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When I was a child, I wanted to fly. Not in airplanes, helicopters, hot-air balloons, or rockets, but of my own volition — as birds and bats and butterflies flew. I was envious of their ability to fly out of harm's way at a moment's notice and their defiance of gravity's pull. But most of all I wanted to experience the sensation of flight — the lightness, the uplift of air first beneath my arms as I took off and then beneath my horizontal body. I wanted to roll, dive, rise, and bank. I didn't expect to fly above the clouds. But I did expect to skim the tree tops, to roost on chimneys and steeples, and to glide above my earthbound classmates trudging to school, one foot in front of the other. I wanted to be above it all, even if that meant wind-blown hair, dry eyes, and bugs between my teeth.

I flew in my dreams, so I knew something of sensation and possibility. In my dreams, my flight was perfect and effortless. I flew horizontally, stomach down, arms extended to the sides like wings, and nothing observable propelling me forward. But during my waking state, I was grounded. I studied my mother's college ornithology text for clues as to how birds flew. I realized I had serious anatomical limitations to overcome; my bones weren't hollow and air-filled; I hadn't a system of air sacs for added buoyancy; I hadn't massive pectoral flight muscles; I hadn't the large surface area of a pair of light-weight wings; and I was far from stream-lined.

Yet, I had heard enough stories of humans who flew during their waking state to believe it was possible. The most haunting high flyers were Daedalus and Icarus, whom I read about in Childcraft. When Daedalus realized that there was no earthly means of escape from the enormous, complex labyrinth he had constructed, he fashioned two pairs of large wings from feathers and wax and fastened them onto his and his son's shoulders. The movement of their arms would flap the wings. Daedalus and his son winged their way out of their island prison. But Icarus wasn't content with mere escape. He soared
higher and higher until finally, the heat from the near sun melted the wax holding his wings together. Icarus plunged into what is now called the Icarian Sea and drowned.

I studied the Childcraft illustration of Daedalus crafting the wings more carefully than I did the text. Daedalus’s scheme seemed workable. Birds molted; I simply had to gather their shed feathers. For the wing frames, I would gather small curved tree branches. To hold the feathers and “bones” together, I would melt my crayons. But when I realized that the project required more feathers than my neighborhood birds would shed in several years, I turned my attention to other high flyers for inspiration. I read that the Benedictine monk, Eilmer of Malmesbury, glided an entire furlong (about 220 yards) from the tower of Malmesbury Abbey in A.D. 1,000, or thereabouts. He broke both legs in the landing, which rendered him lame for life. Thereafter, he left the ground only in his prayers. The encyclopedia did not provide illustrations of Eilmer’s wings, so I do not know if they were feathered like Daedalus’s or if they were like the Devil’s membranous bat wings. Neither did the encyclopedia provide illustrations of the long white robe, pleated and folded to gather the wind, that the lunatic Turk of Constantinople wore in 1162. The turk also glided a full furlong before he crashed to the ground and broke every bone in his body, including his neck. If these flyers and others like them had realized the stabilizing necessity of a tail, their brief, injurious flights would most likely have been longer, more glorious, and fatal.

Sunday School and television also supported my belief that humans could fly, with a little assistance. Guardian angels were pictured as plain old people with bird wings attached to their shoulder blades, permitting them simultaneously to hover near and raise their benevolent hands above lost children. Jesus and Mary stood upright, their arms at their sides as they floated up into heaven, their ascension fueled by nothing but their faith and the lightness of their pure souls. Capes aided Superman and Batman. Samantha Stevens and her supernatural relatives were more flexible: sometimes they were aided by capes and broomsticks, but other times they took off with just a twitch of the nose or nod of the head. The desire to never grow up was all that Peter Pan and the Darling children needed to be airborne, though I read (in TV Guide, I believe)
that aerial wires had created the *illusion* of flight in the Mary Martin television movie version. Sunday School and television suggested that human flight and altruism were linked, though neither source was clear about cause and effect. Did human flight make charitable behavior possible or was flight the reward for such behavior? I looked past the physical and spiritual aides and concluded that human flight was simply an instance of mind over matter. If Uri Geller could bend spoons just by thinking about it, I could fly.

