

# Birdman of the Mountain

Sean Arthur Joyce

I know a bent old poet who lives in a small bird kingdom on the outskirts of town. His matted hair and mossy beard once belonged to that crazy Russian prophet Rasputin, I'm told. But the pale of his green eyes were once the eyes of a boy who sat in the back row of class. He cried whenever teachers made him stand up and stutter some arcane formula of math or grammar. By year's end his exercise books were embroidered in Bic pen planets, suns and birds—a child's temple wall at Karnak or the Gates of Babylon studded with bulls and lions and fabulous fanged monsters.

While other boys said they wanted to grow up to be firemen, police or astronauts, he always wanted to be a bird and fly. That's all. Fly like a bird. In his dreams he could rise up from Earth on a thought, light as siskin down, and drink in the world's tapestry of fields and meadows unrolling in a wondrous gasp beneath him.

Like any winged creature, the cages of school and work terrified him. But when the Holy Spirit's dove of inspiration descended, he could work 'til dawnlight bled away the night. Neighbours and even family said he'd never amount to anything. They said he lived in a dream world, which suited him fine. As a man, he had his own proverb: *"Dreams are just the other half of the waking world, and we demean them at our peril."*

His mother used to say birdsong was his native tongue—he learned easily their countless dialects. All the birds adored him for speaking to them in their own languages. Naturally his neighbours thought he'd lost it, talking to birds. But their yards were empty of birdsong while his trees shimmered with winged life. *"The birdies have shown me a gateway to their realm,"* he once told a friend, *"and it exists side by side with this one: Sleep. Just another doorway."*

He was fond of telling the story about the hummingbird family. Every August they danced outside his kitchen window to thank him for the food before disappearing on the arduous trek to the Gulf of Mexico. His yard was an orchard of apples, plums and pears,

brilliant with spring blossoms, heavy with summer fruit. The birdhouses covering his roof formed an eccentric skyline of cedar and birchbark bird condos. Whole families of pine siskins, robins, and Steller's jays raised their young there. Proudly they presented their chicks to him each spring and summer. They spoke to him of their joys and trials—hiding from hawks and ravens, waiting for thunder to finish pounding out its angry beat, a delicious fluttering bath in a mountain stream.

And then there was the Steller's jay he could never forget, who broke his wing. He'd followed it around the orchard, pleading with it to try, to let him help, to hold on somehow. But its heart was broken when his sky motor was stalled. The jay's choice was clear: death rather than life chained to the ground, never to slice down the wind again. It broke the old poet in half to watch.

Soon he knew all the birds' histories, the rise and fall of their tiny kingdoms. And the sublime songs of their master singers—poets in their own right. Although under constant guard against the lethal plunge of an osprey or hawk, there were no wars in their world. It pained him that his neighbours laughed when he told them that. They said such a thing was unheard of, impossible. *"Poor old fool, you're out of touch,"* they said. He decided to stay the hell out of their way.

Once on a stifling summer evening a drunken bunch of teenagers invaded his orchard, pulling down birdhouses and kicking over birdbaths. It took him two days to restore the bird kingdom to peace. He wept the whole time. For once even his neighbours felt pity and shame and forced the kids to apologize. He stood hunched before them like a chick fluffing its down to keep warm in a stiff breeze. When he raised his river-clear eyes to theirs, he said: *"I'll tell you a secret, if you promise to never do anything like this again."*

The lure caught them like trout on a hook. They apologized profusely, sincerely even. *"When I die, my birdies will carry my soul into the clouds. They have promised and they are creatures of their word. They say the soul of every being is light as down. Only sorrow, regret and a heavy conscience weighs it down. The body belongs to Earth. The*

*soul belongs to the sky. We are more like birds than we know.*” The kids looked side-to-side, unsure what to say. No one had ever spoken to them this way before.

Gradually time ground him down like sand on a lens. Sometimes the body must be broken so the spirit can see. It was as if the Earth was gradually drawing him down deeper into herself. His back grew hunched and wracked with pain. His steps became more mincing, as if he were counting each one 'til his last. A kindly neighbour lady named Betty offered him arthritis medicine but he merely said, *“No thanks. My birdies will take care of me. We take care of each other.”*

Finally the old poet died very quietly in his ramshackle house. So quietly in fact that it took several days for the neighbours to notice. Silence drifted in thick as snow on the peaks of the Valhalla mountains. His birdhouses and feeders were strangely empty. As if every bird in the village had died or left the country, offended that such a great, simple soul had gone unrecognized by his own tribe.

Later that week, Betty had a dream. In it she saw the old poet rising up into the clouds surrounded by flocks of siskins, chickadees and jays. They used the soft velocity of their wingbeats to carry him on a sling of air. This, she realized, overcame the body's natural reluctance to kiss the Earth goodbye. *“You see? They never break a promise,”* he told her in the dream. *“They are creatures of great love.”* By the following week, Betty had begun feeding the old poet's birds. She says she feels him walking the orchard, scattering invisible seed. When the moon is full she can hear him singing, the tones of all birds rolled into one breathless, amazed voice...