

Gliders Though They Be

by Carol Emshwiller

They live, as we do, by the shadows, by the warmth of stones on sunny days, by fissures in rocks. They scramble, skulk, and skitter—as we do. They die, as we do, by the sky, by the trees. Live by black brush, prickly poppies. Die by the drop and dive and skim of the masters from the air.

You'll be right in among them, doing everything their way. You'll be trying to like their kinds of food. You'll be spitting out pin feathers. In spite of yourself you'll say, Oh, oh, oh. And you'll have to sing their songs of self-satisfaction, but don't forget you're one of Us.

Find the ins and outs of their warrens. The windings and dead ends, the escape hatches. Know their ditches, the views from their hills ...

They call themselves *The* Creatures, as if we weren't. They call their section of the land *The* Place as if our place wasn't as much a place as theirs. They say they live at the center of the world as though we don't.

That's all right; let them think what they have to think.

Love your enemies. You'll *have* to. Hide your distaste. But you won't have to kiss them unless you want to. Though sometimes our kind does fall in love with their kind, so soft and pink, so thin, so close at hand, as they will be to you. Our kind always thinks such love is a mistake, but I say, all the better. (You'll be thinking your new babies will take to the air along with theirs. Don't count on it.)

Though they keep calling it that, remember they can't fly. It's only gliding. And their wings... They aren't really wings, just a few feathers in with their fur. But they're the big problem. Or, rather, the problem is us ... that we have none. In all other ways we're exactly like them. They crawl around just like we do. Rush from hideout to hideout, all the time looking up to investigate the sky. They squeak out warnings just like we do. We might as well be them, though they wouldn't have us.

Bring a sharp knife. Not to kill—of course not—but to ... *you* know. Be sure to get them just before they're fledged. After that, success will be unlikely. Every single one you cut will be a blow in our favor.

It all depends on them; everything depends on them; it always has. Though now everything depends on you.

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We can't imagine what our nubs are for except to show we're kin with them. We never fledge. Maybe we haven't tried hard enough—haven't spent enough time dropping out of trees or leaping after grasshoppers. But who among our young ones hasn't broken a leg from trying something foolish that those others can do without even thinking.

Perhaps it's all in the mind, and we're not thinking the right thoughts. Or perhaps it's fear of falling that forces them to fledge. Maybe they push their little ones off lower branches—pry their toes up one by one and then push. Or break the branch out from under them. If they fall and keep on falling, they'll fledge soon enough. They'll have to. Being harsher on our own young might be the only way.

Nubs are ugly. Wings ... so delicate, so optimistic ... are lovely. Even so, it'll be easy for one of us to hide among them. Wear a vest or hang a scarf over where your wings ought to be, and you can pass for them. Go!

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They have no trees! That's my first shock. Hills and valleys ... mounds of loose dirt next to entrances, yes, piles of rocks just like home, and bushes ... You'd think they'd have trees. I wasn't told the most important thing. Perhaps they have gnawed them all down as a safety measure—which it surely is. Perhaps they don't ever say, Die by the trees, as we say.

But then I see they do have ... *one* ... just one huge tree off in the middle of their compound. It's the largest I've ever seen. They must take great care of it. Keep it watered. We had no idea they lived like this.

I wear a vest that hides my nubs. Thank goodness there are some of them that are of our bluish color. We're larger than they are, but not by much. Perhaps that's why we can't glide. Though why don't we fledge? And why have these ugly nubs in the first place?

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I had skittered along with others of their kind. I joined a hunting group, bringing back voles, locusts, beetles ... I had nothing hanging from my belt, but many others didn't either. Since I'm bigger than most of them, I thought to wrestle something from one of the smaller ones, but then I thought better of it.

Now, through the gates and into their treeless ... almost treeless compound. I hope I don't look too surprised as I enter.

It's neater than ours. And in spite of having no trees (except that one), they've made plenty of places for shade and to hide under. Little lean-tos and platforms; prickly poppies are growing right on top of some of them.

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Handsome though I am (and especially so in my red vest—or so my own kind tells me), right away they squint at me. Some clack their teeth. Perhaps I remind them of Us. I puff up so as to look even larger, though I lose some of my shine that way. I know that's not a good idea, considering I'll look even more like one of Us, but I want to scare them as much as they're scaring me. I become myself. Or, rather, I

become Us.

I hum a tune I know is theirs—I *think* is theirs—we always said it was theirs, but what do we really know of them? By the looks of their one-tree land, even less than we thought.

They must have been the right things to do because a large female evaluates me carefully. She has a reddish cast, pink eyes, lashes as long as her whiskers. Each eyelash and each whisker has three colors, brown, white, and pink. Even though she's one of theirs, she's superb.

