

The Soul of a Parrot

1.

Orissa, the mother goddess in ancient Egypt, had a parrot's beak nose. Val cannot help but notice that her cousin Alberta has one too. Val and Alberta are eating lunch together in a Middle Eastern restaurant not far from Alberta's house, where Alberta, in her eighties now, lives alone. Val offered to take Alberta to lunch, and Alberta suggested an Indian restaurant near her house. Val is hoping to order curry, but Alberta has confused Middle Eastern with Indian, so Val orders falafel. Such confusions have always marked Alberta's day-to-day existence, inviting scolding in the past from her mother and in the present, in a milder form, from her grown son, admonishments that she seems to need to take the place of genuine affection in her life. Alberta often talks to Val of her troubled childhood. She stuttered as a child. Her mother often admonished her for not being pretty. "You were such a cute baby," the mother said to her once when she was six. "But now your father and I are so disappointed." The mother, herself, was very pretty and very vain. What cured Alberta of her stuttering affliction was an old cockatoo the family inherited from her paternal grandmother. The cockatoo was lonely and bored with its life in a cage without its mate (its mate having been Alberta's paternal grandmother). To pass the time, the cockatoo taught Alberta to speak correctly and to piece the parts of a jigsaw puzzle together. Though the cockatoo was quite intelligent, it sometimes spoke vacuously in ironic tones, just to amuse itself. Whenever Alberta's mother had walked into the room, it would say, "Pretty Bird."

2.

Once upon a time, an old-fashioned schoolmaster had for a pet a parrot named Perico, and this parrot enjoyed listening to and joining

in the daily recitations the students repeated. Sometimes the parrot grabbed onto the stick that the master swayed to direct the recitations, bobbing its head, keeping time with the rhythms of the lessons. After school, the parrot enjoyed sipping from the cup of sweet chocolate the master drank late in the afternoon. Sometimes the parrot hooked the toes of its zygodactylic feet into the awning, and as he rested, he would kiss the shining bald head of the schoolmaster. Other times the parrot perched on a wind vane atop of the master's roof to recite the monotonous syllables the schoolmaster loved to hear. The man and the bird grew comfortable in each other's company like an old married couple. In time, the schoolmaster trusted the parrot implicitly and ceased to trim its flight feathers as a token of this trust.

3.

"We are red Macaws," said the Bororo Indian husbands of central Brazil. "Our wives try to tame us, but we are wild by nature. We live in the homes of our wives; yet we long to hunt in the forest. Our wives' brothers own our names and claim our possessions, and thus we dream of flight. The words we say are not our own. We repeat what we hear." In a patriarchal society, wives carry large pocket books and dress in colors bright as the colors of parrots. In a matriarchal society, husbands mimic words of mighty women and eat crackers. In 3000 B. C., the husbands retreated to a cave upon whose walls they spat paint forming the naïve shape of a bird, a wild parrot, a red macaw. The representation on the cave wall signaled a vision of loss (the inevitable day when the red Macaw would be forgotten), but not a loss of vision. The husbands said, "We paint parrots because our wives do not meet our emotional needs; theirs is an ersatz intimacy. We paint parrots because we long for authenticity. Today we are kept men, boy toys, but soon we shall be transformed from our present nascent stage to mature *psittacine*, the red macaw, a perfect incarnation of freedom."

4.

A tame parrot, a wild parrot: birds of a different feather. The three masks of God—parent, child, and holy bird: gods with distinct missions. A suka parrot announced the birth of the baby Jesus and stirred the womb of a virgin. Can a divided God help us find our one true self amidst a multitude of selves and so many modern distractions? Some of these selves we have fashioned to be saintly or respectable or upright, but one self is cutting the tips of its fingers in a closet, is burning its thighs with a cigarette; another is falling in

