

Learning to Fly

Lesson One: Birth

I was born during a hurricane into a coastal Rhode Island house with no cellar and no shutters. My mother was alone, my father having flown to Illinois to look for better work and a house we could settle in. Heavy with the full weight of me pressing down on her, early in the morning, in the rain, she walked across the yard to the neighbor's place, sunk to her knees in the den, and labored to the sound of falling branches and a flash flood rushing down the road.

Lesson Two: Struggle

Last week, a professor trying to make a point told a story about butterflies: how if you cut a struggling butterfly out of the cocoon, it will die. Butterflies build the strength to stay alive by beating, repeatedly, against the spun-silk walls of what binds them. They form their wings by fighting.

Lesson Three: Family

Most lakes in Maine are large enough only for a single mating pair of loons. The birds are ill-suited for land travel, having legs set far back on the body and bones denser than most other fowl. Eggs are laid in early June; by the end of the month nestlings can be seen floating with their parents on the water. Chicks remain in the nest only until their down has dried.

Lesson Four: The Truth

I was born at Brigham & Women's hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, at 1:29 AM on February 10, 1988. It was a Wednesday and there was a blizzard outside the windows.

The hurricane happened 3 years later, when I was old enough to walk but not old enough to understand why my mother was waking me up, dressing me in rainboots and the t-shirt with my puffy-paint handprints on it, and walking with me and my sister across the soggy lawn to Tyler's house. It was the last bad hurricane to hit New England, and the first thing I can remember. If I am going to tell the story of my life, it only makes sense to start with that storm. Everything before that time is hearsay, but I myself remember the sound of rain lashing against the windows. I remember not knowing what the adults were saying, huddled on the couch with cups of coffee perched on their knees. Mostly, though, I only remember the neighborhood kids in the basement: our giant-sized coloring books, boxes of crayons, and a pitcher of blue Kool-Aid that kept getting refilled.

Our house did not get beaten down by the wind and the water. The basement did not flood. It took, probably, a week or so for the town to dry out and have the blown-down branches hauled away. I don't know how long we spent at that neighbor's house: a few hours, a day, two days. I do know that, whenever I left, I left having learned how to pay attention.

Lesson Five: Empathy

If, in the morning after her first night in a plywood-walled cabin, you ask a second grader what kept her awake last night, she will make one sound, over and over: a hooting that comes from the gut, like a broken-legged coyote trapped in a well. And if you ask her what made the noise? A lost dog. An owl. Some kind of ghost. The cows that never died when the farmland flooded and created this lake.

Loons, the guidebook tells us, have four distinct calls. First, a tremolo, a burst of eight to ten notes that's half laughter and half automatic weapon, an alarm call, a warning bell. Similar to this is the yodel, made only by male loons defending their territory. It's louder, longer, more insistent. It swells. It sticks your ear drums, and makes a low loop, and sticks again. The hoot, the third call, the call of "here I am", is soft. If, when driving in a car, a parent's hand reaching back to pat your leg could be a birdcall, it would be this.

But it is the fourth sound that wakes the second graders from their second-grade dreams. The wail is a release of the bound mouths of all the world's broken-hearted mothers and proof that loons were woven out of sorrows. Here is where the guidebook fails us: the guidebook tells us, simply,

that the call is used to keep in contact with other loons on the same lake and surrounding lakes. Not even a nine year old can hear a loon's wail echoing off the night-still surface of a lake without recognizing that the loon knows something that we know. Empathy isn't the right word, but it's as close as I can get.

Lesson Six: Death

To me, it seems like common sense: you can't cut a woman's brain open, excise a softball-sized chunk of tumor, blast what remains with radiation, sew it back up, and expect her to be the same person. So, she died—my grandmother, who had carried me around in her womb when I was just an egg and my mother was still a fish swimming in her mother's ocean. She died and became a tupperware full of rough ash sprinkled with bits of tooth and bone.

The next summer my family went, like we always did, to the same lake Granny Dot had been going to since she was six. We played soccer in the soggy leach field, picked strawberries, and watched, on the Fourth of July, red flares burn circles of light at the end of every dock. On the 6th, Dot's birthday, my mother rowed out to the floating wooden raft and set up luminaries: purple paper bags filled with sand and a small candle that would burn through the evening.