With my own, I'd chitter or some such, but I don't know what works with them. And I don't want to spark any jealousy among their males or attract attention to myself. But I do clack my teeth a few times.

Females are larger than males, and she is one of their largest. But they're not fighters. They're no good for anything but having children. If cornered or if any little ones are in danger, even if not their own, they become much worse than any male could ever be, but I doubt that fighting will be called for if, when I cut, I do it out of sight.

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We—I and the hunting group—advance toward the center of the compound. When we're not far from their tree, I leave the group and enter a burrow—up the lookout mound of loose dirt at the doorway and then down, down, down. Just like home.

Soon I hear singing coming from below. Female singing. When I get deeper and closer, I stop and listen. You have to be born to their kind of music to understand it. Same with their kind of dancing (head bobbing up and down—exactly like a lizard trying to attract a female). Bla, bla, bla goes their poetry. But as I listen to the song, I can tell there's a pattern to it, and the voice is delightful: squeaky and shrill. Were it used as a warning signal, there's none who'd not hear and obey. I feel shivers up and down my spine.

They told me, go ahead, love. Might be the best way to hide. And the best way to find out whether it's our only way to survive. They said, "Some of us, as you are, are handsome and bold. Do whatever it takes. Become them as best you can."

Almost all our compounds have gone over to their side. It may be that we have nothing else to do but pretend we're them, except we don't know how. The how, is my job. (Along with the cutting, which will make them more like Us.)

I step closer and around the corner so I can see. There's a large room hollowed out and the floor covered with glittery jay feathers. What a singer she is! I can hardly believe her high notes. Higher than I've ever heard. Out in the open air her song would carry for miles. I don't doubt but that I may have heard her screeches as far away as from our own land. And what a remarkable size to her! Except for her pink, you'd think she was one of ours. Her wings lie, folded under her arms. They glisten in the glow of the burrow. I wonder, at her size, can she really glide? We've heard that sometimes their females get so big they can no more glide than we can.

I flatten my fur to give it more glow. I enter boldly. Everyone has squatted down, but I stand in the back—and stare. I can't help it. Even if I didn't want to, I couldn't not stare—her legs so delicate, her feet so small, the bulk of her, her front teeth that peep out as she sings. I wonder if how I feel shines out from my eyes. But then it's in the eyes of all of them, males and females alike.

I try to approach her after the performance, but of course everybody else wants to, too. We do look at each other, both of us half a head above the others.

I think how good we'd look, her pink next to my blue. She must know that, too.

After a bit I see I'm not going to get near her with all those admirers crowding around. I leave. I explore the burrow. There isn't much more to it but the escape hatches. And I feel the need for air after all that emotion.

But just as I come out, the call comes. Almost as beautiful as their singer's high notes. Some other singer on guard duty. Sky alert. We all rush back in. After a moment we peek out to see what's going on. Striped neck, striped tail, speckled underbelly . . . Quite beautiful, actually. Sky folk always are. Already high, the flap, flap, flap. A baby shrieks—and shrieks and shrieks. Somewhere a mother calls out her good-bye—calls out her love. The shrieks get farther and farther away though the mother keeps calling out long after it's useless. But it isn't as if we don't all expect this.

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It's over. Everybody comes out. Not a one stays inside. Back with my own we do the same. I mill around with the others. We squeak and pat each other. We clack our teeth. It would be a perfect time for another of the sky folk to get us. They would have to take a big one now that the little ones have all been pushed back inside. Though if they're like our own, there's always one or two who find a way to sneak out some back door.

She's there of course. They're still crowding around her. I wonder if I'll ever be able to get close. I ask her name. "Lee-ah of the far north holes." "Ah, the far north hole's Lee-ah." A name equal to her bulk, her poise, her tiny feet.

Everyone is still looking up. I step around them, working my way closer, patting shoulders as I pass the others. I make sure my vest hides where my wings should be. Closer. Then close at last. I whisper. "Lee-ah of the far north." She smiles—her beautiful smile, gnawing teeth showing in the front. I can see she's glad to see me.

I say, "Except that I've met you and heard and seen your brilliance, a sad time."

"A sorrow." She raises her head as though to bare her throat to me. A good sign. Then says, "And you, from where?"

I bare my throat, too, but I had hoped she wouldn't ask the important question so soon. If they're like us, I have to come from far enough away from her north and yet not be from my own north. I say, "Also the north, but the east of the north."

That's the truth. One step farther up from their north and I'd be at home with my own.

It must be all right, because she says, "I do love those from the east north." I know what she means by that.

She shakes her shoulders and spreads her wings a little bit as though to show them off.

