



Susan Lester

THE KEEPER

In the beginning, the keeper had four chickens - gangly adolescent hens purchased from a Georgia Feed store just outside of Waycross: two reds, one black and a white that the keeper called Blanka. The birds still bore bits of baby fluff on their heads and bellies. Blanka was a bossy one, always pushing for privilege, snatching food from the other chickens' beaks or butting them off the food dish. First to leave the coop in the morning and first to return to roost at night, she was also first to lay an egg - that small beige wonder the keeper had been waiting for. He felt uneasy taking it from her, uneasy eating it and tasting what issued from a chicken's womb. It wasn't that he'd never eaten eggs before - just that he'd never thought about what he was eating, and that ignorance unsettled him now like a blind spot in the eye.

The hens moved as a unit across the Georgia yard, following one another like the soldiers in Afghanistan where an explosion had taken off the keeper's leg below the knee. He wore a prosthesis now.

"Learning to walk the second time around was harder than learning to play the guitar," he told the feed store attendant, a wide, buxom woman with a chihuahua buttoned in her jacket like a heart.

"Which leg did you lose?" she asked him without apparent reticence or sympathy.

"Left one," he said. He'd hoped she would ask about the guitar, at which he'd become adept, accompanying his voice on gospel and bluegrass - *I am weak but Thou art strong* - but she didn't.

"Left one," she repeated, scooping feed into a gunny sack. "The left side of a chicken reckons predators, you know." She looked up at the keeper. "It's in the eye," she added. "The left eye is fast and and farsighted."

"That so?" He assumed she was exuding chicken-lore, not fact. "And what does a chicken's right eye do?" he tested her.

"Food," she held up the gunny sack. "The right eye sees detail: bugs and seeds and pellets."

"Food," he repeated, not quite believing. "Danger or food - evil or good."

"It isn't about morality," she said, hoisting his feed sacks into the truck for him.

He felt vaguely emasculated by this service. Balancing his weight on the prosthesis, he swung his good leg into the truck, then grasped the thigh of the prosthetic leg and lifted it in too.

"Take a look at your chickens when you get home," the woman directed him. "You might learn something."

He pushed down what felt like rage rising in his chest and arranged his face into a blank before starting the truck.

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"Here, goons," he called the chicks as he threw pellets in their pen.

They watched him: turned their heads to see him from both sides.

"How do you ladies see where you're going?" he asked them. "How can you reconcile two viewpoints in a single tiny head?"

They clucked and pecked contentedly at the feed.

The keeper leaned on a fence post. "You are grotesque creatures," he shook his head at their rubbery red combs and wattles, their scaly, naked legs and clawed, reptilian feet. "You don't even need a rooster to beget your eggs," he finished accusingly.

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"*They don't need a rooster?*" he had asked twice at the feed store when he first bought the chicks. "*To make eggs, I mean. You don't need a rooster?*" His voice had climbed high and soft with incredulity.

The attendant's husband at the counter- a doddering old British man, winked at him and said, "It rather diminishes your sense of male importance, doesn't it?"

The keeper expelled an airy laugh.

"But no," the husband shook his head, "You've no need of a cockerel if you just want eggs."

The word *cockerel* sounded regal and legendary to the keeper, and he momentarily regretted not needing one.

"Of course, a good male *will* safeguard his hens," the Englishman added.

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The word *safeguard* called up images in the keeper's mind of Afghani women wearing chadris to conceal themselves from head to toe. The chadris had only a grilled eye-window through which the women saw the world.

"Why do they dress like that?" he'd asked his sergeant.

"It safeguards them," the sergeant said.

"From what?"

"Lust," the sergeant said.

"I see." He didn't see. The silent accusation of the women's dress enraged him and gave him nightmares like costumes worn on Halloween. What was inside them - evil or good?

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"The cockerel's sperm, in fact, enriches the eggs," the British man continued - "makes them lower in cholesterol and higher in vitamin E."

"I see," said the keeper, and in April, when all four hens started laying, the keeper returned to buy a rooster.

