

Home In

by Sienna Zeillinger '15

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Birds are fundamentally bad at getting lost, and for a while nobody knew why. One theory proposed that, through iron particles in their beaks, birds were somehow more attuned to the earth's magnetic field. But research in the '90s found that pigeons consistently got completely lost at one location, at Jersey Hill, and only on clear days—the exact times when the Concorde supersonic jet was in the area—which pointed to the notion that pigeons are able to find their way home using low-frequency sound waves for navigation. This also explains why they circle around before heading off in one direction: these sound waves are so long, and birds' ear canals so tiny, that they must circle to reconstruct the wave and figure out which way they are oriented. It's the same infrasound that makes up the parts of earthquakes that are inaudible to us, that are out of our range, and our avian friends use it to get home.

Though this would certainly be an acceptable reason to love birds, it's not why I love birds. In Judaism, a baby is given a Hebrew name to honor a family member or to reflect the parents' wishes for her future. My name in Hebrew is Yosi Tziporah: Yosi for my mother's uncle Joe, apparently the most affable Jewish mobster in all of Chicago, and Tziporah—bird—because my parents wanted me to be free to soar to whatever heights I dreamed. This is also not why I love birds; plus, while I value my parents' intentions, I'm afraid of heights and have approximately zero wish to soar. I've noticed that when you're in college and people ask you why you like birds, you're supposed to have a single, predetermined answer, and also that posing the question may be more suitably amusing than your answer itself, since the asker is usually already laughing upon inquiry. I love birds because they can fade into the background if I let them, such that spotting a sparrow in a bush is just as marvelous as reaching out with cupped palms and catching a firefly. And I love that they cut so sharply across the sky and yet disturb so little. And I love how when I walk between two trees upon which they perch and chatter, they won't stop for me, and I'm reminded that I too am merely a visitor here.

I don't know if any of these reasons are exactly why I love birds, but they seem to fit, and they sound nice. The truth is that I only started seeking them out in college and I haven't had much practice explaining in earnest why I do this.

My friend Ben, though admittedly quite different from me in ways both obvious and not, is also one of the few people who knows I like birds and has not asked why, which is why I ask him if he'd like to split the cost of renting a ZipCar and come with me to Sachuest Point, which is a wildlife refuge an hour south of us and which I've been told is where the snowy owls come to spend the winter every twenty years. I'm twenty and I've never seen a snowy owl before, and it appeals to me that we're attuned to the same clock. In the car I hold the wheel with my left hand and a bagel in my right and taste caraway while Ben tells me all about the last road trip he took, the next one he wants to take. When we park at Sachuest, we pause to brush the seeds off our shirts.

The place is a forty-acre peninsula made up of bluffs overlooking Sachuest Bay and Rhode Island Sound right where it starts to turn into the Sakonnet River, and it's warmer for February than it looks from the inside, and, more inland, the grass that isn't covered with snow gestures northwest in the wind in great swaths, savanna-like. The grass stops at the bluffs, themselves comprised of the darkest rocks I've ever seen, or maybe they just seem that way because of the stark and glistening white of the snow atop them. The place is not on a cliff by any means, but the rocks jut outward at angles that gently suggest that scampering down to wriggle your fingers in the water is perhaps not the wisest idea.

At the start of the path Ben and I choose, the snow has iced over to such an extent that it's difficult to make out footprints, and it occurs to me that at some point this morning we could get lost—the possibility exists, at least, if we're dumb or not careful and decide to trek through the brush instead of stick to the shoreline. This occurs to me without worry. I've only ever been lost once in my life, and even then far from hopelessly so. Four days into my first stint at sleepaway camp, on a hike through the woods of southeast Ohio, a girl named Haley and I were sent back to camp for more water. I was happy for the assignment: though we had to abide by the buddy system on the trail ("Let your partner out of sight / You'll sleep a restless sleep tonight"), the bathrooms back at camp had real plumbing and functional doors, and I was in a rather urgent state of affairs. We turned around and soon had no bearings, no water, and no idea how to use a compass, which didn't matter because we also didn't have a compass. I remember having a sort of intellectual understanding that we were lost, but whatever panic I believed I ought to be feeling was entirely trumped by sheer relief when I told Haley I'd be right back and went behind a tree and crouched in blissful solitude. I remember that the sun was shining and the birds were chirping, and that at that moment I could identify not a single care in the world.

A fact: we have, all of us, two kinds of matter in our brains. Grey matter is composed of neurons and supports processing and cognition. White matter is composed of glial cells and axons that protect those neurons and act as the tissue that transmits messages from grey matter to grey matter—it is this that allows us to learn, to reason, to plan, to remember. When white matter is locally damaged, the brain can find alternative routes that bypass the damaged area in order to maintain functional connections between various areas of grey matter. This is how railroad foreman Phineas Gage got shot through the brain by a large iron rod in a rock blasting accident in 1848 and lived to talk about it. But in a person with dementia, the white matter is damaged generally, all over the brain. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, in which one's nerves gradually die after being strangled by expanding plaques of amyloid proteins.

There is no peace afforded to its victims, slowly rendered strangers in their own skulls.

