird. I thought the falcon and Steve would make a good match and began preparations to introduce the two. In a short time the falcon was transferred to me (with every intention of passing him on to Steve) when a peculiar fate intervened and halted our plans. Bodio's symptoms worsened, preventing the practice of falconry that summer, and the original owner decided not to reclaim the bird. Even a prominent raptor propagator refused the tiercel as future breeding stock. I was suddenly stuck with an aplomado falcon by default—a bird nobody wanted, not even me.

I had once been like Steve Bodio and had dreamed of aplomado falcons. Their tropical plumage imprisoned my eyes in picture books and their versatility as long-wings made me imagine ringing flights off the fist. Of course, it was all fantasy and rumor: I had never actually seen an aplomado falcon in real life. The species was extirpated in North America and had been for over forty years, longer than I'd been alive at the time. In the mid-1990s, I learned The Peregrine Fund had developed a repatriation program for the bird at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Texas. Their mission was to reestablish the aplomado falcon as a resident breeding species within the United States. I did everything in my power to become a part of that project just to see the falcon and add it to my life list.

I didn't want to leave the young falcons to the mercy of the dark, so I stayed and suffered the still air and mosquitoes with them.

Later that same year I found myself working long hours in the dusty, humid heat off the Gulf Coast releasing captive-bred aplomado falcons to the wild and collecting data on their foraging behavior, habitat use, and dispersal. At the end of each day I climbed into the bed of my pickup truck to sleep on a thin mattress at the foot of the hack tower while my coworkers returned to air-conditioned rooms in refuge housing for the night. Despite the rough inconvenience, I didn't want to miss any opportunity to observe the resident wildlife and learn their secrets. I didn't want to leave the young falcons to the mercy of the dark, so I stayed and suffered the still air and mosquitoes with them. I fell asleep to pauraques calling in the distance and coyotes yelping in the night. The midnight vigils of ocelots were betrayed by paw prints in the dirt. Greater nighthawks tumbled over my head in reckless courtship flights, their wings whistling in the furrows of every dive with a hollow "whoosh" sound. In the morning I awoke to vast flocks of reddish egrets, roseate spoonbills and great egrets stroking their way to a far shore, the sun peeking over the horizon and illuminating their white belly feathers from below. The brilliant light upon their feathers reflected back at me and blinded my eyes as I watched.

It was on the refuge that I became acquainted with purple sage (*Leucophyllum frutescens*), an unfashionable, woody shrub with intertwining, ash-gray branches and leather-like leaves. It bordered many of the dirt roads and paths used to access the hack site and blocked our way. It was just another nuisance, along with the biting insects, heat, and salty soil that interfered with our desire to track the falcons and study them in the wild. In Spanish the shrub is known as *cenizo* (pronounced *Se-nee-so*); the English-speaking locals, who were more intimate with the plant and knew it better than I, referred to it as "rain sage."

The season spent at Laguna Atascosa NWR was to become one of the worst droughts on record for the state of Texas. It didn't rain for more than a year, drying up resacas all over the refuge. Even the largest one, Cayo Atascoso with a span of

Cenizo takes a parting look over the shoulder before taking flight. Photo by Kathy Stohrer.

more than 200 meters, completely dried up by midsummer. The refuge manager walked across its mud-cracked length just to be able to say that he had done so in his lifetime. As the great pond receded, fish were crowded together in ever-smaller volumes of water, suffocated, and died. Their bodies piled up in a huge, stinking mountain at the center, which grew larger with each passing day as hundreds of black vultures gathered above the waste. I could see the ominous column of vultures from miles away hanging over the resaca and marking its demise. They fed off the dead fish for weeks. Desiccated swarms of honeybees circled the hack tower in search of water and forced us all to flee in alarm at the first sounds of their arrival. Even the tough, heat-tolerant *cenizo* withered from excessive exposure to the sun.

Exotic birds never before sighted on the refuge, or even in the United States, began to appear: a collared forest falcon, an orange-billed nightingale thrush, and a cave swallow were all added to the master species list that year. Whether they were trying to escape the intense heat wave or traveling with it, no one could say for sure. What was known is that the drought continued, day after day after day, without relief.