So, I stood in my backyard, arms extended. I shut my eyes and tensed all my of muscles, believing effort alone would vault me into the sky. Nothing happened. I didn't even hover. I stood in the loft window of Billy Ebbensmeier's garage and concentrated hard: "Fly! Fly! Fly!" I commanded myself. I pushed off from the sill with my feet, flapped my arms frantically, and hit the ground with a heavy thud. For a few seconds, I had been airborne, though that had more to do with the time it took a falling object to hit the ground than from my efforts to stay aloft. I tried more exotic incantations, using words I learned from my mother's ornithology text: "Primaries! Secondaries! Tertiaries! Flanks!" Another thud. "Axillars! Speculum! Alula! Keel!" Another thud. If will and effort alone mattered, I should have been soaring. But my body was becoming heavier, and the falls were not becoming any easier. I did not expect to fly as high as a condor (I read in the encyclopedia that an American condor had collided with an airplane at 20,000 feet) or as fast as a swift (an East Indian chimney swift was clocked at 200 miles per hour). I would have settled for a leisurely glide, one city block at a time. But the closest I came to controlled flight was that fraction of a second in ballet class when my feet left the ground in a jete.

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When I was twelve and thirteen, the world was filled with birds. Some were just beyond my reach like the gentle pigeons that nested in the eaves outside my bedroom window or the sleek, smart city crows that taunted me from atop utility poles. But other birds literally dropped at my feet. On the streets, I found bird husks: car-
flattened sprays of feathers and guts, with beaks open in permanent surprise. Pink-skinned nestlings decomposed on the sidewalk, their stomachs bloated and their eyes bulging behind blue lids. A nest of chimney swifts fell onto the log holder in our fireplace, their desperate, hungry chirps alerting us to their presence.

My mother, a biology teacher, lacked the common motherly abhorrence of the creaturely world. Whatever sick or orphaned birds my brothers, neighbors, my mother's students, or I dragged to her doorstep, she willingly took in. A horned lark scampered in a cage in the dining room. A barn owl perished in a tall circular wire cage on our screened-in front porch. Robin fledglings strained to peer over the tops of cardboard boxes. Still blind chimney swifts sprawled in a bath towel "nest," warmed by a heating pad and drank Gerber's strained veal from an eye-dropper. My two bluejays, Blueberry and Puck, both orphaned by a neighborhood cat before they knew what their wings were for, had free reign: they perched on curtain rods, chair backs, or lamp shades; they rode about the house and yard on my shoulders, head or forefinger. But my father drew the line at our offering refuge to pigeons: they were filthy, lousy, and too abundant, good only for target practice, he said.

Our object was to nurse these casualties through a vulnerable time in their lives and reintroduce them to their natural habitats, just as Joy and George Adamson had returned Elsa and the other lion cubs to the Kenyan wilds. Many of our avian charges died, which meant I did not have to face returning them into the wilds. But for those we had raised from gangly nestlings to spirited fledglings to immature adults, release was inevitable. The most difficult release for me was that of Melody, the horned lark. We took her to friends' country home, near Oakville, Iowa, where hawks posed more of a danger than BB guns, domestic cats, or cars. We set her cage, her only real home, on the ground and opened the wire door. Melody was unmoved by the presence of a piece of ungrated sky, so my mother removed her from the cage. The little lark paused a moment in my mother's open palm, raised her tufts, leapt to the ground, and slipped into the brush. Our friends reported spotting Melody near their house on several occasions, though I suspect that these comments were less statements of fact than attempts to ease my sense of loss and fears for Melody's safety.
I doubted that Puck and Blue could make it on their own in the country, since they had been hand fed all their lives. But the city was an even more hostile environment for tame birds. If I released Blue and Puck in town, chances were good that they would land on the shoulder or clothesline of an unsuspecting person who would be so frightened, he or she would call Animal Control. Neighborhood children envied my tame, mischievous pets and threatened to steal them. If I turned Puck or Blue loose, capture or violent death was a foregone conclusion. I hoped that the impulse to use their wings for more than short trips would not get the better of them.

Preparing orphaned birds for their eventual return home was not my only motive for tending to them: I expected them to reveal to me the secrets of flight. In my flight dreams, there was no take-off or landing to observe because I was always airborne. I knew that if I was to fly while I was awake, I would have to attend to these two crucial parts of the process. I observed Blue’s take-offs and landings carefully. To take flight, Blue opened his wings as he pushed off with his feet. Just before his wings were at full upstroke, he drew his legs into his body. To propel himself forward, he alternated between downstrokes and upstrokes. Co-ordination was everything. His landings were simpler. While his wings were up and his feet extended, he grasped a branch or my shoulder with his toes and then folded his wings. What was most essential in this process was that his wings opened as he pushed off. When Blue raised his wings, he created enough air beneath them to press against and raise his body. With this knowledge, I wanted to return to Billy Ebbensmeier’s garage window. I would swing my arms as I pushed off the sill with my feet; then I would tuck my legs. If the breeze was with me, I would hang in the air a few moments, perhaps even glide a furlong, before I lost altitude and struck the ground. But Billy was no longer my neighbor: his family had moved and so had mine. Even more, at almost-thirteen I wasn’t interested in crashing to the ground and moaning from my injuries in front of my peers.

