

# the little yellow bowl

My Kinship with an  
American Robin



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*Dedicated to those who willingly give their hearts away.*



## PROLOGUE

The little yellow bowl is still on my kitchen counter top, tucked into the corner. When it wasn't in Byrd's cage, the bowl sat in that same corner for 18 years. Although the bowl is clean, the inside has a muddy discoloration and the outside is faded. It sits atop a round, translucent, plastic container lid—the same lid that I used to cover Byrd's crunchy bird chow for so many years as it soaked to softness in a red container in the refrigerator. I notice the little, yellow bowl everyday as I prepare my own food. The bowl has been untouched for over a year. I can't move it. I can't touch it. The bowl is his. The space is his, too.

I don't know what to do. If I neglect to write Byrd's story and simply pack his bowl away, he will be forgotten and die again—his spirit pushed into a cold, lonely, insignificant whirlpool of darkness, screaming to escape. Conversely, I fear that my narrative will conjure him if he is resting peacefully in his grave. The story could be a 'Monkey's Paw,' an amulet that will capture me in the past; a sharpening of my desire to unleash Byrd from death; an invitation for his spirit to haunt my dreams and torment me for disturbing his sleep. I also fear that a narrative, raw and irrational, will expose my life in a harsh light. If such a large portion of my heart was given to a bird, what kind of a person am I? Am I one who has difficulty bonding with humans? Am I socially awkward and drawn into unnatural attachments? One day, whatever my emotion, I'll have to move that bowl. But I fear moving it. It's his. The space is his, too.

Byrd wouldn't want it this way. If he could speak, he'd tell me to put his bowl away. He'd tell me to live more bravely, just like he did. He'd tell me to remember the times he sat napping on my lap, the tricks he performed, the songs he sung. He'd laugh at my reactions to all of his mischief.

However, I can't follow his will at this time. As I search for the release of both of our spirits, I am reminded every day of my loss as I glance at the little, yellow bowl that I cannot move.

## **1 Into this World**

*In the most difficult period of my life, when nothing made sense and all was lost, a small being beckoned.*

I had recently graduated from Kent State University with a Master's degree and two Bachelor's degrees, but it was a miserable 1990 economy and I was among the unemployed. Still, my blessings were many. Any college debt was minimal due to military education benefits and a paid college internship. A harvest of happiness and prosperity depended only upon enthusiasm for future employment in a new stage of life, both of which were expected within months. Consequently, my rural apartment didn't seem so dump. Even the booming that radiated from the gymnastic studio in the apartment above mine wasn't so annoying. My brother and my parents loaned me money for rent and other expenses. My girlfriend of three years wanted to marry, and I loved her passionately. After a year of job fairs, résumé revisions, networking, contacting prospective employers, and responding to bogus classified ads from employment agencies and schemes from the likes of Amway dealers, drought set in.

Decent job prospects evaporated while others never materialized. Uncomfortable living arrangements became uncomfortably permanent. By the end of 1990, I pursued any work available. A turnstile of temporary employment included work as a school janitor, cemetery caretaker, data input for an insurance consultant, and bookkeeping for a local gym and for a local antique shop.

During my ongoing job search, I noticed an advertisement from an area art museum for a position as curator of art and encouraged my girlfriend, a recent college graduate herself, to apply. Even though the job fit her fine arts background, she did not want to apply because she felt underqualified. After more of my prodding, she applied and was offered the job. She found temporary employment for me in the museum janitorial department.

My enthusiasm for life was waning, but at least, I still had my girl. I

nicknamed her Bird because of her stature. At a height of four feet and ten inches, she was small and cute. As I began to apply for career opportunities a distance away in Cleveland, she showed a reservation toward our future together. Bird enjoyed her museum job. Although she knew how important children were to me, she decided at that time that raising a family was not her desire. I was crushed. Our love withered and we parted as friends.

In the summer of 1991, my parents decided to stop loaning money to me. They believed that I should apply for welfare. That prospect was terrifying. My parents' evaluation of those on welfare was ingrained into my psyche. Welfare recipients were lazy parasites who were a drag on every hard-working taxpayer. Although my working-class parents told me that I was not one of *that* kind, a few words couldn't overcome a lifetime of indoctrination. In addition to the embarrassment of being unemployed, I was now a hated parasite. After filling in an application for general assistance at the county government building, I departed via the main entrance. The nearby flagpole invited me to hang myself from it. My world turned barren.

Public assistance left me in a quandary. The monetary aid provided a small monthly check, but far from enough for the rent of my downtown Ravenna dive. Since the paltry, sporadic money that I earned from odd jobs would reduce any assistance, I had to become a welfare cheat in order to survive. Food stamps could pay for three weeks of groceries, but the stigma of using them presented additional humiliation. When exchanging the stamps for groceries, I could feel the contempt of the people in line behind me. One shopper was obnoxious enough to sigh loudly at the sight of a steak among my fruits and vegetables. In spite of my education... in spite of my drive to succeed... in spite of my upbringing... I was an object of scorn, reduced to fraud. The shallow goal of sheer survival led to the meaninglessness of all around me, even my own existence. If the condition persisted into the winter gloom, I considered killing myself. Walking the streets at night was a cheap respite from troubled sleep.

One of those many walks changed my life. In August, local friends invited me to join them for late afternoon doubles tennis at an area park.

Although they offered to drive me to my apartment after the match, I declined. On the walk home, I approached what appeared to be a lump of mud on the sidewalk. When my shadow passed over the lump, it opened a tiny beak. I bent over for a closer look. A puffy, yellow-chested, baby robin inspected me with inquisitive, brown eyes. When the robin peered upward, the black speckles on its chest grew larger as it inhaled. A second later, the tailless, brown-backed, feather ball opened its tiny beak again, exposing a reed-like tongue and a cavernous gullet. A demanding chirp instantly followed. I looked around. No mother bird. I attempted to pick the baby up. He flapped stubby wings, propelling himself a few feet to a hedge in the front yard of a small home. I gathered him onto my tennis racquet and placed a hand towel over his back to prevent him from falling off.

Perhaps, I picked him up in order to fill the loneliness in my life, the loss of my love. Then again, perhaps I saw myself in the failed exploit of a being capable of flight, but now vulnerable and seeking help from anyone kind enough to offer comfort. He hungrily squeaked a bit more as I walked home, his head peeking from under the towel. That would be the first day of the rest of my life for the next 18½ years.

Upon my return, 90 minutes later, Byrd hadn't moved from his original position.

## 2 Another Mouth to Feed

*As much as I doubted myself and my abilities, I couldn't fail the little bird—that would lead to his death. Somehow, he knew my determination, and trusted me.*



Taken at my kitchen table, this is one of only two baby pictures—a bad exposure on a film camera.

As I pushed open my warped, wooden apartment door, I knew that the little bird's hungry squeaks would have to be answered. After setting the racquet on my kitchen table, I cupped the robin in my hands and lowered his papier-mâché body to the table's smooth surface. His infant legs slipped a few times in an effort to hold himself upright. With a round body, thin legs and no tail growth, he looked like a lollipop standing there. The surroundings may have scared him. He remained still as I watched him with one eye while searching my cupboards with the other. My choice of soft food, or any food for that matter, was limited. I settled upon a can of chicken. I poked small chicken chunks into his gaping beak, but he coughed them up. Apparently, immature neck muscles prevented beak-level swallowing. The chicken had to be poked down his throat in order for him to swallow. A pair of tweezers facilitated the task. His chest expanded with each swallow. I also dipped my

finger into a glass of water and let two to three drops fall from my fingertip into his beak.

When his chest stuck out like a soldier's, the bird closed his beak, stopped chirping and shut his pea-sized, brown eyes. His feet dangled as I picked him up. Apparently, he was too tired to resist. The bird was hardly the size of a teacup and fit neatly into the palm of my hand. As he slumbered, I held him to my chest, stroking the pillow-soft feathers of his wings with my forefinger. I found myself brushing the delicate, brown feathers of his back with my cheek, and then, with my nose. His feathers smelled like honey. As darkness descended, I lined a box with newspaper, set it on a front room chair and placed him inside. Throughout the entire process, he didn't even wake up.

When I rolled into bed that evening, self-doubt began to unsettle any sense of accomplishment, meaningfulness or joy. Should I have taken him from his immediate surroundings? How could I provide some type of cage? The price of a big parrot cage was far beyond my means. Since I fed him, would returning him to the wild be impossible? Would I have to keep him for the rest of his life? How could I afford to keep him when I couldn't feed myself? What if I moved or had to leave him for an extended time period? Worrisome thoughts of this nature revisited frequently. I planned to let him go as soon as he could fly and hunt.

At dawn, my weary eyes opened to sharp, demanding squeaks. When the squeaks were loud enough, I forced myself out of bed. I peeked from the bedroom doorway to find that the little bird must have jumped out of the box. He stood on the rug below the chair, crying for food. I felt sympathy and gathered him into my hands. His beak opened intermittently as he stared into my eyes. He knew that I would feed him.

When we entered the kitchen, I lowered him onto one of my ugly, green and blue, garage-sale dinner plates. Again, I poked more chicken into his craw and added a few drops of water until his chest bulged and he stopped opening his beak. And again, I picked him up, placing his delicate body in the palm of my hand. His pink claws tickled slightly. I instinctively sung him



a lullaby. His big eyes lazily closed within seconds. Like the previous day, I lifted his body to my face, smelled his fresh feathers and stroked his stubby wings with my cheek. I took the time to observe everything about his new body from inches away. Even his beak was interesting. A waviness at the corners near his face showed that his beak was going to grow longer. Since I never owned a bird, my knowledge of their care was very restricted. I went to the local Ravenna library, only a minute walk from my apartment.

I stumbled upon the best book that fortune could have allowed, *Stroud's Digest on the Diseases of Birds*. That old, rural library, housed in a building with great columns on its front steps, had the book written by Robert Stroud, the real Birdman of Alcatraz. Although the title implies only a book on avian medicinal needs, Stroud gave me knowledge about trimming toenails and beaks, dietary needs of small wild birds, first aid information and preventive medicine. Most of what I needed to know was in the pages of that classic book, written from Leavenworth prison in 1939. I wrote to the publisher, scraped together \$40, and still treasure my copy of the best book ever written on overall bird care.

Although financial times were difficult as ever, money was always available for live food, such as earthworms and maggots. A handmade yard sign that I noticed on one of my many walks led me to a neighborhood entrepreneur who sold fishing bait at reasonable prices out of his garage. After rainstorms, I gathered worms from the pavement. Passersby looked at me strangely, but it didn't matter. The baby bird was more important than any reputation that I had or thought that I had. Other soft foods helped me to fill the gaps when I didn't have live food. The bird liked canned corn, lunch meat, soaked raisins, thinly sliced grapes, watermelon, orange, fried eggs, wet dog food. If there were only enough food for one of us in those times of want, I would not only have had the bird eat before I did, but I would have been thankful to be able to feed him. And while I was feeding his body, he was feeding my heart.

I began to understand poverty. Many years prior, my brother expressed his belief that people receiving public assistance shouldn't have pets. If poor

people had pets, they must be using some of their aid money to purchase pet food and pet supplies. The poor were granted low levels of aid in order to live at a complete subsistence level. The company of another species is a luxury. I recall the faces of those unfortunates standing beside me in the welfare line. They looked like any group of typical Americans; husky men stared at the floor; women calmed anxious children at their side; an Asian family sat in a waiting room as their toddler played with used toys from the office toy box; an older man wearing a crisp shirt and tie held a leather briefcase. I wonder if any of them felt the greeting of a cat rubbing against them as they entered their door or the encouragement of a dog as it licked their face without regard to the direst of financial straits.

But now, I knew differently. Now, I knew that with life so damn difficult, a winged or a four-legged companion lights a dark life, provides a reason to rise in the morning and sparks the energy to accomplish a task. I began to feel the vitality that I had lost—all because a life depended upon me. When I woke, I didn't wake to depression and unemployment. I woke to the bird's morning song practice. When I returned after a day of minimum-wage work or no work at all, I no longer dreaded a decrepit, lonely apartment. A little bird was there, hopping up and down in his box as if his twig legs were pogo sticks. Now, I rushed into the apartment, and without even taking the time to remove my jacket, proceeded to the front room to gather him into my hands, to nuzzle and kiss him repeatedly, to quickly present him with life-supporting food. The self-worth gleaned from the dependency of a child must be so much greater.