The attendants, man and wife together, led him to a back yard where roosters were caged separately from hens - and separately from one another.

"They fight," the woman said. "They sometimes will kill each other." She shot the bolt on the gate and stepped in. "More than one rooster is more than enough, she continued to talk as she opened her arms and slouched slightly over the rooster, who stood his ground and wiped his feet, raising dust. "He knows I'm here to capture him," she said. "Mostly, we slaughter the males when they hatch, but this one was a keeper." She caught the bird by the legs and turned him upside down to keep him helpless. "You have to be firm," she insisted, swinging the whole weight of the rooster through the air.

The bird was tall and black; his glistening feathers flecked with iridescent greens and golds and reds; his tail feathers rising in a plume of color, and his heels bore sharp, mean spurs.

"That one is a singer," said the husband, "Like Johnny Cash."

The keeper named him Cash, and bought a dog kennel in which to keep him until the hens got used to his presence in the yard.

The cock paced in circles inside the kennel, beating his wings against the bars so hard that the keeper was afraid he would wound himself. Until he was released, the rooster didn't crow, but on the day he was freed, his voice claimed the air like the muezzin's call to prayer on the minarets of mosques in Afghanistan. The sound stilled the keeper. The Cock strutted and stretched and aired his wings, then ran down the hens as a unit, jumping Blanka first, screaming and hammering her head with his beak, gripping her wings with his talons and forcing her belly against the stones and thistles of the yard. She rose dazed and keening to huddle amongst the other chickens who, on seeing the blood on her body, pecked and abused her again.

"Sadists," the keeper called them. The companionable Reds, who ordinarily jabbered to each other over bugs and weeds and pellets, became stern with retribution, urging one another on to "wound, wound, wound" the white chicken, while the little Black pulled feathers from Blanka's wings.

"A cockerel will calm down in time," the feed store attendant promised, "and all the hens will too. But right now the big bird wants to flaunt his dominance, so let him get it out of his system."

The keeper had seen dominance flaunted in Kunduz: soldiers gone mythic, calling themselves warriors, looming like shadows of themselves cast large by the light of war. "Thug!" he called the rooster who strutted like a cop on night beat with a truncheon in his feathers. He had two distinct rooster cries to warn the hens of danger: one for a threat from overhead and the other for treachery on the ground. "Take Cover," the first cry commanded. "Run," the other ordered.

Commented [1]:
pronounce "mew EZ in"

How the chickens understood this and why they obeyed was a bafflement to the keeper. Their brains were too small to process commands. Maybe their bodies were their brains - or the flock, the entire flock: a brain that carried the collective memory of their race.

Instinct was not a big enough word.

Cash, while safeguarding his women, defiled and assaulted them too. He raped the Reds relentlessly and brutalized Blanka with undisguised rage. Only the little Black seemed to escape chastisement. She flirted with Cash, clucked at him, lay in his shadow and stole his food; when he attacked the other hens she helped him, tomahawking their heads with her beak to keep them down, yanking out tiny feathers to humble them.

"Mean little princess," the keeper scorned her even while believing that Cash somehow treasured her, saw something worthier than he saw in the rest. The keeper began to believe he could taste the difference in the black hen's eggs: something cleaner and more delicate in taste than the others.

The chickens laid eggs in neat little groupings of four, hiding them in a different locations each day: atop the steaming compost pile, against the rusted gate, in the crevice of a canvas tarp left on the lawn. So cleverly camouflaged were the groupings that no matter how hard he sought them, he mostly just encountered them - stumbled on them by accident. He began to believe that chickens could see dimensions and details that he could not, and thereby conceal their treasures.

"That's right," said the feed store attendant, her chihuahua thrusting his head from the neck of her blouse to yap. "Have you seen their third eyelid yet?"

