

Five Auguries

An Essay on Navigating Cancer

1. The Mourning Dove

The dawn after the diagnosis, when your fiancé hops on the first flight west to his mother and his boyhood home, you will know two things. First, that the CT scan showed four inoperable masses, and second, that everything is about to change. When your search for wisdom in the haze above the airport reveals nothing more, listen to the mourning dove. This is a bird with a message. She is an augury, or perhaps an augur herself. Her soothsaying comes in the way she holds her distance on the power line. Listen for the urgency in her feathers, the muted coo before the sudden take-off. Notice how she does not yet fly.

And don't fall for the obvious symbolism. No mourning yet—your role is to support. The task at hand is to load up the car with a summer's worth of stuff and drive three days with the cat perched on the center console. As you pack, the cat will watch the mourning dove through the kitchen window, green eyes trained on the dove's black beads, bloodthirsty. Think about death as much as you must, but don't ask anybody those questions.

2. The Sandhill Crane

You will see a pair of sandhills browsing in the roadside ditch when you first arrive. You don't know them well, but you love people who love them. The ditches are thick with daisies, sedges, rushes, grass-pinks. The cranes will simply go about their business, eating whatever it is that they eat. In the art of auguring, cranes symbolize immortality and good fortune, but they fly with their necks outstretched against the sharp blade of sunset.

When you drive by these marshes again, you will see mute swans and their young ones wading through the duckweed and pond lily. When prompted, you will teach your mother-in-law-to-be the term *cygnets*, then think to yourself that swans do not technically belong here. You will realize you don't know what young sandhill cranes are called. She wonders aloud if she will ever hold another baby. With a catch in your throat, you will silently entertain plans to move here permanently. You imagine generations of cranes returning again and again to the marsh.

3. The Great Horned Owl

You will not hear the nighttime call of the great horned owl with the fan running in the RV. That honor will be reserved for her aging chihuahua who—so you are told—hoots back to the owl in a special tone of voice. Take comfort that such a large aerial predator is ready in the woods, can act as a spirit guide if the ambulance can't come quick enough.

Sleeping in the RV it will be hot. The fan will not keep the mosquitos off you, but you will tolerate the bites as a way of absorbing some of the pain, though the raised pink envenomated bumps will do nothing about the size of the masses in his mother's lungs. One night, the stent holding open her airway will migrate into her throat. You will bargain with God to trade nine years of your life for hers. In a terrible fit, and a deep heave, she will cough up the stent like an owl pellet.

4. The Cliff Swallows

The cliff swallows are for you. They're for themselves, but symbolically you can claim them as companions. You inked their image into your skin when you longed most for independence, envied and emulated their daring migrations. You will find them first when you walk down to the river alone. Their clay and concrete nests under the bridge are bursting with the unseen mouths of swallow chicks. Each swallow is devouring scores of mosquitos, which you are allowed to relish. Each one of you is a conglomeration of cells killing and eating and creating more cells.

The swallows will peep to one another. You will count pairs—perhaps thirty—unsure you're double counting as they swoop and dart amongst

each other. Their purplish glossy backs are sleek like the varnish coating you paint on the ironwood poles at the make-your-own-walking-stick workshop. The three of you will each decorate different designs. You will paint a pair of bloodroots—he carves a river otter. She brands warrior in bold text, and if you look at just the right moment, you will see the upturned flight feathers of a smile, the rise and fall of a breath.

5. The Four-Toed Salamander

This one is not a bird. Not all auguries are. You will find two four-toed salamanders under logs in the backyard forest you will someday steward. Steady yourself for the big conversation with your own mother, trust that she will understand, that you will still visit, that you can be happy here. Ask yourself if salamanders—whose entire lives play out in these few acres—think this much about uncertainties. Tell your fiancé about your findings and be glad when his reaction is a vow—to tread lightly among the hummocks of sphagnum moss where the four-toeds communally nest. You have helped him care about someone he didn't know lived in his boyhood woods.

Let it go when the gravity of the moment you shaved her head dissipates because her hair grew back enough for her own daughter to re-shave it over the weekend. You will bond over making the wedding guest list, in brainstorming ways to transplant the hostas and the trumpet honeysuckle. Keep it to yourself that you have your own garden ideas, your own dreams for the family, the forest, the unfortellable future. You have time to transform, to talk about it. The masses are still there, but smaller, and the cough is less. The salamanders are out there, hidden, little known to the birds.