love with a mirror and is taunting a needy child; still another is reaching into a hollow to steal a parrot egg. Oh, our foolish dreams of unity. Intelligible speech does not arise from God's silence but from the wild parrots' chatter, from their cacophony. Ca-ca: the sound of a parrot calling. Caca: a word that means shit. The devil too has many guises: Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles. Oh, Prince of darkness, Prince of pasty white skin. White-skinned devil. Black-skinned devil. Yellow peril. Red peril. Detested races of the world, scattered through continents. Continents of the world scattered from Gondwanaland, home of the Ur parrot. Feathered Friend, I plucked your feathers to adorn my hair. Dear Mr. Popinjay, I plucked your feathers to fashion a garland to adorn my naked shoulders as I jazzed Paris upon the stage in the year of Our Lord, 1927. One true parrot whose feathers we pluck to gather courage, to harness energy, to tuck luck in our hat bands, to weave our headdresses, to steady our arrows, to dip in dark blue ink. Dandy-like, dandelion: bright yellow, green, blue, and red. The clown's soul is a laughing parrot. The king's soul is a soaring parrot. Do not capture the parrot: the clown will die; the king shall perish. In India, a parrot has perched on a prostitute's elbow: Mol and Pol. At sea, a parrot has perched on a pirate's shoulder: spirit brother, phantom limb. The native guide carried a parrot on her sleeve. "Oh, you are our parrot. We shall follow you up the steepest mountains, down the deepest valleys, even into the valley of death." Death cast its long shadow on the land of parrots and the valley of parrots echoed the dry cough of death. The parrot's soul shall always haunt us; long after death, it remains a white ghost, impaled in a ring-barked tree.

5.

Alberta said the cockatoo not only talked but also listened, and as it cocked its cockatoo head to one side, it seemed to understand an unloved child, a stuttering child, a discarded child of an ambitious mother. The cockatoo had lived a long time. Deprived of tropical forests, of other parrots' company, and of flight itself, the parrot recited words, practiced patience, observed life through its bars, waited for Alberta to come home from school. Then one day the old cockatoo died because it was so very old and so very wise and had lived its long life upon this earth, and Alberta wept inconsolably. Alberta's mother had the parrot stuffed and placed it under a bell jar on a living room shelf. Years later, when Alberta first learned that her mother herself had died, she immediately thought, "Now she can no longer hurt me." Then Alberta buried the cockatoo in a proper grave. She had already imagined its immortal soul in Paradise.

6.

I would not say one should never trust a parrot. And yet a parrot can fly away at speeds that allow fifty miles a day. Every feather in a parrot's body is designed for flight. Trust wisely in accordance with nature. I would advise, Know thy parrot! One day the schoolmaster was directing his chorus of children, when one boy shouted out, "Perico has flown away." All of the children ran to the door and the master followed. In the far distance, they saw a green marble gleaming in the sky. Nothing could be done. "It must be God's will," the schoolmaster said (hand upon heart), though he felt sad and betrayed. To temper his emotion, he called the children back from the door and once again bid them follow his direction (that is to say, the direction of his stick) in the daily recitation of numbers, syllables, and the indisputable truths of the Holy Catechism.

7.

A male parrot has no phallus. Its testes are internal, resting near its kidneys. One external hole vents urine, feces, and sperm. The parrot Ya-Lur, a missionary parrot from the United Pentecostal church of Lubbock, Texas, had a thick tongue and could speak in tongues. His master told the native congregation, quoting from the book of Isaiah, "For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people." Mayan syllables and intonations with a slight Texan drawl flowed from the thick-tongued parrot's mouth but formed no discernible words, and yet the human preacher, the parrot's master, being an interpreter of tongues, understood the meaning and told it and esteemed the worth of the parrot's gift of tongues and declared that the sounds came from God through His avian messenger, part bird, part angel, whose wings and colorful feathers exuded creative energy. Repetition acquires meaning, and so I repeat, repetition acquires meaning. Liminal being: soul and incarnate body, which spills sperm and cracks and savors the taste of tropical nuts on Earth yet flies to the Lord in Paradise, a pure spirit like Brancusi's elongated bronze, to hear the Holy Noise and to impart its ecstasy.

8.

Vicente Riva Palacio was a nineteenth-century Mexican author who wrote about parrots and schoolmasters. One day, the beloved schoolmaster was called to a nearby town a good fifteen miles away, a half-day's journey on an old horse. He mounted his horse and politely tipped his hat to all the ladies who gathered to say goodbye to him. By afternoon, he was riding through the jungle. The sun high in the sky, the heat of day distorting his clear perceptions and

clouding his good sense. He thought he heard the children of his school reciting their chorus of lessons: syllables, sums, and commandments. He shook his head as if to dispel the auditory hallucination and traveled on, but as his horse trotted along, the cacophony of sound only grew louder until suddenly a flock of parrots flew across his path reciting multiplication tables, and behind them flew the most majestic of them all waving a stick in its claw, and this final bird, the old schoolmaster recognized as his escaped Perico: "Oh see, now, Dear Sir, I have a school of my own!" Thus the story ended. Val was not sure if the moral of the story pointed to the poor teaching methods of that day, to the intelligence of parrots or their stupidity, to their inability to truly understand the meaning behind the words they repeated, or to the tragedy of tamed parrots who never could return in perfect harmony to the wild.