I'm the first one to spot the harrier circling high above the brush as we round a bend. It's only a hawk, it's not why we came here, but I point up at it anyway and Ben cuts off mid-sentence, and it doesn't change its flight path-why would it? We are hushed and pointing and I am struck at once violently and welcomingly, softly, as if the hawk itself has collided with my chest, by the thought that we are not why it came here either. Ben grins.

They're called MTBIs now-mild traumatic brain injuries-but they're known colloquially as concussions, and a concussion is just the action of striking. You get whacked on the head, or you accelerate too quickly without running into anything (think whiplash), and the brain strikes the inside of the skull. Only ten percent of concussions result in permanent disability. But studies within the past year have revealed MRIs of concussed brains to look remarkably similar to those afflicted with certain strains of dementia. The patients suffer from the same sleep-wake disturbances and distraction by white noise. Nobody's going so far as to claim there's a direct cause and effect relationship at play, but they are beginning to say at least this: that an unexpectedly serious loss of cognitive ability, it turns out, has got something to do with repeated blows to the head.

There is a strong chance that I will get lost again, though probably not today. One concussion halves your threshold level when it comes to sustaining future impacts without issue, and a second concussion halves it again, and I've had fourteen. I kind of set myself up for it. Not only was I unlucky enough for my genes to predispose me to a height of (if I'm feeling generous) 5'2" at a rate that put my face in most adults' elbow-swinging range for a solid fraction of my teenage years, but I also chose to play softball, where I spent the majority of my time at shortstop and catcher attempting to get in the way of either ball or ballplayer. And even there, a good proportion of these concussions were my own fault: running headlong into a chain-link fence to reach a pop-up in foul territory, standing anywhere but behind our most erratic pitcher while she warmed up with our backup catcher, getting momentarily distracted (while crouching behind the plate) by a mass exodus of pigeons out in right and catching a fastball with my face mask-that's on me. The first concussion I was ever diagnosed with resulted from a rather enthusiastic game of Verbal Conjugation Hacky Sack in 8th grade Spanish class accompanied by a grand and accidental nose-dive into the corner of a table in the hallway. "Yo tengo," I proclaimed, and then confidently strutted in the opposite direction of the classroom. At the end of senior year I was bestowed the superlative "Biggest Klutz," a nod, I was told, not to my gracelessness (I could tap dance and figure skate if not with the best of them then at least with the rest of them), but rather to my impressive gift for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That's the easiest way to tell it, but it's not the whole truth. There's another way to tell it. I have had to relearn how to use chopsticks, how to paint my nails with my left hand, and how to say "vegan peach milkshake" without tripping over the consonants. I've been getting steadily worse at matching faces with names. One time I saw an MRI of my own brain that showed a spot the size of a nickel in my cerebellum. Then I saw the bill, half-hidden under the rest of the mail on the dining room table, and I cried. Another time I was the cause of a phone call to my mother from a woman she'd spoken with only once telling her that her first-born had been hit in the head with an aluminum bat, was currently unconscious, and would definitely need stitches and probably a parent present as well. I remember my mom's face four hours later when the ER nurse at Nationwide Children's Hospital asked her about our home life, and I remember that when she held my hand on the drive back to softball camp and stayed late that evening to gently tip my head back in a ladies' room sink and wash the blood from my hair her hands were warm. That's the other way to tell that story, and while it's certainly less comfortable, it's still easy. I know which words to choose, which events to include, if I want to make this thing a tragedy. But that's too simple, and more importantly, it's not all the way true either.

The brush on our right opens up into a small clearing overlooking a pile of grey-black boulders, frosted with a thick layer of snow untouched but by the wind. This is all that exists between us and the ocean, which as far as I can tell extends infinitely. I've stood at the bay before. This is the ocean. We stand in silence together for a moment-even the sparrows are quiet-and then suddenly Ben crouches and hurls a snowball at the rocks. It blooms splendidly on the nearest one's northern face. After a moment I turn to go. Ben offers me a snowball and I shake my head.

"Come on," he says.

"I'm just totally okay not leaving my mark here," I tell him, and then I hear how it sounds and I apologize.

We come to an "observation platform," a small stage with two pairs of binoculars bolted to poles of wildly varying heights, and press our brows to the sights, Ben on tiptoes and me with bent knees. I've never been a Girl Scout. Maybe that's why the idea of unintrusiveness, the motivation behind "leave no trace," seems to me a matter not of instruction but of personal virtue. I like watching. I can see ducks, eiders brown and quivering and more enormous than I've ever seen.

"They're enormous," I say.

There's more to say about them, of course, but I only know what I've seen, and that's never enough, not for a true story. And so I don't tell it, and we look on silently, and the ducks float by, which is fine by me. And as far as I know they'll float by long after I forget the word for what they are, which is fine by me too.

On the drive back we take the scenic way to the highway, craning our necks back at the point and at a bird sanctuary and finally at a murder of crows perched on a telephone wire at a three-way intersection. It's just a stop sign, but no one's behind us, so we linger.

Ben just goes ahead and says it. "We didn't see a single snowy owl."

I stare straight ahead at the road. Something shifts in the air outside and the crows take flight all at once and I put my foot on the gas pedal and we go on.