Days later, I walked beneath the tree from which I had picked up the baby robin. Perhaps, natural order dictated that he should be placed back in his nest. I looked for a squawking mother bird or a nest, but found none. Another baby robin was on the sidewalk a block away. That one was sprawled on the hard concrete, chest torn open. I knew that I had done the right thing for me and for Byrd.

I stuck my hand into his cage and repeatedly nudged his toes with the side of my hand, but he wouldn't step up.

### 3 My Byrd

*Every time I thought that I could no longer keep Byrd, the obstacles kept falling down. Our spirits were meant to be together.*



Byrd, at two weeks, perched on the back of my kitchen chair. August 1991.

I named him Byrd because he was small and cute, reminiscent of my former girlfriend. He helped not only to fill my broken heart, but to wrest my mind from the self-destructive feelings that accompany broken dreams. I never intended to keep Byrd. My worries were many, and since I had never kept a bird, the full extent of the obstacles was unknown.

At first, I feared that I could not adequately feed him. Byrd needed a better diet than my soft table scraps and the limited variety of live food that I could afford. After checking pet shops, I found a reasonably priced, small-pellet, mynah bird food that could be soaked in water. Byrd liked it,

particularly when mixed with human food. I continued to dribble a few drops of fresh water into Byrd's beak with each meal.

Afterward, I feared that Byrd would never be able to feed himself. I fed him for weeks with tweezers, poking food down his throat as he opened his demanding beak. Byrd would not eat from the table top nor from my open hand. He had no inclination of taking food in any manner other than from me poking it down his throat from directly above his head. I worried as the weeks passed. How could I be there, multiple times per day, to feed him for what may be years? If Byrd had no desire to feed himself, he could slowly die of starvation, or at least, not ever reach a healthy weight. Then, it occurred to me—parent birds train their young.

Since I was Byrd's mama and daddy, the training task had to fall to me. Since I worked out with weights for decades, I figured that the eating muscles of Byrd's throat and neck had to be trained and strengthened. Rather than poke food down his throat, I began to place it on the back of his tongue. Sometimes, Byrd coughed the food back up. But increasingly, he used his throat muscles to swallow. Later, I began to train his neck muscles by feeding him from an angle slightly below the 90-degree angle directly above his head. At times, I had to wait for Byrd to become very hungry until he began to take food from lesser angles. At times when he regressed, I dangled food above Byrd's head. As his beak settled around it, I applied slight pressure to the tweezers, angling more toward a 60- or 45-degree angle before releasing the food or poking the food down his throat.

Patience and empathy won the day. Perhaps two to three weeks later, and only when very hungry, Byrd began to eat from my angled hand without the assistance of tweezers. Within a few more days, he could take food from my hand as it rested on the tabletop. And finally, he understood fully and began to pick up food directly from the table. I don't know whether my training was wholly or partially responsible for his progress—simple maturation probably was a factor—but I felt happy and relieved that Byrd could better take care of himself. At about that time, I bought him a little, yellow, weighted, gerbil food bowl.



My next concern involved my landlord. The apartment lease stated that pets were not allowed in rental units. Since anyone maintaining the apartment could easily see or hear Byrd, I had to disclose his presence to my landlord. If I couldn't keep him in the apartment, at least I would have the option of releasing him in the clement, fall weather. I was very attached to the little bird and felt a heaviness as I ascended the broad stairs of the gangster-era building in which I paid my monthly rent. The winding, iron railing was colder to the touch; the stairwell a shade darker; the beige, tile floor a bit dingier. As I slid my monthly rent check across the wooden counter top and through the glass opening of the old bank teller window, I asked whether a bird in the apartment would be an issue. The grey-haired, elderly woman smiled from behind her horn-rimmed glasses. She told me that a bird was no problem whatsoever. That was the anti-climactic end of the matter. I believe that her family owned my building and many others in that small town. Perhaps, my habit of regularly exchanging small talk with her helped my cause. Perhaps, my other habit of not bothering neighbor tenants and paying the rent on time and in full may have been just as decisive a factor.

Also, Byrd needed a suitable cage. I couldn't let him fly around the apartment for the entire day, possibly hurting himself in some unexpected manner or leaving his droppings in a hundred different places. The cage had to be big enough for him to accept; however, I could not afford a large, metal bird cage. They were priced at well over \$200 in pet stores.

My original cage was a bird hovel and Byrd responded in kind. The cage was cut from a large cardboard box. Since thin slits had to be made in the sides of the box, I invested hours in its construction. After Byrd had a meal, I placed his sleepy body in the cage. Hours later, when Byrd was more energetic, he stuck his beak between the cardboard bars to the point of rubbing his facial feathers off. When I opened the makeshift door, he burst out of that dark ghetto as if it were an iron maiden. In spite of all of my efforts to place the box cage in a well-lit area and to make interior amenities, such as perches, sills, and stairways, he still dreaded that cage. He'd kick, squawk and squirm as I placed him inside. I found a number of wire cages

on residential tree lawns on garbage collection days, but they were not large enough for a bird of his size and energy. Every cage was a prison cell in which Byrd could injure himself physically and mentally as he beat his beak and wings against its restraints. I simply could not afford to keep Byrd happy. Then, lightning luck struck again.

I noticed a large, wire dog kennel for sale for \$25 in the local newspaper classified ads. In pre-Internet days, it was my last chance. If Byrd did not like it, my only option would be to set him loose in order to protect his own health. He would have to find a way to fend for himself by watching other birds.

After my purchase, the transportation struggle began. That behemoth measured 4 feet long, 2 feet deep, and 2½ feet high—almost enough for me to fit into. The cage included a one-inch thick, plywood board that covered the bottom. I wrestled the cage into the back of my Dodge Omni hatchback, and after returning to the apartment, lugged it up the fire escape. All 5 feet 8 inches and 150 pounds of me twisted every which way as the silver monster fought me over each bare metal step.

Byrd observed as I awkwardly hefted it onto a front room coffee table, next to a window. After opening the cage door, setting up a few perches and tacking newspaper to the floor board, I stepped back. This rough contraption, with a little bit of rust on the edges, was hardly what I had seen in any home or pet shop. However, it was the best that a man on welfare could do. Byrd was still watching closely from his perch atop my raggedy third-hand couch.

Only seconds later, Byrd swooped into the cage and lighted onto a perch, claiming the kennel as his domain. I felt like a poor father who somehow bought just the right gift for his young son on a Christmas morning. Perhaps, Byrd knew of my struggles to transport that cage! Realistically, it was large, airy and a place where a bird could stretch his wings. I placed Byrd's little yellow bowl on the cage floor and set up a drinking apparatus.

At this point, the obstacles were out of my way. Just me and Byrd. The path of destiny is paved with many stones of good luck.

He was too weak to step upon the back of my hand and too weak to retreat to the corner of his cage.

#### 4 A Smart Little Byrd

*Byrd quickly adjusted to his surroundings. As I guided him through a new world, he guided me to a new world: a world of hope.*



Byrd in his cage. Film photo taken in fall 1991.

Within hours of entering my life, Byrd learned that the image of his caregivers had changed and became accustomed to me feeding him. Although his eyes were open when I found him, perhaps my entrance into his life was at a critical period in which he imprinted the image of mother and father. After all, at first sight, he opened his beak to me. If I had found him days later, he may have flown away, provided neighborhood cats didn't kill him by then.

After feeding him only a couple of times, Byrd was eager to jump onto my hand and be taken to the dinner table. Once there, he anxiously waited, beak open, for food and a few drops of water. Byrd would take no more food when his chest stuck out like a balloon, indicative of a full craw. At that time, I placed my hand in front of his feet, and nudged his toes. He would step one lanky leg at a time onto my palm. After cupping my hand

around him and stroking his back and wings, he would lower his head into his shoulders, shut at least one eye and doze. Many times, I added a lullaby to the routine. Usually, this made Byrd fall asleep much faster. Lullabies soothed him throughout his lifetime.

Byrd realized that he could manipulate his world. Within his first week, Byrd must not have been satisfied with my speed to the breakfast table. During his first few days of apartment living, he must have been studying me. One day, as usual, Byrd began to squeak for food at the first light of day. And, as usual, I rolled over to go back to sleep for awhile, content that Byrd was in or near his box. But something was different that day. Rather than a constant squeak from the front room, the squeaking began to grow louder... to grow closer. I peeked from my bed in time to see Byrd hopping into my bedroom. I pulled the covers over my head and retreated to the wall. However, the squeaks only drew closer. Another peek—this time from under the covers. Byrd was at the foot of my bed. I pulled the covers back over my head. A flapping sound. Then, the sensation of small feet on top of the bed. I lay dead still. The pressure hopped from my foot to the crook of my knee. From the crook of my knee to my hip. From my hip to my shoulder. I peeked from my hideout. Byrd jerked his beak to my face, yelling from his point-blank position. A smart little Byrd, indeed. Breakfast was going to be served a bit sooner.

When Byrd began to take food from my hand, approximately two months after I found him, I tried an experiment. On the kitchen table, where he was usually fed, I covered up some food with my hand. Rather than look toward me for more food, Byrd began to look between my fingers. A human baby would perceive the food as being 'all gone.' Yet Byrd knew better within a very short span of life. Perhaps, I could have guessed the result of this minor experiment since he realized that *I* was not 'all gone' within his first week of life with me. After all, he did track me to beneath my bed covers.

After Byrd knew how to eat on his own, he inherently knew what constituted food. One morning, when I did not awake to Byrd's demands to be fed, he became quiet and retreated to another room, seemingly giving up



on the idea of an early breakfast. I fed him at about eight a.m. that day. At lunch time, I grabbed a ripe peach from a plate on the top of the refrigerator. That peach was now covered with gouges—gouges the size of Byrd's beak. He found his own early breakfast that morning. In the future, I had to stash all soft food from what was becoming a flying vacuum cleaner. Byrd also knew when I was eating. If he wasn't in his cage with a bowl of food during my meals, Byrd would fly to my plate and try to snatch a sample.

Byrd also began to hunt. He could've learned from watching birds at his windowsill vantage point. Most likely, instinct was his teacher. I watched him prowl the carpet, probing the brown shag for anything that moved. Insects no longer traipsed upon my windowsills. They disappeared, as if Byrd's beak was a Venus Fly Trap. And spiders... they were a tasty morsel any time of day. Byrd reconnoitered the dark spots on the apartment drop ceiling. He would hover with his stubby wings, and then peck the spots. At times, I had to brush cobwebs off of Byrd. They were the telltale signs of his exploits. He was patrolling beneath cabinets, pulling guard duty behind the refrigerator and conducting search-and-destroy missions in dark corners. At times, he was so deep in enemy territory that he needed the assistance of a rescue mission. His system of Morse code, a series of scratching sounds, enabled me to locate him when he was lodged in a tight space, like behind the wastebasket, and open up an escape route for him. Insects weren't safe anywhere.

Byrd also seemed to inherently know something about water; he was attracted to it within his first month. Since the old apartment was only outfitted with a bathtub, Byrd could have been attracted to the water and the subsequent splashing. He also could have been prone to imitate my washing motions. Whatever the case, Byrd sauntered into the bathroom and vaulted onto the side of the tub. His eyes darted back and forth across the water, carefully observing the surface as I bathed. When my knee was above water level, he leapt onto it, continuing to study the water. I slowly lowered my knee to the point that the water covered Byrd's feet. He jumped back onto the side of the tub. Within seconds, he leapt onto my knee again. This time, he

dipped his beak into the water and threw it over his body. He shook his wings and tossed the water with even more vigor as I further lowered my knee. When I lowered my knee substantially, Byrd floated on the water like a duck. Realizing that he was without any support, he scrambled across the water, jumping back to the security of the side of the tub. After a bit of wing flapping and feather preening, Byrd jumped back to my knee for additional bathing. That was his first bath. Byrd joined me in the tub rather frequently.

I observed Byrd become a skilled flyer. Within weeks of his arrival, he progressed from laborious, wing-beating, comical flights with a minimal sense of direction, to precision, effortless vaults to my shoulder and head. I was privileged to pick him up during his early mishaps. For example, I saw Byrd try to jump through the window screen. He bounced back to the windowsill like a rubber ball. Byrd's sudden inactivity indicated that the crash was a bit worse than it looked. I scooped him from the windowsill and cradled him in my hand. Moments later, he began to squirm. And just like a father would set his young boy back on a bicycle seat after a skinned knee, I set him back on the windowsill. Byrd did not attempt to fly through the screen or window again. Byrd learned from his minor baby crashes how to navigate the restraints of indoor living.