9.

The parrot of the Maharajah of Nawanagar, who travelled in a Rolls Royce, on yachts, and on biplanes, had an international passport. He boasted a gilded cage with an embroidered silk night cover. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Oh, vain be the popinjay: vanity, its chief vice! The parrot of the Maharajah of Nawanagar also took the Lord's name in vain, repeated mariners' curses learned in his avian youth that, due to his great longevity, were now defunct. Other parrots are known for good deeds. Wild parrots are deemed sustainers of all life: they rustle leaves as they eat, dropping seeds to the ground upon which other creatures nurture, and thus parrots coincidentally propagate fruit trees far and wide as loosened seeds scatter to the winds or are emitted through diverse animal scat. Domestic parrots likewise do great good as companions and accomplished teachers of speech. A parrot knows no greed but rather is its victim. Bandits reach into the hollows of trees to snatch eggs to incubate or the just-hatched chicks to pack in crowded crates to transport them, motherless, to sell at great profit in pet stores in first-world nations. Nothing natural about the parrots' natural history in the drawing room, nothing natural about the parrots' natural history in a cage: the bad conscience of capitalism, the bad conscience of colonialism. At the Managua airport the revolutionary soldier inspected the crate to find forty-nine parrots dead among ninety-nine packed up. The fifty others immediately quickened to take flight back toward the jungle from whence they came. They soared majestically high in the sky, claiming their freedom and their home. The poet, Comrade Ernesto, hearing of this incident, tried to balance joy and sorrow but

ended his famous poem with the image of the forty-nine dead parrots. He could not erase that troubling vision from his mind.

10.

Pretty. Pretty. Beware of flattering strangers. They might display you on a shelf. Alberta never called her parrot Polly. She did not know its name. Its name (which indeed had been Polly) died with Alberta's paternal grandmother who had lived in another state and whom Alberta never met and with whom Polly had mated and for whom she now mourned. Upon the grandmother's death, Polly had cried alone in her cage with only dirty water to drink. In one corner of the room, the expired body of her faithful mate, Alberta's grandmother, slumped upon the floor. In time, with mounting mail, unpaid bills and unanswered telephone calls, help finally came, but by that time the cockatoo had plucked out all of its breast feathers, had lost one-third of its weight, and refused to tell its name. *To plume* means to decorate a body. *To plume* also means to take all the feathers from a body: the sorrow of self-mutilation. In another house at another time, a family which had come upon the hard days of Great Recession deserted Gordy its cockatoo in an open cage in the empty, unswept living room, leaving only a dish of water and a bag of dog food in one corner. Neighbors heard the distress of the bird and called 911 for help. In the shelter (full of deserted parrots), a crippled female cockatoo shyly courted Gordy, who had never known his own kind before. They nestled their heads in one another's necks and found great and abiding comfort. Polly, deprived of avian succor, saw the cuts on the tips of Alberta's fingers, saw bitten nails and hidden burns and recognized her own sorrow. She could not mate with Alberta for she had mated for life with Alberta's dead grandmother, and grief, it seemed, might last forever. Yet she taught the girl to speak, to piece together jagged pieces of words and puzzles. She found ways for a time to divert them both from their loneliness.

11.

Two toes forward, two toes back, once bidden, the trained African Grey chose with its curved upper mandible the Tarot card of destiny. The king must die. A messenger from the House of Hermes delivered the news, presenting a parrot's egg next to the card upon a gold plate. The king, having a premonition, did not wish to answer the door and only did so finally with great and debilitating dread. Upon seeing the egg, the king hung his head and then himself. "The King is dead. Long live the King." The king's son has now assumed the throne. Thus and so, generation follows generation. We designate the

parrot a gifted storyteller, and every story is the story of generation. We so wish for continuity! (And yet seldom act in its accordance.) We designate the parrot a clown. We laugh because we do not know what we laugh about. We tell our parrot jokes: *Runaway parrot: polygon; parrot in a raincoat: polyunsaturated.*

Question: What do you get when you cross a parrot and a tiger?

Answer: I don't know, but when it talks, you better listen carefully.

12.

Oh, Polly. Oh, Perico. My dear Mr. Popinjay. *Pretty. Pretty.*