"Third?" He went home and looked into one of the red hens' eyes and saw contempt staring back at him, a black pupil ringed with yellow - a mean eye that he disliked and would not

have looked in again but for little Black who blinked at him - her upper and lower lids squeezing together with the coyness of a wink. He winked back and gave her an extra handful of corn, stirring up the dust from the feed bag which caused her to blink again, but this time with a translucent lid that closed across her eye like a theater curtain. "The third lid," the keeper was dazzled as if he'd asked to see something and little Black had revealed it to him. The third lid seemed akin to the fabric scrim of the Afghani women's chadri: a curtain that let them look out without being known.

When, in October, the hens began to molt, the keeper tried to put Cash in the kennel again. He had become a creature of towering magnificence, cruel and vaunted, stalking the hens pitilessly. Blanka was the first to start losing her feathers and stop laying eggs. Pale, pebbled flesh and hard, stray feather-shafts pimped her nearly naked body, but Cash ran her down anyway and brutalized her. She staggered away, her wings slung from her narrow shoulders like a shawl. She ate nothing and wandered the yard confused.

The keeper cared, but couldn't capture Cash; he was fast and sharp; he lured the keeper close, then charged him, bit him, cut him with the spurs on his legs and drove him back. Then he lured him again and flew at him. The keeper made a turn so sudden that he stumbled and broke loose of his prosthesis. He lay on the ground afraid as Cash scratched dirt into his face and scorned him. That night, he locked the chickens in the hen-house pen, leaving the rest of the yard to Cash. For a week he watched the rooster scratch and strut and scold the hens through the chicken wire, then a snake slipped into the pen, and Cash sent up a clarion call: "Run." But there was no way for the chickens to run, they were locked in. The snake, a copperhead, killed one of the Reds. The keeper found her limp on the ground, and finished her off by wringing her

neck. He knew from war that when a unit took a hit, it was sometimes *the* hit that turned them, not outwardly, but inwardly toward acceptance of death. So that subsequent attacks hurt more and losses broke hearts and spirits. Furious with himself for locking up the hens and making bait of them, he turned them loose, and turned on Cash who again stalked and ravished them. Because the keeper could not sink a spade with his prosthesis, he chopped the hard dirt beneath the forsythia vine and he made a shallow grave. When the snake came again, he shot it six times in the head with a 22, then chased down Cash again, threw a blanket over him and wrapped his arms around his great strong body, turned him upside down, held him cruelly by the legs. He shoved him into the dog kennel where he left him all night, then dragged the kennel to the truck in the morning, loaded it with a piano dolly and drove it to the flea market where, for a few dollars, he sold the rooster, kennel and all, to a toothless dealer showing exotic birds that had feathers between their toes and tufted plumes on their heads - rare beauties or grotesque genetic accidents, the keeper didn't know which. They disgusted him. Driving home, he felt there was something he was not seeing, another blind spot like the one that had led him to the explosion that took his leg.

He sought out the three remaining hens in the yard at home. Little Black and big Blanka stood together in the yard but the single Red stood alone, her head resting on a corner of the henhouse, and once again the keeper wondered if the whole flock comprised one chicken's mind. The copperhead might have bitten this second Red too, but no wounds showed on her body. She was more likely grieving the loss of her twin, the one who had been most like her - the one who knew the laws and taboos of the Red chicken race. The keeper studied her closely, but she closed her third eyelid against him. "You will be safe now," he told her anyway, urging her into the yard. He spent the day reinforcing the hen house, filling gaps beneath the fence where a

snake had gotten in, laying boards against the building and setting-in a lightbulb to give warmth and illumination to the night. Because It was a clear, cold autumn day, he lay a drop cloth over the henhouse as an extra measure. Then he shooed the hens in.

The Red wouldn't go. She wanted to be apart from the others like a woman taking something seriously that the others could still joke about. The keeper was tired from the work and the failure with Cash. He had no patience and no energy to track-down the Red and force her into the coop, so he left her out. She would have to fend for herself, he decided. She was a creature of nature; she would figure it out. That seemed to be what she wanted.