Then something miraculous happened in the waning days of summer: a flash front passed over the refuge and it rained, refilling the resacas with water and momentarily ending the drought. The *cenizo* was transformed overnight: it immediately gained strength and began to bloom, producing large buds that opened into lavender, hibiscus-like flowers that brightened the back roads of the refuge. Following the storm, I could now look past the hack site and see winks of purple across the once languid landscape. The spectrum of color changed with the angle of the sun and the direction of the wind, throwing pink flushes deep into shades of purple, from moment to moment. It was gorgeous. I never would have imagined that such an un-engaging shrub could produce such beauty. The plant only blooms after a rainstorm, hence the colloquial name. In my memory and experience it flowered just once, after the pivotal thunderstorm that ended the summer drought.

In time, the aplomado falcons revealed themselves to me as well. A few individuals, ones that had been released in previous years and survived, matured enough to establish nesting territories on the refuge and become a permanent addition to its ranks. I watched those birds reintegrate an ecosystem that had once gone without their wisdom. I watched a mated pair cooperatively hunt together to catch a mockingbird in thick brush. The larger female circled patiently overhead while the slender male repeatedly slipped in between thorny branches of mesquite to flush out the prey from below. The mockingbird would flee from cover, the female would commence to dive, and it would suddenly turn and dart back to the safety of the hedge. The male would immediately follow the mockingbird into the mesquite, reflushing the prey for his partner. After several repeated flushes, the female finally dove and caught the mockingbird in flight before it could reenter the thicket. Both falcons retired to a shady branch among the trees, perching shoulder to shoulder, to share the meal afterwards.

> **All at once the falcon rolled over and stooped, fully tucking in his wings, falling like a stone toward earth.**

Another day I watched a lone, adult male aplomado pursue a horned lark over great expanses of cord grass that grew along the coastline. The area was open and provided little groundcover for protection, so the lark was forced to "sky-out," flying ever higher and higher to evade capture. It was a classic ringing flight that lasted a quarter of an hour. The lark was smaller and had a lighter wing load, so it could climb at a much faster rate than its pursuer. The falcon stayed a constant distance below but never quit the chase. He turned determined circle after circle, climbing an invisible spiral staircase of air, challenging the lark to new heights. The birds climbed so high that I lost sight of the lark, even with powerful binoculars, and the falcon was nothing more than a tiny black dot in a blurry blue sea. All at once the falcon rolled over and stooped, fully tucking in his wings, falling like a stone toward earth. The lark had done likewise, pushed to the limits of energy and altitude, its only chance of escape was to beat the falcon to the ground and hide. Both of them fell as simultaneous meteors, separated only by time and space, in a race for survival. The falcon's speed was incomprehensible; it quickly closed the gap between the two birds, plucked the lark from the air hundreds of feet over my head, and continued on a long, downward arc across the horizon to disappear from view.

Witnessing such flights only confirmed the rumors and strengthened my desire to have an aplomado falcon for falconry. It was an impossible longing back then. The only authorized breeders of the endangered falcon were authentic scientific organizations involved in wildlife research and conservation, and their birds were not available for private ownership or use. And, of course, it was illegal to trap a domestically-raised aplomado falcon once acclimated to the wild. For a long time afterward I contented myself with the privilege of having known the species solely from fieldwork.

Nearly two decades later I suddenly found myself sitting in a comfortable chair of my own living

Cenizo with house sparrow taken at the Indiana Falconers Association picnic. Photo by Kathy Stohrer.

room holding an aplomado falcon on the fist and contemplating the strange chain of events that led to its appearance there. Even more startling was the fact that I didn't *want* the bird.

The falcon I held in my hands had nothing in common with those bred and released by The Peregrine Fund. He was a mar-hawk: a bird that was unstable, unsocialized and unenlightened. He had no endurance to fly because he hadn't been exercised in an entire year. When he was flown—it was but for a few short weeks— he had caught just three inadvertent sparrows during that time. He was never seriously gamehawked; the sparrows caught were random accidents flushed by the previous owner's dogs as they trotted under the gliding falcon! The rest of the time the falcon had been tied to an isolated perch in a darkened room and thrown whole quail carcasses to feed from at leisure. He knew absolutely nothing about hunting wild game. And he screamed constantly, a vice of raptorial birds that had been grossly mishandled in captivity.

In just three weeks I would start another accelerated college course; I had performance reviews to write on subordinates at work; student trainees that I needed to teach; and a medical laboratory that needed to be supervised. I had a house to repair and flower gardens to upkeep. I didn't have the time to maintain an established falconry bird, much less rehabilitate a mentally- and physically-disturbed one. Still, *it was an aplomado falcon*, a bird that had once owned my heart and mind. They were rare in North America, hardly known to birdwatchers, falconers and scientists. Was it possible to make this falcon into the likeness of one that had summoned my imagination from so long ago?