Byrd also picked me up when I fell. Unemployment, poverty and the resulting degree of social isolation pushed me to the edge of depression. But that was before Byrd found me. I remember looking through the employment ads of an Akron newspaper on a fall evening as Byrd was honing his flying skills. Daylight savings time turned the gray afternoon into violet evening by six o'clock. As usual, the ads were a hodgepodge of minimum wage or vocational employment for which I wasn't qualified. As I sat in the overstuffed chair that I had picked from the trash, paper still up to my face, Byrd flew over my shoulder. He rocketed into the newspaper, almost knocking it out of my hands. He slid down the paper and rolled onto my lap. With all of the strength in his skinny, pink legs, Byrd doggedly climbed the front of my shirt one determined step at a time. He claimed a spot on my shoulder, studying my eyes from inches away. He knew my face, my touch, the contours of my

form.

At that moment, I realized that I was happy. In spite of all of the adversity—no job, an uncertain future, the embarrassment of being on welfare, the loss of my girlfriend—it was the first time in over a year that I realized that I was genuinely happy. The old room wasn't a dive built in 1920 with furniture from 1960, it was a warm home with long, wooden windows and high ceilings. It was our home. Byrd didn't have a rickety kennel for a cage. He had a spacious playground. My television with the cracked casing was only something that would lead to something better. I was falling in love with that feathery bag of joy. I had given Byrd life and he was giving it right back to me.

Within another week, he was flying with confidence. Pumping his stubby wings, Byrd bounded across the room to perch upon curtain rods, lampshades, cabinet doors and door tops. He had an affinity for landing upon heads. My neighbor, the maintenance man, heard that I had a bird in the apartment and visited. As soon as he entered, Byrd flew to the top of his head. When he raised a finger and slowly brought it toward Byrd's feet, Byrd flew back into the front room. My former girlfriend also visited. Byrd flew into her hair as soon as she entered the apartment. Perhaps, his memories of the nest remained. Then again, perhaps he simply enjoyed high vantage points. Although I received a shining recommendation from my landlord that the apartment was in "move-in condition" when I eventually left, I think that somewhere high upon the woodwork of those long windows were numerous loads of bird crap.

Regardless, from whatever the vantage point, Byrd followed me like a dog follows its master. If I walked too fast for Byrd to run after me, he caught up to me by flying. If he sat on a windowsill, it was the one in the room in which I happened to be. He kept me within his sight. I don't know whether it was because I was Byrd's food source, or because he was lonely, or because I was his mother and father. Byrd had his reasons.

Risking additional stress, I decided to hold him.

## 5 A New Home

*The employment that provided financial relief subtracted from my time with Byrd. I tried to make up for it by adding another bird to our family.*



Byrd and Pinky settle on the curtain rod. Photo taken in early 1992.

In the Spring of 1992, I was offered a federal job in my hometown, Cleveland. I planned to move back to the city within a month or two. In the meantime, my working hours and commute would leave Byrd alone for ten hours daily. Byrd was not home alone for any extended period except upon the few weekends that I visited my parents in Cleveland. He tolerated the situation. A pie plate full of food kept him content. But upon my return, he would anxiously jump from perch to perch, bolting out of the very dirty cage as soon as I opened the door.

Since Byrd would be by himself for extended periods of time through the distant future, I bought a parakeet to keep him company. She was an albino female, so I named her Pinky. I figured that both of them should get along, not only because of the extended hours together, but because they were of opposite sexes. Any same sex dominance issues would seemingly



be minimized. I placed her moderately-sized cage next to Byrd's.

Unfortunately, Pinky liked Byrd more than he liked her. Although they occasionally slept next to each other on the curtain rod, I detected an indifference on Byrd's part. While she always wanted to be close to him, he usually flew away or didn't pay much attention to her. When I returned home from work, Byrd sat on his favorite perch in the middle of his cage while Pinky perched as close to Byrd's cage as possible. Occasionally, I left Pinky's cage open during the day. Upon my return, she would be sitting on top of Byrd's cage, gazing down upon him. Every now and then, Byrd pecked at her tiny feet. She jumped back or squawked, but always returned to the space directly above his head.

Besides the difference in species, perhaps a major difference in each bird's upbringing affected the dynamics between them. Byrd was hand-raised, enjoying my company. Pinky was not hand-raised, enjoying the company of other birds. While Byrd and I spent time together, Pinky stayed near her cage, anxious for Byrd to return for food or sleep. As much as I tried to integrate her into our lives, she wanted Byrd to herself. I spent as much time near them both as I could.

Weeks later, I moved to a southwest Cleveland suburb. Friends helped me with the move. Pinky was no problem to move in her modest cage. I anticipated driving with Byrd in his cage in the hatchback of my Omni. After covering his cage with a blanket, two of us struggled hauling Byrd down the fire escape. We not only found that the cage didn't fit into the car, but that we wedged it half way into the hatchback! The foldable sides or the bottom board must have shifted; the cage fit into my car when I first transported it to the apartment. My heart raced as Byrd fluttered in his cage, banging against the sides. He was unfamiliar with such a drastic change of scenery and a multitude of strangers. If we attempted to work the cage free, Byrd would have continued the fluttering, possibly pummeling himself to death during the process.

Byrd needed to be transferred to another container in the parking lot. A paper lunch bag was the best that I could do at the time. I told my friends

to gather in front of the cage door and begged them to be vigilant about not letting Byrd fly off. My heart thumped like a bass drum as I opened the cage door and quickly inserted my hands, head and upper body inside. If he flew off in a panic, not only would I never see him again, but his survival skills had to be minimal. I mentally pictured him firmly in my grip. Any negativity may have further affected Byrd's agitated state. Any doubt may have affected the steadiness of my hand. As Byrd backed into a corner, I boxed him in and grabbed him. After securing him in my hand, I backed out and slowly deposited him headfirst into the paper bag. I ripped a dime-sized hole in the bag. Byrd stuck his beak out of it. He rode on the front, passenger-side, floor of the Omni for the journey. Byrd squeaked a few times as his claws scratched at the bag interior. I talked to him soothingly over our drive.

Byrd easily adjusted to the new apartment. He was still young enough to be flexible. He liked the big, front room windowsill. The position of his cage, next to my computer and with a view through the front window, seemed to please him. Pinky's cage was placed a couple of feet away. If Byrd did not adjust well, I may have had to draw the curtains for a while or mark the windows with masking tape in order for him to avoid any collisions into the glass.

The upcoming months were tragic for Pinky. Although she was content because Byrd was there—his cage was again next to hers—Byrd became aggressive toward her. His extra month or two of maturation may have brought Byrd to primal protection of his territory. He began to attack Pinky as she flew. Byrd, an excellent flyer, pecked at her head and back while she awkwardly flew. He typically returned to his cage top with a beak full of white feathers. And rather than avoid contact with Byrd, Pinky continued to fuss when Byrd was out of his cage, insisting upon being out of her cage when he was out of his. I began to monitor them when both flew free, but often had to put a protective hand between both during her vulnerable flights. In spite of my protection, Byrd caught her during flight. He plucked out the beautiful crest on her head. Both birds had to be kept apart.

I tried to be Pinky's best friend. The worst of results followed. One

day, as she clung to the side of Byrd's cage pining for him, I gathered her into my hand and kissed her, then threw her into the air. I did this with Byrd frequently. He would squirm a bit in my hand; but as I threw him into the air, he would free fall with his wings outstretched for the first foot before flying away. Sometimes, he would return and let me pick him up for a second go-round. After throwing Pinky into the air, she circled in her awkward manner. After she landed, I chased her playfully and she took to her bumblebee flying again. She veered into the hall, wings constantly pumping. I laughed as I followed, not realizing the extent of her exhaustion. She fluttered into the bedroom and plopped onto a felt hat atop my ironing board. She clutched the side of the hat, her small chest heaving. As I walked to her, she lost her grip and fell backwards. In a frenzy, Pinky pumped her wings, only propelling herself with greater velocity toward the hardwood floor. She couldn't right herself. The back of her head struck the floor first. Still on her back, she convulsed. Then froze. She died before I could pick her up.

In an effort to substitute my attention for Byrd's company, I chased her to exhaustion and to death. I cursed myself for not jumping to stop her fall, for my absentmindedness, for my stupidity. Then, I wept out of frustration and compassion. Did she ever feel loved? Did she die fearful and broken-hearted? Pinky never cared much for me; however, she really liked Byrd. He reciprocated by attacking her. Byrd's attacks on a parakeet as vulnerable as Pinky were nothing short of sickening. But I had erred, forcing a relationship between her and Byrd when it was highly improbable. My intention at the time of Pinky's purchase was to eventually move her into Byrd's cage. We would be a sweet interspecies family. I naively estimated the powers of nature and upbringing.

I set her body in a sitting position on the chair next to Byrd's cage. The next day, I buried her in a six-inch deep hole beneath the lilac bush in a landscaped corner of my parent's back yard. Byrd didn't seem to notice that she was missing. She was with us for under a year. Regardless, she had some influence on him. He occasionally slept with his beak tucked under his wing, just like she did. Byrd never practiced this habit before. His beak was

too long to make this sleeping position entirely natural.

I couldn't help but to feel a distance from Byrd. Memories of him crouching on top of his cage, waiting for her to fly—daring her to fly—as he plotted to yank out her feathers in mid-air, left me conflicted. This happy, passionate bird of mine still had the intent to kill—not for food—but for territory, sport or to have me to himself. In retrospect, many have been surprised by the violent actions of their own cats and dogs. Many more are surprised by the violent actions that humans inflict upon our own species. We all are capable of killing for territory, sport or passion.

In order for life to continue normally, forgiveness was in order. I had to forgive myself not only for accidentally killing Pinky, but for bringing her into our home in the first place. Perhaps, a wild bird is to be the only bird in a household. I also had to forgive Byrd for his attacks upon her, whether natural or not. And maybe, Byrd had to forgive me for bringing another bird into his home and into my life. He wanted to be the only one to protect me; the only one to watch over me.

The only time that I held Byrd was when I trimmed his toenails. He fussed during those moments of restraint. No fuss today.

## 6 Someone to Watch Over Me

*From the time that I first entered Byrd's life, the role of all individuals important to him became mine. In turn, he became my protector, a guardian angel. He became a someone to watch over me.*



Byrd on the front room windowsill—one eye on me, one eye outdoors. Approximately 1996.

Perhaps, I encountered Byrd before he fully imprinted upon his mother, father and siblings. Since he now depended upon me for regular feeding and companionship, I became Byrd's everything. If a menacing crow or hawk glided by the window, Byrd darted beneath my feet. When he was mischievous, he pecked my toes and I would playfully chase him. When hungry, Byrd made demanding squeaks while he stood beside my feet. When he was amorous, he would jump on one of my feet and wiggle. I *truly* became Byrd's everything.

In turn, he took it upon himself to watch over me. Like a faithful watchdog, he followed me around the house. If I was in the kitchen, he watched from a vantage point atop an open cabinet door or from below while crouched at my feet. When I was on the toilet, Byrd kept guard from the sink, from my knee or from a perch upon the waistband of the pants bunched



around my ankles. (And yes... sometimes he crapped in my pants.) When I worked at my desk, he monitored me from my lap or shoulder, from inside or on top of his cage, the back or legs of my chair, the nearby windowsill or while snuggled at my feet.

Byrd kept a tab on me from a variety of odd vantage points. During my yoga stretches, Byrd waited until I laid on my back and brought my feet to touch the floor over my head. Then, he'd regularly fly from the top of his cage to perch on my butt, staring at me from between my legs. One day, as I practiced guitar, the bass strings suddenly muted. As I turned from my sheet music, I found Byrd perched on the guitar neck. His claws were lopped over the strings, deadening them. Byrd observed me from open cabinet doors, the top of the lampshade, picture frames, my music stand, the light bar above the bathroom mirror. If he could comfortably wrap his claws around any point with me in an elevated line-of-sight, he perched there.

Duties didn't stop at night. Byrd began to sit atop my bedroom door as I slept. He was my guardian angel, a vigilant sentinel warding off the evils of night. His stalwart shadow was the last sight of my day. At first, he was calm throughout the evening. I would wake at first light to him flying to the windowsill beside my bed. He quietly waited there until I left the bed.