But in the morning he found her limp beside the fence, possibly frozen, but more likely dead of grief. He decided he should tell the feed-store attendant, who would believe in a chicken's grief.

Blanka and little Black finished molting about the same time. Their well-being turned toward the good and their feathers began growing in again, sleek and new. They foraged and chattered and preened one other all day, and snuggled, roosting close together at night. In the morning the keeper would open the coop and the gate to the yard, so the pair of them could lay their eggs where he might encounter them. They strutted out to meet him and eat from his hand, their wattles and combs softly brushing his palm, their beaks nipping and sniffing his scent. "You'll be alright now," he promised them, with something like tenderness squeezing his heart.

And then there was the hawk. The keeper didn't notice him, though he'd probably soared overhead all day. Cash had always been there to warn the hens to take cover, but no one warned them now, though they all paced and pecked at the dirt nervously. Then while the keeper was in the house, little Black disappeared. That was his only tip-off. When he went into the yard and saw Blanka alone, standing still beneath the cedar tree, a touch of foreboding struck him. He

called for little Black, shook the corn container to summon her, but she didn't respond. He walked down the road imagining she had flown over the yard fence, but he didn't find her, and Blanka stood still, gazing at two horizons at once as if trying to remember where little Black had last been.

"Blanka?" the keeper queried her at last, and that was when the truth emerged slowly, as if from the waters of his own being. He scanned the yard, checked the fence, searched beneath the shed and the fig tree branches, but found nothing. It was in the tall weeds at the back of the yard that he found her carcass mauled and bloody, eyes grey and blank, neck broken, innards half-eaten and strewn across the ground, half the carcass coldly left for another meal. Trembling, he locked Blanka in the chicken coop and buried little Black's poor remains.

"She probably flirted with that old hawk," he said to Blanka. "She probably sidled right up to him thinking he'd fall in love with her like Cash did."

He stretched chickenwire over the yard and pen, lay cinderblocks around the base of the coop. The hawk returned almost every day and sat wily and hostile atop the barrier wire the keeper had drawn over the pen. Blanka peered at him with the left eye, then the right as if to see in him what she was blind to.

Because the nights were freezing now, he put a small space-heater in the coop. Rain started to fall at midnight and froze on the surface of branches and roofs creating a crystalline wonder. When Blanka came out into the chicken yard, raindrops pelted her, slid down her feathers and froze, so she went back into the chicken house which smelled strongly of what the keeper now called "chicken." A hungry fox smelled it too, and made himself small, very small, to get in through a hole in the egg box at night. The keeper heard Blanka's distress scream in the darkness through the muffle of canvas and the patter of rain. He heard the beating of her wings

against the inner walls of the coop. On one leg alone, his 22 in his hand, the keeper hopped into the yard, threw back the canvas covering, caught the fox with one perfect and accurate shot, but Blanka was a white heap in the corner of the coop. In the light of the space-heater, the keeper saw that her eye was clawed out, her comb torn from her head so it flopped over her beak, and her body was bloodied, the new sleek feathers ripped out. He knew he should shoot her or wring her neck, but couldn't. He left her alone and made his way back to the house. He needed rest.

And now he dreamed of mortars falling and assault rifles firing, and fire flying in the air. Every shelter was a trap, he remembered, every open space a danger. There was no place to go. He lay on the ground, his leg blown off and two dead men lay beside him.

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In the morning, he went to look at Blanka. She had lived through the night though she hadn't risen from where she fell. Her comb drooped, bloody, over her beak, her eye was crusted over with puss and blood. He freshened her food and water dish but she did not move. He adjusted the angle of the heater. On the second day, she was the same, but on the third, in the evening, her head hung over the watering trough. The keeper wet a soft cloth in warm water and lifted Blanka in his arms. He washed her blind eye and the blood on her head, then held her against his heart and out of some ancient urge began to sing, *I am weak but Thou art Strong*, his voice moving through his lungs to his heart, through his grief for the world and the war and this strong, bold chicken, her body slack and hopeless against him as she listened to his song and lived.