I honestly didn't know.

I sat there, looking down at a bird with atrophied wings that drooped upon the glove while he squawked and squatted without insight, and doubted the both of us. I had exhausted all means to dispose of him and had solicited no takers. "I guess we are both alone, together from a similar lack of association, and have only each other for comfort", I sighed to myself—when suddenly the falcon ceased all sound, tightened his grip upon my hand, and looked up with a start. I justified the prospect of keeping him, already knowing it wasn't an option. "It will take weeks to tame him," I told myself sheepishly, "I won't have to do much, just keep him near me while I study. By the time he's ready to be worked outside and flown free, my class will almost be over. And it is summer...daylight hours linger past 9pm...I'll have plenty of time to train him after work or school." Still not entirely convinced, I quickly added, "Besides, he's in such poor physical shape that I'll just lure-fly him at most. He'll never develop the stamina to pursue live game in the traditional way..."

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Since the falcon was never meant for me, I didn't name him during the short interval between transfers. When it became obvious that we would be together for a much longer period of time, I decided some kind of reference to his presence was needed. For lack of anything better, I simply called him the "Orange & Black Bird" (OBB) after the bold, bicolor pattern of his plumage. That title was soon shortened to the unimaginative moniker of "OBBie".

I began training Obbie once submitted to his cause. He was deliberately perched among strangers or traffic to acclimate him to modern noise and distraction, and I carried him along on trips whenever I traveled away from home. He perched next to my chair as I did my homework, peering at the books and computer in earnest, as if he, too, was trying to comprehend the knowledge there. Occasionally I brought him to the university: he'd sit on the back of a chair, as obediently as any other student, and endure monotone lectures in cramped, overheated rooms with me. I obsessively touched his feathers and feet and face, and fitted him with newly-made, leather equipment. I waked him for long hours at night until both our heads hung down in sleep.

At times it was difficult to stay focused when the same distractions that ultimately desensitized the falcon led me away from work or school or him. Those irritations encouraged a casual disregard in Obbie but only heightened a sense of underachievement and insecurity in me. I would be pushed in opposing directions and have to concentrate on one goal at the expense of others, only to work harder at regaining lost ground at a later time. Eventually I accomplished all of my intended tasks and schoolwork, and Obbie learned to wear a hood, ride in a car, and not bate from sight or touch. Throughout it all, I gradually lowered his weight, timing it just right so that he was ready for the first free flight when my classes ended.

I trained Obbie to the lure and began flying him every day after work. He was miserably weak in the beginning and could do no more than five short passes without falling out of the sky. He would drop to the ground, heaving and panting, wings splayed to the sides and his face buried in the dirt. At first, I quit as soon as he showed signs of exhaustion, but the exercise was so brief, I worried that he'd never build up any endurance. I began to wait for him to catch his breath, hooding him for an intermittent recovery period, and then launching him

into the air again for another set of lure passes. He would complete five more and then drop to the ground. Every week I would add another set of five passes to the previous count until his staying power improved. After two months of persistent lure-flying Obbie could make 40 passes without a break in flight. By that time, it had become a routine: I'd return from work, change into hunting clothes, drive to a nearby field, lure-fly the falcon, feed him up and return home. I was happy to train Obbie for *something*, even if it was only lure-flying. I didn't imagine he could do anything more. I invited friends over to watch him circle around me like a giant swallow in the evenings. He was sociable and tame and they could touch him without fear of injury. That was all I ever expected of him: a demonstration bird.

It would have continued that way, perhaps forever, if it wasn't for The Meadowlark. One day, while swinging the lure, I noticed a streak of movement nearby. A meadowlark was creeping along the ground between tussocks of grass in an effort to hide from the sweeping falconiforme above. Each time Obbie passed overhead, the meadowlark froze; when the falcon reached the far end of the field, it resumed a furtive crawl through the grass. In a moment of unexpected surprise, the meadowlark exploded from its meadow refuge. Obbie folded into a stoop to intercept the fleeing bird, and the lark immediately turned around to land back on the ground. At the moment of impact, the lark jumped up and Obbie hit the dirt. A plume of dust drifted over me, as the lark launched back into the air and sped away. Obbie immediately flew up to follow the bird. He tail-chased it for a hundred yards, closing the distance until he was within a body length of the prey. He reached out a foot to grab the lark in midair just as it entered the tree line at the edge of the field! Both birds vanished into the foliage, and I stood there carefully considering what I had just seen. When Obbie did not reappear, I began walking toward the trees, believing he was too tired to return. A few paces into the walk, Obbie flew up and began the journey back to me. He landed at my feet, twitching and heaving with excitement. He didn't catch a lark that day, but he convinced me that he had the willpower to. Even so, I had one final reservation and dragged my feet all the more...