After a few calm nights, I startled to Byrd circling in a crazed, blabbering flight over my bed. After turning a light on, he settled back atop the door. After two more consecutive nights of these startles, I turned the light off before going to bed and placed my hand at Byrd's feet. Since Byrd never flew at night—most birds do not—he always willingly climbed onto my hand in the dark. The best place for Byrd—and for me—was to have him in his cage at night, even if the cage door was left open. I don't know why Byrd awoke from his door top perch. Any of my nocturnal shifting may have woke him. On the other hand, I regularly heard Byrd hop from his cage perch to the floor newspaper in the middle of the night. Apparently, he shifted during his sleep, too.

At dawn, Byrd regularly returned to my bedroom. He sang sweet songs from the windowsill, the floor beside my bed or my nightstand. I've

never felt such peacefulness and comfort. He even slept with me in early morning hours, nestling on a small towel on the portion of mattress beside my pillow.

The apartment door didn't divert Byrd from his duties. One summer evening, I left the apartment to see a drive-in movie. A bowl of food didn't entice him to enter his cage, so I withdrew most of the food and left the cage door open. I departed with my usual "Goodbye. I love you, Byrd. Be a good bird." I guessed that he would follow his nightly routine of spending the final 45 minutes of sunlight sitting on the front room windowsill watching birds, bugs, people and traffic on the main road. With the final strands of daylight as his guide, Byrd would retire to the highest perch of his cage, where I would typically see his crouched, sleeping, one-legged shadow upon my return in the darkness.

As I left the back door of the apartment complex and crossed the courtyard on my way to the parking lot, my feet stopped. An emotional force whispered to me "Turn around." With a plastic cooler in one hand and a lawn chair in the other, I looked up to my third floor apartment. From 75 feet away, I saw a dab of orange on the bedroom windowsill. Byrd's tiny face came into focus. I stood still. Did Byrd crisscross the apartment, dashing from window to window, until he found me? I remembered my childhood anxiety, and a few tears, when my mom and dad would leave me for an evening. Did Byrd feel that same anxiety? I felt like running back up the stairs, throwing the door open, gathering him in my hands, giving him 100 kisses and never leaving him again.

Byrd knew that I was somewhere else when I disappeared behind the apartment door, but still in need of his care. On a summer evening, I decided to read a book outdoors. As I walked out of the building, I again felt the need to look upward. Byrd's little face was intently watching from the front room windowsill, his beak following my movements. I placed my lawn chair under a shade tree within his view. Every once in a while, I found it reassuring to look up from my book to see him looking right back at me. Although other spots near the backyard pool could have been more interesting, I always

read at that spot on the front lawn for its superior comfort.

Byrd also had to physically protect me. While sweeping the rug, my vintage canister vacuum cleaner growled as it pursued me. Then, a pinging noise began to emanate from the vacuum. As I turned to check for a mechanical problem, there was Byrd—pecking that monstrosity! Although the vacuum was armored and much bigger than he, Byrd stood toe-to-toe with it, tirelessly attacking. When the vacuum wand approached him, he pecked that, too. Some days while vacuuming, I would make him jump by brushing his tail feathers with the wand. One day, I swept too close to him. Upon raising the wand, I found Byrd pinned to end of it by his chest! He squeaked before I could shut off the vacuum. I worried that I may have traumatized him, but duty overcame any fear. He continued to battle the vacuum, in spite of the size and power differential. What a brave heart!

Territorial threats were not taken lightly. Byrd defended the apartment on at least two occasions. I observed the first when I emerged from the kitchen on a summer afternoon. Byrd was gazing at what seemed to be his reflection in the front room window. When the reflection moved in the opposite direction, I realized that an invader was at the homeland border. Both birds began to peck at the window separating them, then took to dogfighting. Byrd strategically retreated to the top of the curtain rod. As the outdoor robin sat on the windowsill quizzically cocking his head back-and-forth, Byrd attacked from above. The outdoor robin peeled off, leaving Byrd king of the windowsill. Seconds later, the robin counterattacked from below. Byrd vaulted to the top of my computer monitor, then wheeled around. The other robin fell back as Byrd dove with outstretched claws. The aerial parrying continued until the outdoor robin retreated to an awning, frustrated at the window border and at Byrd's determination to hold his ground. Both birds eyed each other for a while afterward. Byrd had one other windowsill battle. He dove from the shower curtain rod to surprise a sparrow at my bathroom window bird feeder. The sparrow instantly charged, angrily nipping at the screen directly in front of Byrd. Byrd sprang back to the curtain rod, not to attack again. That sparrow was too crazy for him.

Byrd's loyalty was a gift. A little someone was always waiting for me to come home from work. If in his cage, he'd hop from perch to perch, squeaking all of the time as I entered the apartment. When the cage door was promptly opened, he'd bolt out, sometimes leaving an orange feather floating in his wake. At times, I would leave him out of his cage when I ran an errand. He developed the habit of waiting on the windowsills. Upon my return, I could look from outdoors to my front room window. His orange chest stood out like a candle. If he was perched on the lamp in front of the window, he stood out like a lighthouse beacon. Byrd must have known that I would return, as I always did. And while I was at home, he constantly watched over me—from the bathroom windowsill as I showered, from the floor as I wrote, from my chest or big toe as I napped, from the top of an open cabinet door as I prepared our meals. When I was depressed with the futility of my federal job or upset with a failed relationship, Byrd sat next to me, just listening. When life wasn't worth living, I knew that I had to return home. Byrd was depending upon me.

Other than 40 weekly hours at my job and workouts at the gym, I didn't spend much time away from Byrd. His life revolved around me, and to a large degree, my life revolved around him. I owed him that obligation. Additionally, I was not inclined to join social groups. From my early youth, my blue-collar parents considered school work and the accomplishment of high grades to be my job. After-school activities were not encouraged.

When my father and I regularly camped for five days in early summer and five days in late summer, my mother visited my apartment daily for Byrd's care. She spent time with him previously in order to gain his trust. With very few exceptions, I telephoned her every night every time that I was on vacation. After asking how she was doing, my next question was always the same: "How is Byrd?" One day, she responded by saying "What will you do without Byrd?" I couldn't stand the thought of his death, pushing the inevitable out of my mind. Byrd was still young and we were having fun.

His feet dangled as I cupped my hand around his back and wings.

## 7 A Circus Byrd

*I can't help but to believe that Byrdie liked to do tricks. Patience and a step-by-step process yielded wonderful results. Besides, he was a little show-off.*



Beginning a bath. Photo taken in 2004.

Teaching Byrd to perform tricks was an activity that we could do together. Besides, Byrd enjoyed pleasing me and I enjoyed time spent with him. I don't think that serious efforts were made to train Byrd until he was at about 6 months old. He was so rambunctious as a baby that I did not attempt it earlier. I laid the foundation, though, by placing my hand or forefinger near his feet soon after he came into my house. Often, he stepped onto my hand or finger. Simultaneously, I probably said the word "up" with a similar voice inflection each time.

At the new apartment, real training began with the classic perch on the forefinger trick. Training proceeded slowly, usually upon my kitchen table, but sometimes upon the floor. Using a piece of Byrd's favorite food, combined with a period of food deprivation of about an hour or so, provided the proper motivation. I would rest my finger in front of Byrd's feet. While holding a



treat at beak's height and slightly behind the finger, I would say "up." When Byrd lunged at the food, jumped over my finger, flew onto my forearm or did anything except step onto my finger, the treat was withdrawn. As soon as Byrd stepped onto my finger, I gave him the treat. Within days, he was stepping onto my finger regularly at the word "up." From that point, I began to raise my finger. Byrd could no longer simply step onto my finger. He had to jump a few millimeters or so. I withdrew the treat numerous times or hid it behind my back as Byrd did a myriad of motions rather than the requested one. If I felt that he was getting frustrated or took more than 5 to 7 attempts, I withdrew the food and waited until he was calm. We then reverted back to a simple step onto the finger without any elevation. The treat was then given. If Byrd was still hungry, we did the simple step again, perhaps with the finger elevated a single millimeter. In order to avoid the connection of frustration with doing tricks, I liked to end the session with Byrd not only feeling a sense of accomplishment, but of weakened hunger. Since Byrd was not a small bird, we could continue for 15 to 20 minutes before his stomach would fill and his mind wander. We repeated his lessons a couple of times per day.

It wasn't long until his millimeter jump increased exponentially. After a week, Byrd was jumping up an inch to perch on my finger and claim his treat. After a few more days, he began to jump higher. When he ran or pushed his way under my hand to pilfer the treat, the treat was withdrawn until Byrd settled down. If necessary, we reverted back to jumping only a few millimeters onto my finger for a treat. We progressed forward when possible and backward when necessary. One training session, Byrd just seemed to 'get it.' After raising my finger progressively higher off of the table, he jumped progressively higher onto my finger. When I backed away from the table, he bounded to my finger. When I moved to across the room, he again flew to my finger. We repeated that trick scores of times. Byrd never tired of performing for food.

After that accomplishment, I added a new twist. I bought some wooden dowel rod from a local hardware store and we returned to the kitchen table. After showing the treat over the short dowel rod extending from my fist and

giving the order, Byrd jumped onto my hand. He looked at me, expecting me to give him his treat. But I waited. Byrd waited, too. Then, he inched his way to the dowel rod and shimmied claw over claw to claim the treat waiting at my fingertips at the end of the rod. After a few more times of Byrd flying to my hand and shimmying to his treat, he began to fly directly onto the dowel rod and claim his reward without delay.

My plan didn't stop there. Byrd could be challenged further. I fastened a 4-inch section of dowel rod on the top of a 3-foot section of dowel rod to create large T-shape. When Byrd flew to the kitchen table for a treat, I set the apparatus close to the table and held his treat over the 4-inch section. Byrd lighted upon it within a moment. I raised the apparatus to the level of my face. Again, Byrd lighted upon it, easily claiming his treat. Finally, I raised the T-structure like the baton of a circus ringleader, showed the treat, gave the order and Byrd flew to perch upon the very top. Then, I raised and lowered my makeshift baton to the imaginary music of a circus band. All of the while, Byrd bobbed upon the top of the baton, enjoying the ride and the attention. In those moments, I could picture myself in a red suit and top hat, maneuvering between elephants as the smallest performer perched upon my baton. The crowd was clapping wildly while the pride in Byrd's brown eyes glowed with the reflection of crisscrossing beams of swiveling spotlights.

I taught him to fly between my legs. Since Byrd would readily fly to my finger, all that I had to do was bend over rather closely to him, extend the forefinger at knee height, show the treat and give the command. Sometimes, he would tease me by jumping on my back. But after a short time, the treat was too enticing. He regularly flew between my legs from across the room to perch upon my finger. Repetition imprinted the trick upon his brain. His best performance was yet to come.

The ring. I asked my mother to find some type of a dinner-plate sized ring as she practiced one of her favorite pastimes, scouring neighborhood garage sales. She found a wooden, needlework ring that fit the description. When I brought the ring into the room, Byrd cocked his head to one side, suspiciously eyeing it with the full extent of his monocular vision. When I

approached him with the ring at my side, he darted away. He didn't like that ring at all. The granddaddy of all tricks was going to take extra effort.

Delicacies would have to be the lure. Byrd grew tired of earthworms, and lost his appetite for mealworms. But Byrd could never resist one treat: waxworms. Those plump, parchment-skinned, maggot-shaped waddlers drew Byrd's attention like nothing else. A shake of the waxworm plastic container would bring him scampering from any corner of the apartment to light upon my shoulder. He would stare at the container, mesmerized. That magic had to be put to use.

Training again began slowly. I dropped the ring on the front room carpet and tossed a waxworm a few inches from it. Byrd flew to the floor, yards from the ring, and hesitated. He looked back to me, inevitably wanting a waxworm, but not the one near the ring. I tossed another waxworm a foot away from the ring. Byrd still hesitated, dancing back and forth, stopping, craning to observe a treat seemingly so far away. Then, he stood still. Decision time. He crept inches closer. Closer. Lunged. Then he ran away, content to devour his waxworm within a safe distance of the dreaded ring. I dropped another waxworm closer to the ring. After hesitating for minutes, Byrd again gingerly stepped closer, snatched the worm and ran away. He waited a while longer before daring to grab the waxworm closest to the ring. Finally, I threw a waxworm into the middle of the ring and sat back to watch. Byrd nervously skipped around the perimeter of the ring, wondering which stretch of wood was safest to jump across. After deciding on just the right spot, he stopped. Paced back-and-forth. Stopped again. Waited. Suddenly, he vaulted into the ring, grabbed the worm, jumped out of the ring and again ran a distance away to enjoy his treat. A first day success. In subsequent days, Byrd grew accustomed to retrieving waxworms from inside the ring perimeter—without the drama.

