

Empty Nest

Bird-form finial,
ca. 500–1500 AD.
Colombia: Zenú, gold,
3-13/16 x 2-9/16 x 4-1/4
in. Dallas Museum of Art.
The Nora and John Wise
Collection. Gift of Mr.
and Mrs. Jake L. Hamon,
the Eugene McDermott
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Mrs. John D. Murchison.
(1976.W.438)

ONE JUNE MORNING, I discovered a baby blue jay squawking in the garden. He was too weak and undeveloped to fledge, but I left him alone. Humans who intervene with good intentions often cause young animals to die by driving away parents hiding nearby. Through several painful experiences, I had learned to be very cautious about crossing the line between humans and wild animals. So after scanning futilely for adult jays, I reluctantly left. Three hours later, the little blue jay still cried miserably, his beak sagging on the ground. A hawk or weasel would soon hear him. After another hour, I knew he had been truly abandoned, probably bumped from an overcrowded nest so the others would live. It's nature's cold, practical way. Despite knowing this, I carried the helpless nestling to our screened porch. It was either death or our world now. Exhausted from his trauma, the little fellow feebly pecked once at my hand, then lay quietly—awaiting his end, I supposed.

He would—like most wild animals—refuse to eat, slump despondently in a corner and die. But I tried anyway, touching his beak with a stub of worm held in blunt tweezers. He nearly impaled himself choking and gurgling it down, snapping the tweezers for more. Then he assumed his begging pose—beak gaped wide, squalling pitifully, wings trembling. Nestlings do this to attract food from their parents. I fed him more worm. And more. In the next hour my wife and I scrounged up wild black raspberries, peanut butter, peas, corn, slugs, insects, and favorite-of-favorites—mashed potatoes. There seemed to be nothing he *didn't* like. He begged at the sight of tweezers, at the sound of our voices, and finally, like other advanced creatures, at the hum of the microwave.

“He’s so ugly!” Carol said. “Why couldn’t we find a chickadee?” Booper—named for his cry—was gray, not blue, and huge chicken legs propelled his tiny body. Yellow, scaly skin showed under his scraggly feathers—which sprouted from inside white calcium tubes. With his beak, Booper slid these tubes off so each feather fanned open into brilliant white and blue. Some tubes he only pulled halfway, leaving feathers resembling hourglasses. When excited, he bristled his stubby head feathers into spikes, punk-like. He was a jay version of an eleven-year-old growing in six directions at once. Within a day he perched on my extended finger to tour the screened porch. I was amazed that he crossed so easily into our world. Soon he napped on my chest when I read, tugging my whiskers to make himself drowsy. As we lounged together easily, it seemed that I had also crossed into his world.

In a few weeks his tail feathers sprouted, and he careened wildly about the porch on first flights. But he could only fly up, so he’d cross from floor to window (crash!) to storage shelf (crash!), then squall for help down so he could fly again. Meanwhile, feeding him had become a relentless hunt for grubs and worms. When I heard blue jays outside chattering, I wondered if the parent jays snickered at my toil. When neighbors watched, I pretended I was gathering specimens by acting vaguely scientific. A professor who has often behaved strangely can get away with that.

We taught Booper to forage so he wouldn’t be hooked on hand feeding. In a pan of dirt we sprinkled live sow bugs—gray crustaceans found under wet wood. He turned one eye to the pan, pecked a bug, tossed it into the air, opened his beak and caught it on the way down. Bravo! He gave a satisfied “whirrup” and repeated the same process—twenty times. I couldn’t believe what he put away—or the number of logs I rolled to catch crawling things for him. I pounced triumphantly on squiggly, slimy creatures as if I’d found gold nuggets. So much for my own civilization.