There was still one more thing that needed to be done, something that I had deliberately avoided all summer but had not forgotten. Before I could officially hunt with Obbie, he needed to learn to step off the kill to a lure and do so graciously. If I allowed him to sit on quarry at length, or carry it to another location, he would be a target for every redtail hawk, Cooper's hawk and broad-winged hawk in the vicinity...and there were hundreds of them around! He wouldn't survive long being preyed upon by other raptors. Every falconer I knew that had allowed his or her trained aplomado falcon to carry prey away from sight lost it to another hawk. I felt the safest course of action when flying a brightly-colored, tropical falcon in temperate habitat was to teach the bird to stay close to me for protection; however, that crucial lesson had been a dismal effort in hope and pride.

I tried to coax him up to the lure, but his grip only tightened and his behavior worsened with each attempt.

The first time I tried to transfer him off a kill was a complete disaster. I had given him a whole quail carcass to simulate a "kill" and then, after he had broken in, offered a garnished lure in trade. He immediately turned his back on me, kakking and mantling over the quail. I tried to coax him up to the lure, but his grip only tightened and his behavior worsened with each attempt. He had a death grip on the carcass, and I couldn't have pried him off with a crowbar. Each time I presented the lure he spun suspiciously around, stiff body feathers sticking out all over like a pincushion, twisting the carcass in his feet and swallowing whole mouthfuls of quail in between screams. In his contortions to escape me he managed to tear off the entire upper quarter of the quail, holding it in one foot, while grabbing the lure with the other free one. He now had fresh meat in both feet and couldn't stand. He spread his wings wide like oars and paddled across the floor, dragging the lure and tattered quail parts behind him. He left a bloody streak the entire length of the garage before I caught him.

"Oh, my God!" I yelled out loud in disbelief. He was worse than any mis-imprinted eyas I'd ever seen. "What did I get myself into? Why couldn't I just follow my decision to not keep any more birds? Why did I have to get stuck with him!? This kind of nonsense is the reason I haven't accomplished anything of value in life!" I scolded myself. I had parted with two perfectly trained gamehawks because I had wanted to quit the sport and now I had the worst bird imaginable in my care. The enormity of it all hit me like a landslide. At times like this, I strangely remembered my work with The Peregrine Fund and the aplomado falcons hacked out in Texas. Were the ghosts of those birds consoling me or mocking me? I pried Obbie off the tangled and clotted mess—as he hung upside down from my fist—and put him in the mews for the night. I walked back to the house, threw the quail and lure directly into the refrigerator, and removed a bottle of wine. I drank it until I cried and the memories disappeared.

I was so traumatized by that incident that I deliberately neglected to think about it since; however, I instinctively knew I'd have to correct the possession issues if I

ever wanted to hunt with Obbie. I thought hard for a few days and came up with a plan: I obtained the largest coturnix quail I could find and froze it solid. It was nearly the size of a pigeon. I then tied a large, tempting piece of fresh meat to the lure. I took both items into a small room and placed the frozen quail on the floor. I retrieved Obbie and walked into the room. As soon as he saw the quail, he dived off the fist with zeal—and slid off the frozen carcass like an oil slick. The carcass rolled with the force of the hit and Obbie fell to the floor. He immediately jumped back on the carcass and it rolled the opposite way, dumping him face first into the concrete. He repeatedly jumped on the quail, but the carcass was so slippery smooth that he couldn't get a purchase on the body and flopped around helplessly. Out of frustration he finally grabbed the neck and bit down hard. The tip of his beak got stuck in the block of ice and he couldn't pull loose. He yanked his head up and down, the whole quail bobbing in rhythm, to free himself. At that point, he started kakking in anger and I laughed out loud. I pulled his beak free and gave him the garnished lure. He immediately grabbed it and began to eat, ignoring the quail. I repeated the training exercise two more times, giving Obbie the lure after he failed to break into the frozen quail. He became less possessive of the quail each day and more expectant of the lure. I switched to a half-frozen quail one day and a fully thawed one the next. When I got the same response, I quit training. It was time to go hunting.