When fear was gone, training advanced. I dropped a waxworm inside of the ring and picked up one edge approximately one inch. Byrd had to simply step inside of the ring, as usual, to retrieve his treat. After a bit of hesitation, he stepped over the ring edge contacting the carpet, retrieved his

treat and ran away. I began to slant the ring further, never letting Byrd run under the ring. I would rotate it until the edge which contacted the carpet was always in front of him. He could run out of the ring by running beneath it or jumping out of it, but never retrieve the treat by running under the slanted ring. The slant increased over days of practice, from 10 degrees to 45 degrees to 60 degrees. Then, to 90. At that point, the ring had to be constantly rotated. Byrd always ran to the opposite side of the ring in order to avoid walking through it. He soon realized that the only way to the waxworm was through the ring. He began to hop through it. Breakthrough.

The next steps were relatively easy. I lifted the ring ever so slightly. Byrd hopped through for his treat. Lifted it higher. He hopped through again. Lifted it higher. This time, I placed the worm between my thumb and forefinger. Byrd jumped through the ring, onto my hand and retrieved the worm. When I moved the ring to the kitchen table and placed a worm within its perimeter, he waited for me to place the ring on the front room rug. Remedial training was in order since Byrd didn't transfer the trick to all surfaces yet. I coaxed him onto the kitchen table with a waxworm, and then we quickly moved through our initial training on the tabletop. Byrd jumped into the ring, walked through it, jumped through it. I moved the ring from the table to over my lap. The real test.

Byrd transferred. He bounded from the table, through the hoop and onto my finger to claim his treat. Then, I lowered my finger to the side of table, placing Byrd's claws over its edge so that he would willingly step back onto the tabletop. I moved further away. Byrd popped off of the tabletop, through the hoop and onto my finger to again claim his treat. I set him back on the table and I stood up. He flew through the hoop. I moved across the room. He jettisoned from the table through the hoop. His eyes and his body radiated an aura of pride and success.

Byrd enjoyed his new ability as much as I did repeating it. I could tell—after claiming his treat, Byrd lingered on my finger until I threw him into the air. He'd land nearby, waiting to perform his next trick. In subsequent days, I could use lesser treats, such as a slice of grape or a soft raisin.

We accomplished the grand finale. Just me and Byrd. Now... if I were to set the ring on fire—careful not to singe my red ringmaster suit—and positioned myself between two sitting tigers, I know that the crowd would explode in applause when Byrd flew around the grandstand three times, and then, bulletted through the ring of fire! In front of our imaginary circus, we repeated all of Byrd's tricks most every day and tried to expand his repertoire.

Byrd's pleasure was not only in receiving a treat, but in performance itself. Since he showed so much intelligence in his early youth, I should've known that Byrd would be such a good performer. As he aged, his intelligence was also channeled into energetic curiosity.

Byrd accepted an unfamiliar position: I placed him in the palm of my hand.



## 8

### A Curious Little Byrd

*From the day he entered my home, Byrd's curiosity freed him from the restraints of his box. Very few of my best memories involve Byrd in his cage. His life was one of discovery, companionship and the love that results.*



Byrd enjoying a bath. Photo taken in 2004.

Byrd was out of his cage at as much as possible. I get antsy during extended periods of time in the apartment and must get out to see friends, a movie, have dinner, shop and such. Byrd felt the same way. Occasionally, I would enter my apartment complex to the distant sound of high-pitched squawking. On those days, I knew that Byrd was infected by cabin fever. He wanted to stretch his wings and explore. His wings were never clipped. He was a bird with a sleek body designed to fly. Why would I frustrate him?

The apartment was fertile ground for an inquisitive mind. When I pulled my chair to the computer, Byrd stared at the screen from my shoulder. He'd jump to the top of the monitor for a closer look, then glide to the windowsill when the outdoor scenery lured him away. If a plant were on the windowsill, real fun began. Byrd would start digging away with his little beak, plucking a leaf or stem to sample the taste. At a sharp clap of my hands, Byrd would

dart away, dirt covering his beak. After a quick neck twitch, hurling most of the soil particles to who-knows-where, he'd conveniently finish the hygiene task by wiping his beak on the rug. Then, it was time to take flight again. If I heard scratching from inside of the kitchen trash basket, the noise usually wasn't the working of an emerging poltergeist, but Byrd mining for food and adventure.

After escorting him out and covering the trash, I would try to keep him entertained. I'd place a plastic cube of multicolored paperclips or my seashell full of coins on the floor. Byrd would throw the paperclips all over and pull every coin from the seashell. Following play, he'd run off into the kitchen for a while, perhaps to hunt silverfish. Silverfish, much quicker than spiders, were a more exciting challenge. Later, I'd hear him singing in the bathroom. The acoustics may have been more pleasing to his ear. Sometimes, he'd be content singing from the bathroom floor. Other times, Byrd liked to project his voice from the height of the door.

When he quieted, I usually set out a soup bowl of hot water on the kitchen rug. Byrd enjoyed his daily baths. He developed a bathing ceremony. First, he'd hop around the bowl repeatedly. Then, a beak dip to test the water, followed by more circling the bowl. After finding the perfect spot on the lip of the bowl, he'd jump onto that particular spot, wait a second, jump back to the floor, and again, dance around the bowl. After finding another perfect spot on the lip of the bowl, he'd jump to that spot, wait a second, slide in, jump back out, and flick his feathers a bit. The dance would begin again; but around the fourth time, after jumping upon the side, he'd slide in and sit still. Finally, a rollicking bath began. Byrd would submerge his head and shake it like a tambourine beneath the water. The churning water rolled over his back feathers. The wing flicking began next, spraying bursts of water in all directions. When he emptied half of the bowl, Byrd would lift off with furiously beating, brick bat wings. After preening himself on the kitchen counter, he completed the ceremony on the front room windowsill. Byrd would extend his wings, spread his feathers and dry himself in the warmth of the sun.

After all of this activity, Byrd was raring for a meal. I could not sneak

into the kitchen without Byrd hot on my trail. As I'd open the refrigerator, Byrd was already on my shoulder, anxious for a glimpse of the tasty treasures within. Once, he jumped into the refrigerator. I closed the door after he settled on the top shelf. When I opened the door a few seconds later, he darted back to my shoulder. He never flew back inside, but would hungrily stare into it from a safe distance. When I began to prepare his meal, cutting fruit and perhaps a few small pieces of meat, he'd perch on my hand and try to snatch a sample. If he grabbed an item as large as a grape, I had to chase him until he dropped it. Otherwise, he wouldn't enter his cage for a while and his droppings would increase substantially. Usually, I could transfer Byrd from my hand to my shoulder during meal preparation. Depending upon his hunger, those transfers could not only be numerous, but accompanied by angry "ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bah" squawks. When his meal was ready, I'd have his bowl in one hand and him perched on my other hand. His beak followed the bowl like a retriever pointing out a rabbit.

When the bowl was placed in his cage, Byrd hopped inside to quickly pick out his favorite morsels. He typically threw his food all over the cage and snacked upon the crumbs later. I have no idea why Byrd was such a messy eater. His many wayward food particles necessitated a vacuum to be kept beside his cage for daily rug cleaning. When his bowl was empty, Byrd pushed it from one corner of his cage to the next. Although the bowl was weighted, he was strong enough to shuffle it around, probably trying to dislodge every crumb of food. I kept him in his cage for 2 to 3 hours following his meal.

Byrd's cage time wasn't too boring. He had a variety of toys. He enjoyed rolling and throwing modestly-sized household items, such as a toothpaste cap, shiny pennies, an eraser and pen caps across the floor of his cage. Other items that kept him occupied included rubber and plastic bugs, a mirror, and a white, plastic parakeet mounted on a spring attached to his perch. Byrd frequently napped next to this white parakeet, occasionally pecking its tail to make it bob to-and-fro. I wonder whether it reminded him of Pinky. My mother also brought little toys for him, such as plastic balls,

rubbery balls with long spines and a doll house telephone that he liked to hold in his beak. She bought a synthetic nest at a garage sale that must have been used for a craft project. I tied it to a perch and used it as his toy box. Byrd liked to pluck out all of the toys, drop them to the cage bottom, and later, scatter them across his cage. Therefore, weekly toy washings were required. If a rubber animal or a small object was placed upon the kitchen table while Byrd was out of his cage, he usually flew off with it, whether the object was intended for him or not.

Care had to be taken not only with the toys provided, but with small objects left about the apartment. Stray objects had to be large enough that they could not be ingested. Once, Byrd passed a rubber band through his system. I noticed him pluck it from his backside and drop it into the kitchen sink from his perch atop an open cabinet door. Afterward, all rubber bands, strings and small items were kept in drawers to ensure Byrd's health.

Although apartment living kept him adequately entertained, the object of Byrd's most curiosity was me. He always had to know what I was doing from the time that I woke to the time that I went to bed. At sunup, he flew into my bedroom and sat on my chest. If my arm was uncovered, he perched on it. Acutely aware of even the smallest of moles and skin imperfections, he pecked at them until I twitched violently enough to send him vaulting to the windowsill or nightstand where he sat watching me or singing sweetly until I awoke.

After I rolled out of bed, he followed me into the bathroom. As I shaved, he perched on my shoulder, once ticklishly inserting his beak into my ear. After a splash of my razor in the sink water, Byrd would jump to the sink. He'd attempt to hop in, anxious to splash, too. I blocked Byrd on many occasions from bathing in soapy water in order to prevent him from burning his eyes. After emptying and quickly rinsing the sink, I would open the faucet to a thin stream of hot water. Byrd would jump onto the back of my hand and I'd place him beneath the water stream. The water stream would burrow a part in his back feathers until it penetrated to his skin. Because of a bird's high body temperature, Byrd enjoyed very hot water. He would settle on the back of

my hand, spreading his wings and opening his beak to expel extra heat. A minute or so later, he'd jump out, shake his feathers and jump back onto my hand for more bathing. When the sink water was a couple of inches deep, he'd splash. He insisted that I keep my hand beneath his feet for support. When he was soaked, he fluttered from the sink to the top of the bathroom door. From the door top, he'd shake his wings until they were dry enough for adequate flight. The vigor of his shaking left small down feathers clinging to the nearby wall.

During my writing workdays or weekends, he'd shadow me for most of the rest of the day. If in his cage, he'd watch me from the highest perch or from the cage floor corner closest to me. If outside of his cage, he'd sit on my lap or peck at my toes from under my desk as I worked at my computer. On breaks, I would scatter more toys about the front room rug. Some days, I'd attach a string to a plastic bug and pull it across the floor while bird grabbed at it.

When darkness fell, Byrd flew to his cage, settling inside or on top of it for a night's sleep. If I worked into the night, the dim light of the computer screen didn't seem to bother him. Byrd was content that I was next to him. And after a day of watching him explore his world, I was content, too.

The last time that I had held him this way, he was a speckle-chested baby, sleepy after filling his craw with worms.



## 9 Byrd Glop

*Freedom has its consequences. Acceptance of those consequences was my way of fully accepting Byrd.*



Byrd sitting atop my black couch. He probably crapped on it as he observed me taking this photo from my desk in 1994.

As a baby, Byrd defecated in his box or on the kitchen table as I fed him. As he matured, my main course of action to control the whereabouts of his bowel movements was to feed him in his cage and keep him there for a couple of hours following his meals. That restricted the placement of about 75% of his droppings. The remaining 25% remained elusive.

I was able to capture a good portion of his freestyle droppings through the astute placement of newspapers and trays. One of the most beneficial placements occurred on the front room windowsill. I positioned an old, gooseneck, desk lamp there—a perfect perch for Byrd while he viewed the outside world. Then, I placed a tray beneath the neck portion, the area which Byrd spent most of his time. I also placed newspaper in Byrd's favorite places to sun himself. He usually jumped on the newspaper and sat there with his feathers puffed out and his beak open until he was satisfied with his daily

dosage of sun. At times, Byrd seemed to accommodate me, too. He perched on the trash basket beneath my desk, using it as an enormous toilet.

I wasn't so lucky in other cases. The top of my black, vinyl couch was one of Byrd's favorite places to relax. Since the front of my desk touched the back of the couch, Byrd could watch me work from that vantage point. By the day's end, the couch was streaked in a clumpy white design. Often, I didn't clean up right away. Heck... we were both bachelors and bachelorhood gave me the option of cleaning up at will. After a couple of days, that couch was pretty crusty. He liked the arm and the seat, too, with similar effects. Even after thorough cleaning, the couch retained ingrained, white patterns and ended up in the dumpster. We never missed that couch. I just rotated my desk to face the window and kept a box of tissue within arm's length. As I worked at my desk, Byrd kept an eye on me from his windowsill lamp, my lap, my desktop, the feet of my desk chair or the floor at my feet.