I was the one who saw it, the wind tipping a bag over and the spark inside setting light to the paper, the paper setting light to the wood. I was the one who grabbed an empty waste bin and a cousin and rowed out to extinguish it, I was the one who discovered that the water only made the flames flare higher, and I was the one who stood there blowing out every last lick of fire, the danger gone, the memorial gone, the grandmother still dead and just a black burnt ring remaining.

Lesson Seven: Calling

The loon's wail can be heard for miles. We have all heard it, heard it and thought of our own lost dogs, our own fears bubbling up from underwater. That sound has seeped through my morning so many times that, now, it is special and wonderful only in the way that waking up in a body is special and wonderful: it is expected. But, once—once, and only once—I woke up to the sound of one's wings. Loons are the only birds without hollow bones, so there is weight behind it when they move the wind. When I woke up that morning, I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Lesson Eight: Balance

It took me seventeen years to admit to anyone that I had never learned to ride a bike, and another year beyond that to decide to let the boy I was in love with teach me. He took me to the middle school soccer field. He ran, panting, beside me, with one hand on my back and the other on the handlebar. I did not let him let go until I was sure I could do it, and when, after that, he tried to run beside me, I pedaled harder, passed him, looped circles around the soccer field, didn't look back, didn't turn my head, pedaled harder, squared my shoulders, clenched my fists, and flew. I did not fall, or if I fell, I do not remember it.

Lesson Nine: Getting Lost

It is not uncommon for a migrating loon to land accidentally on a wet highway or a slick and empty Walmart parking lot, having mistaken the shiny darkness for a river or a lake large enough to land in. Even a too-small pond can strand a loon, who needs a long stretch of open water to build up enough running speed to take flight.

Lesson Ten: Getting There

I was still terrified of bikes when Beth, this past summer, convinced me to ride 11 miles with her down Route 202 from camp to Tim's house. Tim was camp's maintenance man, a lanky boy with an affinity for chainsaws and a thick Maine accent, and Beth was sweet on him. Before this, the last time I had been on a bike was at my mother's house in Wisconsin: an ambitious ride along the shore of Lake Michigan to the Manitowoc lighthouse, a ride during which my skirt flew up over my knees so that when I reached down to fix it I toppled slowly over onto the grass beside the path. The only bruise I got I discovered three days later, a fist-sized black splotch on the back of my thigh. I had no scrapes, and was unharmed except for a sprained right ankle: an ankle with which I had to pedal

myself back home, an ankle that swelled to twice its normal girth and wouldn't let me put weight on it for four days.

Riding to Tim's, I kept seeing myself flung once again into the road—kept seeing my body losing balance and ending up, suddenly, beneath the wheels of a car. But there is an amazing power to inertia: physics' own will that you keep going forward. And I didn't fall, and we made it to Tim's in an hour, and when we got there we threw off our clothes and jumped into the lake and dried off and drove to the fireworks and ate french fries and no one else knew, but we knew that we had been flying. We had been free.

Lesson Ten: Swimming Lessons

Hatchlings, though born knowing how to swim, will spend much of the first couple of weeks on their parent's backs, nestled between wings. Lake Bunganut is too small for more than one mating pair, and we watched a single chick float around the lake nestled between its parents wings: a burst of gray feathers small enough to hold in your mouth. One day, lifeguarding out on the floating raft, the family swam up close enough for me to see their eyes, the same glowing red of the emergency flares of the 4th. I saw them often, these birds—saw them from canoes and sailboats, saw them first thing in the morning when the fog was still settled on the surface of the water, saw them even when the swim section was full of forty-seven screaming twelve year olds. Although we did not carry the baby on our back and did not dive down to the bottom to pluck up lake weeds to feed to it, we still felt somehow like this hatchling's mother. Or, if not mother, then sister.

Lesson Eleven: Learning to Fly

We left the lake to return to our other lives well before the leaves started changing, and so missed the end of the story. What we didn't get to see: the parents moulting, shedding their characteristic black and white feathers at the same time as the oaks and maples were dropping their autumn leaves. The flightless days while their grey-brown winter coat came in. The loud flapping and final takeoff as the parents started their migration north. The way they left the chick, as all loon parents do, before she got her flight feathers.

We didn't get to see her--this baby we'd loved all summer--suddenly alone, the only one of her species around for miles. We don't know how she turned out. If she was lucky, she taught it all to herself: how to find food, how to stay safe from the racoons and the ravens and the foxes and the crows, how to feel the tug of seasons that says "it's time to fly south," how to heed the compass that points the way. If she was lucky, this bird taught herself to fly.