I shake, too, and hope my vest still hides my nubs. I say, "Glorious." I show my front teeth.

She asks if I sing. I say, "No." She says, "It doesn't matter. Not at all." Then, "Will you join the contest? Please."

I don't know what she means, and it must show on my face.

"The contest!"

I squint and clack my teeth, not from choice but from nervousness.

"For all of us. And for me! For me!"

"Of course I will."

"Until then," she says and moves away, magnificently—swaying side to side on purpose to lure me.

But I'm too anxious to be tempted to the extent she wants me to be right now. I have to find out what she's talking about without seeming to ask. I worry. We have contests, too, but I already suspect what theirs might be. *Of course* would be. Gliding! Probably from higher and higher branches. That's what that tree is for. Once you really look at it you can see worn spots and claw marks, branches flattened out into platforms. I can't be seen doing that. Or even trying to do that. Besides, I'd break every leg—at the least. I don't have to join the mating contest, but I want to.

If I don't do it, I can just hear it. "Lost your wings? An accident? The punishment for some crime? What crime is that, to make you one of the Lesser? Go up north where you belong."

Until I came here, I had no idea they call us the Lesser. Though that makes sense. Except we're so large and strong, and we have such a beautiful iridescent blueness.

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For the next few days, as I wait for the contest, I show off by lifting things none of them can. I carry heavy loads for long distances. I feel superior to all of them. And I have managed to get to three young ones who can't yet squeak out to their mothers what I've done and removed their first hints of feathers. That leaves no scar, and leaves them fledglings who will never fledge.

I have an entourage of admirers. Young ones who want to be just like me. Several females want me to glide for them when the time of the contest comes, but I'll stay true to my exquisite pink singer.

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I remember when I was small and had heard about these others. I couldn't believe that I was Us and not them ... I was sure I could glide. A group of us climbed a tree and jumped, squeaking out our triumph. One died, two broke legs as did I. All of us bruised and chastened. Almost all our young males try it. After that, we stick to our own contests, broad jump, high jump, skittering ...

We try not to let our little ones hear about those others, so like us, until they're old enough to understand we're Us, and that we can't glide no matter how hard we try.

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Here, they've been practicing their glides. The handsomest, the youngest, the most fit. I'm all of those, but of course I don't practice. At least not that way. I'm awed by the heights they leap from. I'd be frightened just climbing up that high and looking down. So that's what I practice—just climbing up a bit higher than I'm comfortable. I sit on a branch. I make myself stay there until I've stopped hanging on so tight my limbs hurt—until I've stopped sweating...stopped breathing hard. Then I go up a little higher and do it all over again.

I miss the afternoons of Lee-ah's singing. I have to do it then because there's nobody around except a few sentinels. Thank goodness none posted near their tree.

There are two times a day I dare practice, when she sings and in the moonlight. (Though the ground is all in shadows, it's even scarier then.) I get to know the tree so well that I know every branch.

She sings for them every day at midday. It's the time for a rest. It's hot, and the burrows are cool. Everyone hunkers down in that vaulted cavern to listen. They just leave a few guards outside. That would be a perfect time for Us to get almost all of them in one operation. All we'd have to do is close off the entrance and station warriors at the escape hatches.

When I'm up on the branches, I imagine launching myself into the air, leaping away, as far out as I can to avoid the lower branches, my limbs spread. (I've watched how they do it.) I imagine the glide. It doesn't help to think about it. I feel sicker. I cling all the harder. Besides, I know it's hopeless. And when I practice by moonlight I worry about owls. Almost more than the height. They're so silent. I'd be prey and never know it until I was in the sky.

I'm so busy and exhausted with my practicing ... my useless practicing ... (How can it do any good? I'll never glide.) I'm so busy with myself I've only cut the beginning wings of those three fledglings. I did, though, get better at looking down without trembling and sweating. I can walk across the highest branches with assurance.

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Someone must have seen me climbing up and then down again without gliding. As I sit, half asleep ... (I was up much of the night practicing. I was feeling good about myself. In just a few days I had mastered my fear of heights.) ... I hear someone whisper, hot breath right into my ear, the clack of teeth, whiskers pricking me ... He says, "You're not what you pretend." It's one of the guards. I know him, he's usually stationed at the escape hatch of the main burrow. He has a piercing whistle. I've told him how much I admire it. I also said I knew what a hard job he has, standing up straight to watch for so long. But he's no friend. "I know your kind. Always trying to be us. Second best if best at all. Third best. Fourth best. There is no second best to us. Who are you?"

"One of your own."

"A half-breed."

"Of course not."