Byrd liked to settle in other places. As a result, he crapped on everything I owned: my television, guitar, computer monitor, light fixtures, molding above doors and windows, picture frames, curtain rods. A couple of times, Byrd surprised me with his variety.

He crapped in my toaster. One morning, I left an overhead kitchen cabinet door open. Soon, Byrd perched there. As I pulled out the toaster, that little devil crapped directly in the toaster slot. I just looked up at him and whined out of exasperation, "Byrrrrd!" He casually looked down, as if saying, "It's your own fault." I fished out the majority of the glop. Whatever bits remained were burned off with a dry run. I use that same toaster today—with no ill effects—mind you.

Within his first months of life, he crapped on my forehead while I was sleeping. Even in Byrd's youthful days at the Ravenna apartment, he had a marksman's aim. Early mornings, while waiting to be fed, he began to wait for me to rise by perching on the curtain rod above my bed pillow. On a late August morning, the weather was warm and I felt like I was sweating. As I drew the back of my hand over my brow, my perspiration felt rather slick. After realizing that Byrd was perched directly above me, I woke rather

quickly. After washing, I moved the bed a safe distance from the wall.

He crapped on my telephone. As my eyes popped open to an early morning call, I noticed that Byrd sprang simultaneously from his perch on my telephone. The first ring of my old, heavy Westinghouse must have really jolted Byrd from a morning doze. I laughed to myself. It was about time that a good joke was played upon Byrd. I rolled out of bed and grabbed the phone receiver. A slick, sticky solution adhered to my hand. In the end, Byrd got me again.

Most often, Byrd laid a minefield on the floor. A cold, slick sensation awaited my bare feet if I wasn't completely mindful of my surroundings. I kept several boxes of tissues within easy reach as first aid to his anti-personnel engineering feats. Regular vacuuming and rug scrubbing were always in order. Some of his droppings had to be wiped up within a short period of time in order to prevent staining, such as those on porcelain and wood surfaces.

Dealing with Byrd's droppings tested my patience and humor. However, we were both bachelors. Jokes and cleaning up became part of the daily regimen. I dealt with it as needed. If humans can put up with diapering infant children, how much less of a hassle was handling Byrd. And after all, Byrd was my baby. I did get angry at times, especially when he would occasionally let his bowels loose on my walls during a fly-by. That always bothered me because of the permanent discoloration. I couldn't stay angry long, though. Byrd had a way of looking at me—cocking his head and staring with one eye—that melted my heart. I'd simply touch up the wall with a bottle of typewriter correction fluid, and then, forget about the situation.

Regardless, steady bowel movements, consisting of white liquid with a dark-colored, solid interior, were an indicator of good avian health. Byrd, true to his species, *Turdus Migratorius*, was blessed with health and regularity throughout his life span.

I sat on the front room floor, trying to keep him warm by holding him close to my chest. I stroked his feathers gently with my free hand and with the side of my face.

## 10 Times that I Hurt Byrd

*I vividly recall—probably too vividly—the times that I hurt Byrd. I still feel the regret that accompanies thoughtlessness, impatience, and the worst of all: neglect.*



Never afraid of the camera, Byrd pauses for a photo in late 2004.

The times when Byrd let out a painful squeak were perhaps better than those times in which he felt pain but didn't make a sound. A shrill squeak or a sudden muscle tightening let me know when I physically hurt him. Only after a period of reflection did Byrd realize the sincerity of my actions or the innocence of my errors. At other times, he was hurt but did not vocalize or tense at all. In these cases, only after a period of reflection did I realize the depth of Byrd's hurt. Byrd's feelings and moods couldn't be discounted. He had that component, just like any other complex, living being.

Some of the times that I hurt Byrd were during needed care of his claws and beak. I learned how to trim both through *Stroud's Digest on the Diseases of Birds*. However, without practical experience, I did err. Although the majority of all trimmings went fine, I trimmed a claw too closely when Byrd was about 5 years old. I felt his muscles tense at the exact moment of

the cut as I held him in my left hand. I should have cut the claw in a better lit area in order to discern the separation point between the nail and the quick. My mistake resulted in a bleeding nail. Fortunately, I cauterized the nail with an incense stick within minutes of the incident. According to Stroud, although bird blood clots quickly, the toenails are an exception. A main blood vessel courses through them. Clean cuts have difficulty clotting. Byrd displayed his anger after I released him. He flew to another room and stayed there. He forgave me within hours, though, and once again, began to follow me around the apartment.

Another unfortunate incident occurred as I was pulling newspaper from the bottom of Byrd's cage. I should have been more careful. He was much older and was slow to respond that day. Although I was inching the newspaper from under him, he didn't move, content to ride the dirty newspaper. A claw slid beneath the head of a tack that held down the newspaper. The nail lodged and ripped off. Once again, I had to cauterize the toe. This time, I used the a touch of a red-hot, wooden match. That toenail was deformed for years following the incident. I should've stopped pulling the newspaper when Byrd didn't move out of the way. An old bird, just like an old human being, may not want to move at times.

Byrd's beak was never a problem. I constantly monitored its growth, fearful that both top and bottom portions would grow to an overlapping configuration which could complicate trimming. As a result of my awareness, I only needed to slightly trim the tip of the upper beak that normally grew to overlap the lower portion. Only once or twice within Byrd's life did the lower portion require a very slight trim. Of course, he squirmed during beak and claw care. As Byrd aged, he whimpered and fussed a bit more as he was being held. In his youth, he didn't fuss at all, completely confident in my abilities. I used a sharp pair of human toenail clippers for all trimming. I never trimmed Byrd's beak to the point that it bled; but if it did, the beak tip would have to be cauterized. In this case, I would have needed to hold Byrd's head still, his beak between my fingers. The inclination to bite the match or incense stick in self-defense could have resulted in Byrd burning his tongue

or the interior of his beak.

Other unfortunate incidents occurred because Byrd liked to follow close to my feet, particularly in the kitchen while I was preoccupied with making meals. On occasion, I accidentally kicked him, not realizing when he had ventured so close. His resulting little squeaks as his slight body hurriedly waddled away into another room were enough to make my heart sink. Sometimes, he just stepped back and looked up at me with big, questioning eyes. I usually gave him a morsel of food after an accidental kick so that both of us felt better. Afterward, when I placed my hand near his feet in an effort to move him out of harm's way, he always returned to that dangerous area. Maybe the reward for being at my feet was worth the risk of getting kicked.

I also stepped on his toes a few times. He would hobble away after a sharp squeak in painful retreat as his tail brushed along the floor. I'd chase after him with a piece of his favorite food. He always healed quickly, and the next day would return to the kitchen, under my feet again. At least twice—and again, in the kitchen—I stepped on his foot and severely injured it. He was in so much pain that I was able to grab him as he limped away. A slight abscess oozed from major joints in his foot. I took him to the kitchen sink and ran cold water over his foot and leg as I held him firmly. He squirmed and cried, but settled within moments, probably feeling some relief. I carefully extended his toes, gently massaging them. He seemed to understand my intentions and stood still. Amazingly enough, he only had a slight limp the next day. The following day, he had no limp at all. In spite of the limited accidents at my feet, he kept close to them for his entire life.

I was always careful when moving wheeled chairs at my desk and kitchen table. The weight and pressure could instantly smash his foot to pulp, probably disabling him and subjecting him to pain for the rest of his life. I could never forgive myself if such an incident would occur and was aware of his location before I shifted. Byrd consistently sat at my feet, whether I was at my desk, kitchen table or anywhere else.

I also gave Byrd the wrong toy, which could have killed him. After noticing that Byrd liked to peck at objects suspended from a string, I bought



a cat toy for him. The toy was comprised of a blue, cloth ball tethered from a wand via a red string. He liked to chase that dangling ball so much that I suspended it in his cage. As I worked at my computer, he chased the ball as it bobbed and circled in response to his pecks.

Days later, upon my return from work, Byrd was clinging to the upper side of his cage beneath the cat toy. I sauntered to the cage, wondering what Byrd was doing. After opening the door and expecting him to bullet out, he stayed cemented to the side bars, eyes twitching and breath labored. I pivoted to observe him closely. *The cat toy string was wrapped around his body.* I bounded for a pair of scissors. After cutting the string at the top of the wand, I took a very tired bird into my hand. The string crisscrossed his chest, even winding around his neck. I cut the string repeatedly, withdrawing it in individual sections. I dripped a little water from my fingertip into his beak and set him on the floor of his cage to recover. He may have clung to the cage side for hours. If I had to work overtime or got stuck in traffic, I may have returned to Byrd's dead body dangling from a string. Again, I would never have forgiven myself for such thoughtlessness. As I began dinner, he flew to the table. What a recovery! We celebrated his life by sharing a strand of pasta.

The worst incident occurred when I accidentally surprised him. I spread out a newspaper on the living room floor in front of the television and began to read. Always tagging along, Byrd hopped onto my open newspaper. He nestled as I tried to read around him. I opened the bottom door of the television cabinet, hoping to lure him with a good perch only a few feet away. After I turned a page on top of him, Byrd took the hint. He scratched his way from beneath the newspaper, then lit atop the television cabinet door. He began to preen his chest feathers in the mid-day sun. As I continued to read, a story disturbed me, and in response, I snapped the newspaper article with my finger. At that moment, Byrd tumbled from the door to the carpeted floor. He had no resistance to gravity, falling as if struck by sudden death. As he lay on his side, his beak was pressed closely to his chest. I immediately cradled him. My heart was racing—what happened? His eyes were open. A

soft whimper. He was alive! I instinctively picked up his still body and gently brushed his chest feathers away from his beak. Was his neck broken?

Byrd's entire lower beak, *the entire lower mandible*, was embedded in the skin of his chest! While preening his chest feathers, the paper snap must have startled him as he preened in a downward direction. What had I done? There wasn't time to further scorn myself. Immediate action had to be taken. I gripped the exposed portion of his upper beak, and millimeter by millimeter, worked his beak straight upward. His neck, already tight from the stress, had to be under intense pressure. Bright scarlet glistened from the beak being pushed from his chest tissue. Byrd was silent as I worked firmly, but ever so slowly. After a minute or so, the final portion of his blood-smeared, lower beak slid from his chest. He straightened his neck, then stilled. After I kissed him repeatedly and petted him with my free hand, I set him on the floor carpet. He stood perfectly still, as if in shock. I let him be, not knowing what to expect.

Should I disinfect the wound? Stroud's book recommended to leave open wounds alone. A bird's high body temperature kills most bacteria or does not provide a fertile breeding ground. I reasoned that further handling and the application of peroxide may also increase the shock of the incident.

I took no further action, but kept Byrd under supervision. After perhaps ten minutes, he hopped into the shadow beneath my desk. I rushed to the refrigerator, searching for some of Byrd's favorite foods. He would not take any. Apparently, he was still in an altered state of mind. I left Byrd alone for the rest of the evening, periodically checking on him and dripping a little fresh water on the side of his beak in order to prevent dehydration. The next day, he was hopping and singing as if nothing had ever happened. A resilient little bird.

I also retaliated against Byrd in a situation that he remembered for the rest of his life. Byrd liked to watch over me, even in the shower. He would perch on the shower head, enjoying the steam. Every now and then, he would crap on me. One day, frustrated with his droppings, I filled my mouth with water and shot him back. He bounded to the shower curtain rod. I shot

him again. He flew off, never to return to either place.

At first, it seemed like a good idea. He was no longer upsetting me as I showered. But after a few days, I missed his presence. He cared enough to watch over me. Did I cause him to feel rejection? Did he experience fear or loneliness without my presence? Did he feel an absence of stimulation or an absence of the joy that comes from the presence of someone loved? When in the shower, it was easy enough for me to rinse off. Quick anger and pride made me scare Byrd away. He was there for pure reasons, whatever they were. If I could take back those moments, I would.

Of all these situations, I feel the most regret over the day that I forgot to feed Byrd. Eating was always such a joy for him, particularly as a young, growing bird. When I brought him to the kitchen table, his eyes lit up and he squeaked for joy. My focused attention added to his thrill. When he could eat from his yellow bowl, his beak would knife into it and he would throw his food in all directions. He scooped up the scattered morsels minutes or even hours later. Byrd continued to do this in his old age, even though he had difficulty finding food outside of his bowl.