I began the next day earlier than usual, expecting to invest the greater part of it finding slips for Obbie to practice on. It was hot and still, but I soon located a flock of starlings feeding in a field of waist-high grass. The flock would abruptly rise from the depths of the prairie, roll forward in a great black wave, then become lost again as row upon row of birds broke away from the leading edge and dropped back to Earth like tiny, falling stars. As they momentarily fed on the ground, I could not see them, or they me, and I carefully timed my approach to steal upon the birds as they settled out of sight. I crept up to the flock with Obbie on my fist, leaning below the crown of the grass to hide our presence, when the entire flock lifted in a vibration of sound. I was cloaked in birds—clapping, shrieking, swirling shapes—and didn't notice that Obbie had already left. He chased the flock across the field and targeted a single starling, turning it away from the rising bulk. The starling immediately dropped into the long grass at his approach. Obbie circled around and around, holding position over the hidden starling, until I could reach them. I didn't know exactly where the starling was, so I ran back and forth underneath Obbie hoping to reflush it on chance alone. It burst out of the grass a second time and Obbie shifted in flight after it. As soon as he got close enough to grab the starling, it immediately dropped into the grass again. I chased after them, the vegetation scratching my bare arms

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bloody, until I flushed the starling into the air again. I reflushed that starling over and over, until my leg muscles trembled with exertion and sweat soaked my clothes. Obbie finally fell into the grass, as did the starling, and neither reappeared. I figured Obbie was too exhausted to stay airborne any longer and began searching for him. I carefully parted a sea of grasses—and found him hanging by a grass stalk with one foot and holding onto the starling with the other!

We never looked back after that. I flew Obbie every day after work for the remainder of the summer and he never missed a kill. He caught a bird *every single day* for the next two months straight! He had the endearing habit of "ee-chupping" whenever he caught something. Even if I didn't see the outcome of a slip, I knew it was successful when I heard a contented "chup!" in the distance. As I made in, it was always a surprise to lean over and identify the bagged quarry because he caught all kinds of small game: winged insects, lizards and, on one occasion, a wild mouse! My friends started to go afield with me instead of standing idle on the sidewalk to watch an aplomado falcon chase a lure at dusk.

The Indiana Falconers Association (IFA) held a picnic at the end of August and it was tradition for my birds and I to stay at NAFA Director Greg Thomas' house to attend. That year I brought along Obbie. The IFA picnic lasted all day and featured guest speakers, falconry workshops, hunting demonstrations, and tables piled high with food. I took a break in the middle of the day to hunt and escape the crowd of people. It was stifling hot when I drove into town. I stopped at a gas station for water and thought I recognized the high-pitched chirping of sparrows at the very edge of human hearing. Following the sound, I came upon an unkempt lot between the local police station and boarding house. Ornamental shrubs lined the property and a multitude of house sparrows flitted in their midst. I parked the truck, slipped a hunting vest on over my dress clothes and walked toward the bushes with Obbie. The sparrows immediately burrowed into the foliage at the sight of him. I kicked through the shrubs while Obbie perched on the roof of the police station. Several sparrows flushed, and he dropped like a stone from the building, twisting, and turning, but the sparrows regained the safety of the hedge before he got close. He pitched up and returned to the roof. I flushed the sparrows again and he stooped, tail-chasing them around the building. I continued beating the brush, right underneath the station windows, until a handful of sparrows flew out in all directions. One sparrow flushed toward me, and I waved it off. It turned and headed straight across the open lot, aiming for a line of pine trees on the far side.

Obbie immediately followed the lone sparrow. He put on a burst of speed, came in from behind, and reached out a foot just as the sparrow entered the pines. The momentum carried him straight

into the trees, and he crash-landed in the boughs. For a moment he hung from the branches, wings splayed to the sides and feet dangling down, and then I heard the triumphant "Chup!" I ran to the tree and peered into the upper branches: Obbie was hanging by a branch with one foot and grasping the sparrow with the other! It was a repeat performance of his first starling catch! Obbie was too high to reach, and the branches too thin to climb, so I shook the trunk until both birds tumbled softly to the ground. Obbie was still holding the sparrow in his foot when I picked him up to walk back to the car.