"Live by the leap. Live by the song. Die by the red tail, or by those of the long red neck. Live by the granary." His red eyes glint in a nasty way. "Or live by someone else's granary."

"Our granary, I suppose."

"Why not?"

"Well, you've got them all now." I've revealed myself. "Are you telling?"

He wiggles his nose as though I'd told a joke. Perhaps I have.

He says, "I'd rather wait and see what happens at the leaping."

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The day of the great flights (they keep calling it flying), dozens of sky folk whirl on thermals so high we can just barely see them. Guards with rock launchers stand by. First aid stands by. Runners with stretchers stand by to rush the wounded to burrows.

The leapers climb, first to the height they've decided is the highest they can safely glide, and then they climb higher.

The leap, the dive ... the lovely glide, arms out as though sky folk ... those little shiny wings spread ... And if they survive, it's a leap into the breeding pool. Perhaps this glide contest is exactly for creatures like me. To winnow out us lesser ones. Make sure the offspring will all at least glide. At least that. Will all be them and not Us.

All goes well for the first few leaps, but then someone lies crumpled. An eagle drops ... falls ... straight down, as they always do, wings tight to his sides, and before the stone throwers can even begin to think to do anything, the young one is scooped up. Again they, and I also, call out good-bye and love. Then there's silence. Not just us, but all birds, the jays, the quail, and even the crickets, even the cicadas, even they, feel the danger. And there's still plenty of sky folk circling up there, so high they're mere specks.

Even so, they start the glides again. I thought they'd stop and I was free until the next time. But they cheer each other more vigorously than before. Call out, "Fly, fly, fly," as if they could, and with more bravado.

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Shortly before my turn, Lee-ah tells me I don't need to go too high. She says she doesn't love me for my glide, and she doesn't want me to suffer even one broken leg. She'll love me no matter that they'll ridicule me if I'm the lowest jumper. She says she's not afraid of ridicule. She says she had plenty herself before she learned to sing. Maybe she suspects. Maybe she already knows all our offspring will be lesser ones. She doesn't need to see me leap ... or rather not leap ... to prove it.

I wish she'd told me this before. It might have made a difference.

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I'm fearless. Even more so, here in front of them all. I climb higher than any of them have dared. I might as well. To one like me there's no difference, high or even higher. I look down on them ... at all those who call us the lesser ones.

If I'm quick ... If I'm clever ...

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Many shake their heads as though to warn me. I wonder how many know.

Lee-ah stands below, her arms raised as though to catch me. I hope she doesn't. I'd kill her if I fell on her. But then she starts to sing, and everybody turns to look at her. They're instantly enthralled. They squat down to listen as they always do. She must know who I am. She's giving me a chance. Perhaps I can climb down the back of the tree, come out at the bottom from around the trunk. It's thick as ten of us. Enough to hide me all the way down. But I choose the doom I've already picked out for myself.

My branch is higher, therefore thinner. I've already gnawed it halfway though. I won't launch myself out beyond all the other, lower branches, limbs spread, nubs in full view. I want to come down right *on* the lower branches. I bounce on my branch as though getting ready to leap.

I come crashing down, hitting one branch after the other, reaching out to each as I fall. A feat of skill and strength for one of my kind. And I wish my kind could see me. If I ever have the chance to tell them, they'll not believe.

Even as I fall I'm thinking I hope nobody examines the branch. I gnawed it as best I could to make it look as if it broke on its own, but I'm sure it still has my teeth marks.

Actually nobody sees me. Lee-ah is still singing.

The last part of the fall is the most dangerous. Nearer the ground, there are no branches to grab. I'll have to trust my legs. I wrapped them to strengthen them, but it won't help much.

As I fall and grab branches, I break some of their best leaping platforms.

The last drop. The worst. I plummet down. Crash. I'm so shocked, I hardly know what's happened. I'm on the ground ... broken legs for sure, maybe all of them. And Lee-ah, on her knees beside me. Looking up, teeth clacking. From fear or a warning to the ...

The hawk drops. Almost into Lee-ah's arms. They rush to save her. They mustn't lose their singer.

But I'm grabbed. I'm whooshed away so fast. So high. The hawk's squawk and the sound of wings drowning out Lee-ah's calling out, "Oh love. Oh love."

Higher yet ... I see the whole world. I even see my own land. Little dots that are my own kind. Unaware

of me. Crawling from hillock to hillock. We all do. Even these others, gliders though they be, do little more than that. Whatever they call it, it isn't flying. The only way any of us, we or they, ever really fly, is like *this*.

I had not thought there'd be so much wind. So much flap, flapping, and shaking, and that it would be so dazzling. So spectacular. I had not thought ... the world so all embracing. Astonishing. If only I could tell them.

The End