I barely recall the day, but I clearly remember the hollow feeling of that day. I left for work in the dark of morning. The drive from Ravenna to Cleveland was 60 to 75 minutes. Upon my return 10 hours later, Byrd was not the jubilant featherball that I always experienced. He was not hopping from perch to perch. He was still as a statue. Very few droppings were on his paper. Then, the glaring absence struck me: no little, yellow food bowl. I neglected to move his yellow bowl of soft, mynah bird chow from the refrigerator into his cage before I left for work. Although I rushed to the refrigerator, grabbed his bowl, dumped the excess water, stirred the now waterlogged mush and shuffled the bowl into his cage, Byrd remained stiff upon his perch. He refused to accept my food. I quickly diced fresh food for him. He refused to eat that, too. Byrd must have been famished, but a feeling stronger than the pain of hunger was roiling inside of him.

I neglected him. I neglected him and he knew it. In response, he was angry, disappointed and confused. I always took care of him; but that day, I

didn't. What did he do to warrant such treatment? Byrd couldn't have realized the extent of my work commute. Even as I whispered my daily "Goodbye, Byrd. I love you," only inches from his ear, he couldn't have realized that the darkness of early morning blurred my vision to the absence of his little, yellow bowl. He couldn't have realized that at times I forgot to take my own lunch to work. Byrd only knew that he was hungry, expecting the satisfaction of his hunger and the secure feeling of food in his bowl during his long wait until my return. Satisfaction and security were missing that day. Byrd knew only that food wasn't in his cage. I hadn't given it to him.

Regardless of those feelings, he forgave me the next day. I added extra greens and fruit to sweeten his food mix, and Byrd indulged himself. This next day forgiveness seemed to be Byrd's pattern. He remembered transgressions, slept upon them and then moved on. Anger was only worth the price of a day. A good philosophy to live by.

After my mishap, I permanently changed. I immediately began to soak Byrd's food in a separate bowl. I placed a translucent coffee can lid on top of that bowl and set it in the refrigerator overnight to soften in water. That way, I could keep Byrd's little yellow bowl in the same, prominent corner of my kitchen counter top—a yellow beacon that I would notice before I left the apartment. That way, I was always reminded to transfer his food from the refrigerator bowl to his little yellow bowl. That way, I never forgot to feed him again.

I talked to him soothingly, comforting him by repeating "It's alright, Byrd. I love you, sweetie. It's alright, Byrd." I kissed his soft back feathers. He was a baby again.

## 11 Man Plus Byrd

*Since Byrd's fourth year of life, I worked a great deal of time from my home office. In that time, I soaked up Byrd's affection, joined him in play and grew to enjoy his odd habits. Perhaps, we were born with kindred spirits. Most likely, good food, a big cage, my attention and the freedom to fly opened his heart.*



Enjoying a bath. Photo taken in fall 2004.

Byrd had his ways of showing affection, and those changed during his maturation. In his very early birdhood, he allowed me to kiss and nuzzle him. That fluffy down... Those big, brown eyes... Short beak with a squiggly mouth line... Stubby wings... Tiny tail feathers... I kissed him from head to tail, nuzzling him the entire time. Byrd just settled in my hand, soaking up the attention as he closed his eyes. After months of maturation, he began to squirm. Weeks later, he gently grabbed my nose, tugging back-and-forth with his lengthening beak. Finally, he began to peck at my lips. Safe administration of kisses and nuzzling were now reserved for his back. Even then, I kept my eyes shut in order to avoid a possible peck to the eye.

Byrd showed affection throughout his entire life span by following

me around the apartment. Wherever I stopped, Byrd would be at my feet, usually gazing up at me. If I sat down, I would hear fluttering wings, feel his little toes on my knee, and once again, find Byrd's eyes gazing up at me. After acknowledgment, he hunkered down and made himself comfortable, as if sitting on a nest. When he wanted to make himself more noticeable, he flew to my shoulder or to the table at which I was working. If I was on the floor with a book or newspaper, Byrd would sit beneath the reading lamp, soaking up the radiated heat.

I enjoyed his affection, even when it complicated my tasks. Quite often, he insisted upon sitting on the newspaper which I was reading. I just turned the page when I was ready. Scratching noises and rustling always followed. After Byrd emerged from the newspaper, he usually shot me a disgusted look, then would move a short distance away. When he sat on a book that I was reading, a few kisses on his back or a gentle nudge with my nose would send him ambling to a nearby location. If Byrd was on my forearm as I wrote, I continued to write as he bobbed to the rhythm. He usually hopped off to a short distance away or flew to the windowsill of the same room, content to monitor me from a new location.

Byrd took advantage of me when I napped. When he wanted to play, and this was well into his sixth year, he would pull at my clothes and hair as I lay on the floor. He braced himself with his stick legs firmly embedded into the carpet as he pulled with his beak and jerked with his neck. Since he was having such a good time, I let him continue. When he wanted to nap with me, he would settle into a spot in the middle of my chest. If he simply wanted to watch me as I napped on my bed, he perched on my big toe or the windowsill next to my pillow. Every now and then, he would sing quietly, as if it was now time for him to sing me a lullaby.

At times, Byrd and I could carry on a conversation. He had a call of "who who whoo-oo, who who." The last two "who" vocalizations increased in pitch. When I recognized the pattern, I sneaked in the last two "who" sounds before he finished. The first time that I did this, Byrd looked me up and down. Maybe, I stole his thunder or ruined the punch line of a melodic riddle.



Soon, he began to just sing the first “who” sounds and let me complete the sequence. Sometimes, I would begin the sequence and Byrd would begin the sequence again. Very infrequently would Byrd complete the sequence by adding in the last two “who” sounds when I sang the first four sounds. Perhaps, he wasn’t smart enough to do this. Then again, perhaps it was beneath his dignity.

In contrast to Byrd’s sweet songs, he could bellyache when matters didn’t go his way. A sharp squawk of “ba ba ba ba ba baa” could follow my block of Byrd’s beak as it thrust toward a plate of pasta or the absent-minded lighting of a room in which he was sleeping. This “ba ba” sequence could add up to well over a dozen when he was on a real good burn.

Byrd’s attention could turn devilish. He rattled me with a habit that developed as quickly as it ended. One day at the kitchen sink, as I raised a cup of water to my lips, the cup exploded in my face. As I recovered from my startle, Byrd sped away. I realized that he had attacked the cup! Looking up from the water-splotched kitchen rug, I yelled, “Byrrrrd!” What was going through his mind as he attacked the cup? I figured this to be a one-time occurrence, so I refilled the cup and raised it to my lips. With swinging claws and spearing beak, he attacked again! I was angry—why is Byrd doing this? What’s his motivation? The cup was plastic, plain, blue. I drank in front of him for years without a response of this insane magnitude.

His behavior continued for days. When I was aware, I hid while drinking. For me, this was difficult. I drink water throughout my waking hours. When my guard was down and I drank reflexively, he attacked with devastating surprise. All of my yelling and fussing had no affect upon this crazy behavior. I noticed him lean a slight bit toward me as I reached for the drinking cup. He was not only fixated upon it, but transferred his frenzy to any cup that I brought to my lips. I entered a cycle: vigilance when I remembered, relaxation when I became preoccupied with other matters, and then anger when Byrd surprise attacked again.

After a few days, the eureka moment occurred. I stopped fighting him. With a firm grip, I raised an empty cup to my face in front of Byrd

and let him attack. An orange and brown streak pounced upon that satanic cup with rabid fury. Then, he darted off. I walked to another room, but still within Byrd's view. I raised the devil's cup to my face, and as Byrd catapulted toward me, I ran to the kitchen before he could contact the cup. Byrd hit the air brakes and stalled to land upon a dining room chair. I peaked around the a corner, raised the cup. Byrd darted toward me again. I ducked into the hall before Byrd could reach me. Once again, he braked so hard that he stalled before landing on the floor. I peaked around corners repeatedly as I raised the cup to my lips within Byrd's view. We both had fun as Byrd chased me for 20 minutes. I raised the cup again. No reaction. My calm Byrd was back. He never relapsed, either. Apparently, it was just an oddity that he had to work out of his system.

He had another bad habit, perching on my nose as I slept. Once, he pecked me in the eye as I suddenly woke. (Although I noticed a very small indentation in my eyeball, no medical care was required since eye tissue heals like skin tissue.) My startle response was so strong that he never landed on my nose again.

Byrd had other interesting mannerisms. He noticed anything out of the ordinary. If I had a bandage on my finger, he pulled at it. When a marker protruded from the pages of a book, Byrd plucked it out. Being an avid reader, I can't remember how many times my page was lost. A loose string dangling from a piece of clothing was always subject to a few good yanks. He was attracted to an electric Christmas candle. I still remember the night frost that covered my front room window in all but two warm places: a small area directly across from the candle's green bulb and an area at its base, directly across from Byrd's sleeping silhouette.

He had a love-hate relationship with plastic bags. Byrd enjoyed a romp in the kitchen garbage bag so much that I had to regularly cover the garbage with newspaper to keep him out. When I removed the trash bag from the can and placed it near the apartment door for disposal, he'd peck holes in it. However, if the bag fluttered in the breeze of a fan, he'd become agitated. Byrd would ping pong from perch to perch when he was in his cage

or fly to another room if he was out of his cage.

Sometimes, Byrd ate his loose feathers. As I watched Byrd preen himself one day, an orange feather jettisoned from his chest. He snapped it out of midair and swallowed it. When I saw one of his delicate orange feathers on the floor, I blew it into the air in front of him. He dove from his cage top, intercepting it as it flitted downward. Wondering whether this habit would transfer, I balled a little piece of aluminum foil and tossed it upward. Byrd vaulted into the air, catching it. He lost interest within a few tosses, though. At the time, I could not figure how I could reward him for a catch. He'd be preoccupied with his treat rather than catching the object. Only now do I realize that if I were to have thrown a waxworm into the air, he would surely have caught it. We could have worked from that point forward to create a new set of accomplishments. I regret not adding this feat to his repertoire of tricks. Our loss.

Byrd and I had a healthy back-and-forth. The little guy liked to make me jump by pecking my feet, usually when I wasn't paying attention to him. He got in some good licks. Every now and then, I'd glimpse him just before the strike. He'd rear back his head like a pickax and drive his beak into my instep as if it were a railroad spike. When I'd jump from the pain, he'd just look up at me with innocent, brown eyes. "I'm gonna getcha, Byrd!" was my usual response. He'd turn tail and gallop away, his long, lean legs propelling his big body in a full sprint. I'd waddle after him until he flew to a windowsill or curtain rod. Within a short time, he was back for more play. I tagged Byrd a few good times, too. When he was unsuspecting, I'd touch his tail. He'd jump like a coiled spring. One time, he was pecking at my toes while I undressed. I tossed my underwear on top of him. I can still see that pair of underwear skittering across the hardwood floor until Byrd escaped through the leg hole.

We were a boy and his teddy bear. As a child, I had a teddy bear for many years. That bear would wait for me to return home, to carry him with me, to hold him as I slept. I gave him life and he gave me comfort. Four decades later, that teddy bear came to life. Byrd waited for me to return

home, followed me constantly and waited for me to rise from my sleep. When I faced times of financial desperation and loneliness, Byrd sat beside me. His mannerisms helped me to forget my worries. His sweet songs calmed my anxious spirit. As he busied himself by ripping up the newspaper at the bottom of his cage, I smiled. As he picked the raisins from my raisin bran, I laughed. How could he ever grow old?

After holding him for a prolonged time, I thought that he may be thirsty. I mixed a weak solution of bird vitamin water and picked him back up. I dipped my finger into the solution and brushed it against the side of his beak.

## 12 An Old Byrd

*I remember the day that Byrd became old. The years following were difficult for both of us. I needed to return to that Ravenna sidewalk and find Byrd again.*



Byrd's eye. Photo taken 2004.

In Byrd's ninth or tenth year, a subtle change occurred. I raised Byrd's wooden ring, gave the command, and after bounding from the top of his cage, he grazed the ring as he landed on my finger to claim his treat. I didn't think much about it. He may have been hungry or excited that day and simply didn't fly cleanly through the ring. He did the trick hundreds of times and probably got sloppy for that one performance.

But the situation persisted. Some of the time, Byrd made it through the ring and onto my finger. Other times, he perched on the ring, and then hopped onto my finger. In the worst of times, he simply stared in my direction, and then flew away from me while squeaking a complaint. Did he think that I would move the ring to tease him? Was the treat not to his liking? I couldn't understand why Byrd became reluctant to perform his signature feat. I persisted to prompt him. Perhaps, he simply needed more positive

reinforcement as he aged. I began to hold the ring close to him, rewarding him when he flew through it and lighted upon my finger. However, within months, he looked away when I held the ring. He would do all of his tricks except the ring.