By the end of the summer, all of our birds had gone on to other homes. Puck had been cornered and killed by our two dachshunds. Legions of unnamed robins had been released without much adieu. The owl’s injuries had been too extensive for our limited medical means. Only Blue remained, but with school in session, he and I
could no longer be constant companions. For the sake of safety and hygiene, he was confined to the basement. When I came home from school, I did homework or wrote stories at my desk in the basement, while Blue crammed pennies, paper clips, bobby pins, buttons, and beer tabs between the pages of my books or perched on my shoulder and whetted his beak on my shirt. He was a raucous clown who entertained me by repeating the sounds he heard: chuckles, squeaks, rattles, cat calls, the wolf whistle, bob-bob-white, and a remarkable imitation of the washing machine. But it was flight, not mimicry I was after. And Blue's wings had been all but clipped.

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Charles Schwartz could repair a bird as well as he could repair a waffle iron. Ever since the Burlington Hawk-Eye carried a feature article about his bird-mending abilities, more of his day at Schwartz's Electric Appliance Repair was spent rewiring broken wings than tuning small engines. But unlike the radios, vacuum cleaners, and window fans people brought in, no one returned for these finished jobs.

My mother, brothers and I went to Schwartz's Electric to buy a pair of the ringed turtledoves he bred. Mr. Schwartz was in the middle of a delicate repair job and asked if we could wait until he was finished. Then, he returned to his work table where he had been splinting the wing of a female cardinal with a piece of wood, strips of cloth, and white tape.

While we waited, we peered into the cage lining the front walls of the shop. A regal, one-winged hawk glared at us. A crow whose injuries I could not detect paced the floor of his cage. A house wren missing most of her tail scolded us. The sand colored doves nodded towards each other, flashing their black neck crescents. Hoo-hrooo. Hoo-hrooo. Mr. Schwartz disappeared into the back room with the splinted cardinal. An engine revved. I wondered if a grounded bird had to be charged or juiced if it was to fly again. When the electrician reappeared, he released the sedate cardinal into a cage. She panted, too shocked even to notice the immobility of her wing. "Next week we
remove the splint, give her a few days to exercise her wings and then, off she goes," he explained, demonstrating her take off with his rough, greased-lined hand.

Once at home, we released our doves, Guinevere and Lancelot, into a spacious floor-to-ceiling dovecote my father had built in the basement. I dragged fallen tree limbs into the cage so Guin and Lance could perch upon real branches (they had perched on a broomstick at Mr. Schwartz's shop), and I provided grass, twigs, hair, and yarn for their nest. Guin and Lance took turns incubating the pair of white eggs Guin had laid. I was a solicitous godmother because I planned to receive flight training along with little Perceval and Galahad — from the first stretch of their wings to flapping, gliding, and best of all, turning. But the dovecote and our basement ceiling precluded high flying. Even if it hadn't, my required presence at school meant that I probably wouldn't be there to witness the babies' first take off. I was no closer to discovering the secret of flight than I had been. I was beginning to believe that I was only meant to fly in my dreams.

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Nineteenth- and twentieth-century dream theorists are of varied opinions about the meaning of flight dreams, a common dream I have since discovered. In 1877, L. Strumpell wrote that the flight dream is nothing more than the image the mind finds to be an appropriate interpretation of the stimulus produced by the rising and falling of the lungs. In the 1890s, Morly Vold studied how the alteration of the position of the sleeper's limbs altered the contents of his dreams. "If we dream of a limb moving, then one of the positions passed through in the course of completing the movement, invariably corresponds to the limb's actual position." In other words, we dream of flight when one of our limbs moves into a flight-like position as we sleep. In The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Sigmund Freud confessed that he never experienced dreams "in which the dreamer finds himself flying through the air to the accompaniment of agreeable feelings." (I wonder, did Freud not fly in his dreams or did he not find such
dreams enjoyable?) Nonetheless, Freud offers a somewhat less mechanical explanation of flight dreams than either of his colleagues. He theorized that dreams of flying and falling "reproduce impressions of childhood: they relate, that is, to games involving movement, which are extraordinarily attractive to children." Every child, says Freud, has had an uncle who taught him how to fly by "rushing across the room with him in his outstretched arms... Children are delighted by such experiences and never tire of asking to have them repeated especially if there is something about them that causes a little fright or giddiness. In later years they repeat these experiences in dreams; but in the dreams they leave out the hands which held them up, so that they float or fall unsupported." Freud argues with Strumpell and Vold that dreams of flying are entirely due to sensations produced by the movement of the lungs or the position of the limbs: "In my view the sensations are themselves reproduced as part of the memory to which the dream goes back: that is to say, they are part of the content of the dream and not its source."