After sating himself, Booper would store leftover bugs in any handy crevice—say a shirt pocket. But no hole interested Booper more than the one in my ear. He invariably opened his beak inside holes—perhaps to measure their warehousing capacity. Doing this in my ear always enlivened me. He did “get” me once. When I pried out the wet object, I was relieved it was only a bean and not half a worm. At other times he surprised me with his consideration—even courtesy. When he felt the urge while playing on our laps or shoulders, he would hop to the edge where he could eject his gooey white sac without splattering us. He’d watch it hit the floor, give a satisfied “whirrup,” then resume play. The thought of tiny bathroom tissue crossed my mind, but there’s only so much civilization a human should give a bird.

Booper soon found an ideal perch—my head. He’d slip and scramble in my hair to nestle in. I tried to appreciate the intimacy, to see it his way, but couldn’t put aside the fear he’d have an accident up there. Had I lost the parenting touch? Was I too snobbish and set in human ways? Carol said I was doing “fine” (translation: “better you than me”). The cats made their own suggestions about our new baby. They stared in disbelief through the window facing the porch as the twittering thing fluffed out on my head. They twitched paws and gurgled in their throats, “Grab-it, grab-it, grab-it!”

The games Booper learned didn’t endear him to them either. No mindless romps after string. Booper climbed onto a two-foot model boat and marched the deck with an oar in his beak, raising and lowering his head spikes and chirping commands. Guests “oohed” as Booper dealt cards from a pack, and Carol trained him to find a pea hidden under one of three thimbles that she moved around like a carnival shell game. He rarely picked incorrectly, and in weak moments I was tempted to see if I could make money off him at the local tavern. Surely he could pick the right thimble better than most of the drinkers. Then again, being curious, he’d probably dip into unattended beer glasses, and I’d face the shameful prospect of carrying home a drunken blue jay.

In saner moments, I remembered that we were testing fate’s borders between the wild and human. Was he to remain a caged animal the rest of his life? Booper could only be a temporary guest in human society; he had a natural life cycle to fulfill and was becoming too civilized. Now, when I sat in my favorite porch chair to read a book, instead of sleeping, he pecked at the rows of letters as if reading along, chattered incessantly like a commentary on the plot and tried to turn the page before I finished.

We read that human-reared fledglings go wild within a week of release. So, when we had trained him to forage and his flying im-

proved, we opened the door. But with freedom a flap away, Booper froze. All day he crouched on the edge of the porch like a kid afraid to dive into a cold lake. Not until the next day did he take off on his first beautiful flight into a hemlock tree. We cheered, and he preened wings, stretched and spiked head feathers in self-glory. Freedom! He took more flights, returned a few times, then vanished. I brushed away a tear and the droppings on the porch.

Two days later he returned, begging for food, just like our Gen-X children. So we built a feeding station, and Booper came daily to eat and help around the house. He'd flap at our bedroom window at dawn to keep us from wasting the day. He did test bores in fresh cement I poured for steps. When I tiled the entryway, he pecked my tools, pushed a pencil around, and hoisted snips of tile like a union man. He brought new-found jay friends to his feeding station where they gulped peanut butter deliriously and thought him marvelously wise. For a month he hovered in some neutral zone between bird and human worlds.

One day as Carol and I walked to a neighbor's yard sale, Booper circled ten feet over our heads, squawking. We ignored people's stares at the crazy bird until he landed on my shoulder. "Heh, heh," I said. "Look, Carol. A blue jay." Then he dropped down to a table and strutted, pecking at doodads like any casual browser.

"Shoo!" a lady suggested. Booper sassed her with a raucous call while bobbing up and down. As we reddened, he cocked his eye on the shiny coins in the money box. I grabbed him before his fragile morals could be tested.

Eventually, of course, we helped Booper return completely to the wild. He had only been lent to us. Humans ache to cross over, to touch the strange, wonderful creatures that share the world with us, but most of the time these can be only temporary crossings; all creatures must ultimately live in their own skins and largely by their own genetic rules. Yet I know Booper was changed by his upbringing. Somewhere out there a flock of jays puzzle over his weird, humanized antics, and I wonder if Booper thinks they are slow-witted. Will he pass some of what he learned from us to his offspring? I'm glad he's free and wild; still, on a warm June morning as I lie in bed and listen to birds stirring, I can almost hear an insistent pecking at the window.

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