As I did so, I became aware of several squad cars and a party of policemen standing around. They were all staring at me, demanding to know what I'd been doing in the abandoned lot next to the station. I showed them the falcon and bagged sparrow and explained that I was a falconer. They had witnessed the flights and were immediately intrigued. One officer brought out a camera and took pictures; another asked to "pet" Obbie. A third policeman exclaimed, "We've been stuck in the station for days doing paperwork. This is the most exciting thing that has happened all week!" I returned to the IFA picnic, proudly holding Obbie with the sparrow in my glove and told everyone the news. Greg Thomas remarked, "Yeah, all the other falconers came here to get free food. And then there's Stacia: she went out hawking and caught her own!"

It soon became apparent that my aplomado falcon could catch game in any manner of way, unlike other species of raptorial birds that become wedded to a single style or quarry—Obbie was the quintessential gamehawk that could fly like an accipiter or falcon. I'd even seen him attack prey on the ground like a buteo if he spied something in hiding there. The best time I ever had with him, however, was a classic flight on doves.

I was driving around looking for slips when a mourning dove flew directly in front of my truck. I watched it fly across the street and into a wide-open field next to a high-rise building and artificial pond. The dove landed in the middle of the field, and I lost sight of it among the weeds. A short time later, other stray doves flew in and landed in the same place; they were probably feeding or picking at gravel. I stopped the truck and watched as a dozen more flew in from all directions to join the others already on the ground. It was windy, and I wondered if I could pin the doves long enough for Obbie to have a chance at one. I stopped at the edge of the field and cast off Obbie. The wind immediately caught him, and he drifted away, far and fast behind me. Since I couldn't see the doves on the ground, I had fixed my eyes on the approximate location where they had landed. I kept my gaze on the marked place and walked steadily toward it, hoping to intersect their position. I expected Obbie to circle around me, a habit he had developed from months of lure-flying, but after several minutes of not seeing him I began to worry. He had not passed by me, not even once. Out of nervousness, I searched for him in all directions: forward, to the left and right, and behind me. Obbie was nowhere to be found, and I became frantic. I thought the strong wind had carried him away from the slip—and me. I finally looked up in desperation and there he was, a couple hundred feet overhead, kiting above the high-rise building! At that height, he looked like a tiercel peregrine waiting-on in the wind.

Obbie began to drift over me and I started to run. I ran to the last place I'd seen the doves and continued on through the field. In the next instant there was an explosion of motion. Mourning doves heaved into the air all around me. Some of them jumped up so violently that feathers streamed from their bodies as they lifted into the air. As I stopped to watch, the whole scene progressed in slow motion. The doves gained height over me and, as they passed by, I could see their bright eyes and beating wings. I looked up and caught the sight of Obbie in a full stoop, wings tucked in, resolved in a slow fall toward Earth. He was on a collision course with the doves directly above my head. I saw his yellow foot uncurl and a dove twist to evade him. He swerved and struck the dove 50 feet overhead in a lightning burst of colors: white, orange, gray and brown. I saw the dove fall lifeless into the grass beyond and Obbie pitch up and out of sight. My mouth fell open. I stood there, staring upward in shocked silence for a long time, as stray feathers rained down on me from heaven.

As I contemplated the events of that day, I learned something about myself and falconry. The unwanted aplomado falcon taught me that I cannot sever birds from my life. They are the essence of me, and trained falconry birds are my signature. I can no more part from birds than I can part from my own eye color or childhood or awkward limp. They are as permanent as my genetic history. That tiercel knew more of me in one short summer than I knew of myself in half a lifetime. Perhaps even more importantly, he taught me that life doesn't need to be perfect in order to succeed. Falconry doesn't have to be carefully orchestrated and fore planned to work. It can be reckless, even heartbreaking, and still become stunning. Sometimes it's the inherent hardship of a thing that makes one stand in the greatest wonder of transformations in the end. It adds a perspective of worth that simply doesn't exist in the beginning. As I thought of these things a revelation came to mind: a common thread tied Obbie to the rain sage of Texas. Both had come to me in rough contexts without commendation or any hint of glory. I couldn't see their beauty until I had weathered inconvenient storms, one of nature and one of my own. When that became clear the falcon's name was changed to Cenizo, and so he is known to this day.