Other theories contain a grain of wisdom and a pound of foolishness. Wilhelm Stekel, for instance, saw death symbols in some flying dreams, since the dreamer sees herself suspended in the air like an angel or a ghost. I dismiss Stekel's theory because he does not realize that ghosts and angels are alive and empowered in ways that humans are not. Death symbols, indeed. Alfred Adler considered flight dreams expressions of the desire to dominate others. But I argue that flight offers escape from rather than ascension in earthly hierarchies. The most curious explanation of all for flight dreams comes from one of Freud's contemporaries, Paul Federn. He says that "a good number of these flying dreams are dreams of erection; for the remarkable phenomenon of erection, around which the human imagination has constantly played, cannot fail to be impressive, involving as it does an apparent suspension of the laws of gravity." If dreams of flight are about the defiance of gravity, I suspect it is the act of standing upright on two legs we marvel at, celebrate, and represent.

The theories of other experts contain more wisdom. Some believe that because our subconscious harbors memories of our evolutionary heritage, dreams of flight might be a distant recollection of that time when our ancestors lived in trees and "flew" from one branch to
another much like modern apes do. And so, while we sleep, we dream the evolution of our species: we float, swim, slither, fly, walk, and stand upright. C. G. Jung, the theorist with whom I place most stock, insisted that dreams reveal one's fears and desires rather than conceal them, as Freud maintained. The function of dreams, then, was to compensate for aspects of the dreamer's personality that had been neglected in her conscious life. Since birds are universal symbols of liberation or transcendence, to dream of flight is to dream of overcoming whatever oppresses one, be that too much time spent sitting in a too tightly structured elementary classroom or the sociopolitical sins of those who rule people and nations. And so, Icarus's tragic flight wasn't motivated by hubris or foolishness, as is usually assumed. Rather, he was so enraptured by the liberation of his body and his mind that he climbed higher and higher, seeking more and more of a good thing.

Most of these are plausible theories. But the question that not one of the experts answers is why the symbolic power of the flight dream released rather than tightened its grip on me as I gathered years, wisdom, and worries.

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While riding my bicycle on a Sunday afternoon in October not so many years ago, I was stopped by the curious behavior of a fiery maple. Though there was no breeze, the scarlet leaves twitched. Though there wasn't a bird in sight, a din of chirps and chatters came from within the tree. Then, a great silence fell. Suddenly, starlings were hurled from the tree like sparks from a blown fuse. The birds scattered and gathered into a inky cloud.

I was so weighted with earthly cares — the over-active toddler strapped in the child carrier behind me; the job teaching high school English I had grown to despise; the impulse to write, but none of the time, energy, or leisure I needed to bring that desire to fruition; political concerns that I took too personally — that I felt guilty taking time for something as unproductive as watching birds. But when I saw the rising flock, something old, deep, and almost forgotten stirred
within me. I wanted the sensation of lightness. I wanted to flap and soar and glide. I wanted to leave my cares and the earth behind, for a moment. I wanted to join the starlings' roiling cloud. The dream was back.

One starling left the flock and perched on a wooden fence rail near the spot where I was perched on my bicycle. She was in her winter plumage — dull, brown and speckled, instead of summer's iridescent blue, violet, green, and bronze. I watched her push off her perch and join the flock.

As a child, I had believed that the power was in the wings. Now I saw that the impetus behind the starling's take-off was the downward and rearward push of her feet against her foundation, after which her wings took over. Without this pushing action, she could not move up and forward; she could not leave the earth. My eyes followed her into the flock. She was one of many moving dots, all the same. Soon the birds were not separate but a dark smudge in the distant sky. I pushed hard against the earth, tucked my feet, and rose to follow them.