One day after my repeated prompts, he performed the ring trick his last time ever. Byrd bounded toward me from across the room. Short, strong, wing beats powered him forward. Byrd tucked his wings. Arced gracefully. He was an aerodynamic jet fighter cutting the wind stream. A whizzing arrow. I knew that he was still sharp! Until... Click. Byrd's shoulder smacked the sharp edge of the ring. Ssssss. His body spun out of control. Kuhkuhkuh. Rapid fire wing beats at my chest. Byrd was desperate not to lose control, to tumble, to fall. He clawed at my shirt, somehow gaining his balance before bolting away with his wounded pride. I chased him down. Placed my finger at his feet. As he stepped onto my finger, I gave him his treat while consoling him in a soft voice. Deep inside, questions were rushing into my mind. What was going on with him? He loved this trick! Then, in full, direct light...

I saw it. A miniscule, gray star. Byrd's mahogany brown eyes were no longer clear. Light sparkled mockingly from the gray-purple orb in each of his eyes—depriving me of staring into his soul—depriving him of his greatest sense, of his greatest protection. In Stroud's book, euthanasia was advised for a bird with cataracts. I followed Stroud's direction as precisely as possible in the past. Not this time. When I looked at Byrd in his old age, I still saw the same baby bird that I encountered on that Ravenna sidewalk so many years ago.

Time further ravaged his sight, and in doing so, ravaged his spirit. He stopped even landing on my finger. More food was scattered about the bottom of Byrd's cage. After throwing his food all over as he normally did, he was having a hard time finding the morsels. I noticed Byrd's blind stabs about the cage bottom. His beak missed food morsels or his near-misses pushed them aside. If he stepped on one, he picked it up more readily. As months wore on, Byrd was having difficulty flying to the perch at the top of his cage, his favorite place to nap. He stared upward from the bottom perch, and then,



jumped. Sometimes, he bounded over the top perch, landing on the cage bottom with a few clucks of complaint. Other times, he skimmed the cage top or bounced off of it, landing with a slight thud, and again, a few complaints. I placed my hand in front of his feet regularly, and after he climbed on, guided his feet over the top perch. Byrd began to stay in his cage rather than burst out of it. When he did leave the cage, he first stuck his beak through the cage door to ensure that it was open. Perhaps, he accidentally flew into it in the past. He was sleeping more often and anxious to furiously bite at my fingers when I came close to him. Byrd couldn't realize why he didn't see the ring, clearly identify my finger, find food more readily, run from beneath my feet before they were upon him. He couldn't realize how his environment had changed so drastically. After another year, he began to nip at the shadow of my hand passing over him from a yard away. Byrd was essentially blind.

Byrd was broken and I was broken. In another age, a baby on the sidewalk opened his beak to my shadow. I was filled with the anticipation and pleasure of watching him grow. Now, I was filled with the dread and pain of watching him die. His days of proudly performing were over, replaced by tentativeness, fear, anger. After miscalculations led him to collide with the wall and with the window, he no longer vaulted to the top of doors or lit upon the windowsill. He simply stopped flying. If I placed him on his favorite windowsill in the afternoon sun, he hopped around nervously. Byrd was probably trying to gauge the width of the sill, the distance from the floor or whether a crow may be too close for comfort. He reached the point of completely losing his desire to leave the familiarity of his cage. When I opened the door, he either remained in place or sulked away to the furthest corner.

Mealtime was heartbreaking. After placing his yellow bowl in his cage, Byrd would lash out at my fingers. He may have felt that I was going to remove his food. He may have just needed to vent his anger on anything. I tried to curb his aggressiveness by gripping his lower beak as he attacked my fingers. Even the futility of immobilization didn't stop his biting. I quickly discontinued beak-catching. It was a negative, emotional response that didn't do either of us any good. When I fed him waxworms, he entered a frenzy.

After eating the first, and thereby making the realization that I had waxworms, he'd lunge his beak randomly, sometimes into the air while walking in the opposite direction of the waxworm in my outstretched fingers. At other times, when perhaps he could detect more of my physical presence, Byrd bit my fingers crazily after each quick swallow. The deprivation of his blindness seemed to accentuate the pleasure of waxworms to the point of madness. Feeding him his favorite food became a joyless experience. Because of my agony and his agitation, I seldom treated him to waxworms.

Under the circumstances, withdrawal of my attention and leaving him to decay in solitude were easy options, but not one in which either of us would find comfort. Byrd deserved better. I had to return to the time and place in which I found him, and then, find him again.

The journey began with a change of roles and a change of attitude. Now, I had to be Byrd's protector and he would have to be the protected. Since he couldn't see well enough to quickly react, I had to always be extra cognizant of his whereabouts in order to avoid stepping on his toes or kicking him. Awareness also ensured that he would not trap himself for an extended period of time in a dark corner in which he could no longer see an escape route. All furniture was not moved from the last position in Byrd's memory. I felt that consistency in his environment bred confidence. I began to always leave Byrd's cage door open. If Byrd wasn't flying out of his cage on his own, I placed my hand in front of his feet and nudged his toes until he climbed aboard. Even if he was madly biting at my fingers, I cemented them in front of him until he stepped upon my hand. Then, I lowered my hand to the floor and he tentatively stepped onto familiar carpet. Often, Byrd only dashed beneath my desk or zigzagged his way to the security of shadows in the kitchen or bathroom. However, I still felt that exercise and a change of surroundings would do his spirit well. Hours later, I made sure that he ate. I placed food in his beak at the kitchen counter. Since I didn't know how much food Byrd would eat during the day, I used the same patience as when he was a baby. When he would take no more food, I rested my hand in front of him, nudged his toes until he climbed aboard and carried him into his cage with his bowl

of food.

At this time, the inevitable had to be considered. Years ago, I found a black, nylon, hand-sized, drawstring pouch. At the time, I washed it and stashed it in the back of my nightstand drawer. I checked the drawer. The pouch remained where it was left.

As the years continued, Byrd accepted his lot and we became even closer in his old age. What he lost in energy and mischievousness, he gained in peacefulness and gentleness. Although he was restricted by poor vision, he still heard me and felt my presence. As I read while sitting on the floor, he cocked his head every which way, probably trying to discern light and dark surfaces. Eventually, Byrd would amble over and sit on my book or newspaper as he did in younger years. I set an old section of newspaper nearby with a desk lamp over it. The paper and the heat usually lured him away from the piece that I was reading, but within arm's length of me. He was no longer drawn to the shadows. If there was a patch of sun near me, he spread his wings to enjoy the heat. Baths were still fun. I tapped his soup bowl of hot water so that Byrd had an auditory clue to its location. He still flung water every which way. As I worked on the computer, he sang from his cage beside me with a new tone—soft, but more beautiful than ever. He whispered ribbons of gold. On some mornings, he would surprise me by gathering his fleeting energy and fluttering from his cage to sing for me at my bedside. Most mornings, he sang from his cage. These early morning sonatas took the place of his circus performances. Byrd knew that I was listening to every recital. And I was happy to hear that we would spend another day together.

Byrd swallowed a tiny amount, and then his little head fell lifelessly between my thumb and finger, eyes still open.

**13**  
**Don't Leave Me, Byrd**



Byrd at 16 years. Although this photo shows white facial feathers, Byrd molted them to retain his normal coloring throughout his life. 2008.

Over the next few years, Byrd's typical day did not change much. He couldn't fly to the perches in his cage, so he settled for nestling on the floor newspaper, which I kept clean and dry. Byrd's cage door remained open. Very infrequently did he throw himself into flight. When he did, he fluttered a few feet, hovering until his claws settled upon the carpet. Sometimes, Byrd cackled the entire way down—"bababababababab"—complaining about how the world had become so opaque. After settling, he'd turn to find my shadow and then fine tune the angle of his head to listen for the details of my whereabouts.

Even though I cheered him on during his bold flying efforts, he depended upon me to remove him from his cage. I'd stick my hand inside of his cage and nudge his toes ever so slightly. Byrd nipped a little bit, just to locate my fingers for easy perching. He'd climb upon a finger, then teeter before balancing himself. When I'd lift my hand, Byrd would again teeter until he fully sensed that my hand was resting upon the apartment floor. He'd step

off to jog beneath my desk or gravitate to the heat of a patch of sun. When Byrd was anxious to come out of his cage, he would stick his beak through the open door or pace a bit. When he wasn't in the mood to come out, he walked away from my hand. In that case, I pursued him until he stepped onto my hand. His continuing daily exercise and the accompanying change of scenery made both of us feel better.

The morning of Saturday, January 30, was different. I made an exception for his exercise. Byrd not only stood stiff in his cage that morning, but his feathers were puffed very slightly and his body quivered with the most subtle of tremors. I lifted a morsel of food to his beak, but he wouldn't take it. I kept an eye on him during my morning chores. His unresponsiveness concerned me.

Byrd was never sick before. He never had any nasal discharge, labored breathing, diarrhea, skin conditions, constipation or lethargy. In the past, when I heard him sneeze repeatedly, I mixed a pet store remedy in his water. Within a day or two, the sneezing passed. As a testament to his robust health, Byrd ingested approximately six remedy solutions in his entire life. Since his slight quivering was stable throughout the morning, I decided to go to the gym for a short workout in the early afternoon.

Upon my return, 90 minutes later, Byrd hadn't moved from his original position. I stuck my hand into his cage and repeatedly nudged his toes with the side of my hand, but he wouldn't step up. He was too weak to step upon the back of my hand and too weak to retreat to the corner of his cage. Risking additional stress, I decided to hold him. The only time that I held Byrd was when I trimmed his toenails. He fussed during those moments of restraint. No fuss today. His feet dangled as I cupped my hand around his back and wings.

Byrd accepted an unfamiliar position: I placed him in the palm of my hand. The last time that I had held him this way, he was a speckle-chested baby, sleepy after filling his craw with worms. I sat on the front room floor, trying to keep him warm by holding him close to my chest. I stroked his feathers gently with my free hand and with the side of my face. I talked to him

soothingly, comforting him by repeating “It’s all right, Byrd. I love you, sweetie. It’s all right, Byrd.” I kissed his soft back feathers. He was a baby again. After holding him for a prolonged time, I thought that he may be thirsty. I mixed a weak solution of bird vitamin water and picked him back up. I dipped my finger into the solution and brushed it against the side of his beak.

Byrd swallowed a tiny amount and then his little head fell lifelessly between my thumb and finger, eyes still open. I held him close to my chest, big tears rushing from my eyes. “Don’t leave me, Byrd. Don’t leave me,” I pleaded. I massaged his still-warm chest and puffed breaths into his beak. But his spirit was gone. Large sobs overwhelmed me. My crying was so violent that my nose began to bleed profusely. I again held his body to my chest, rocking back and forth to the metronome of sorrow.

Byrd was more than a best friend, more than a constant companion. He was a piece of my heart. And along with Byrd, a piece of my heart died the moment that he died.



## 14 The Stone

*The deadness within me could not escape through any amount of tears, anguish and melancholia. I turned toward the myth and ceremony of ages.*



Byrd's grave marker. March 2010.



Full view of Byrd's grave. April 2011.

Byrd had to be buried, but I could not let him go. I had to see him, touch him, talk to him, pretend that he was still alive. If I didn't pretend, I felt like I would lose my mind. Hour after hour, if I wasn't already crying, I was on the very border of it, waiting for a thought that would drive me to my knees. I fought back tears during work days, not wanting anyone to question what they could not understand. Upon my daily return to the apartment, I rushed to Byrd's open cage to find his body exactly as I had left it: leaning against the side of the cage, next to his food bowl, as if in a deep sleep. I petted him as if he actually was in a deep sleep, and repeated "I love you, Byrd. I love you so much." Somehow, his body comforted me a bit. I didn't know what to make of that feeling. Was it morbid? Sick? Insane?

In tears, I telephoned a friend with experience in this matter. She buried her beloved feline years ago. She mentioned that since I wasn't

ready to move Byrd, that I should let him remain. His presence provided a cushion to the shock of death, a substitute wake. Ceremonies for human death have been practiced for tens of thousands of years as an aid to the grieving process. Cavemen committed their loved ones to the Happy Hunting Ground; Romans to the Elysian Fields; Christians to Heaven. Since Byrd was so human to me and my heart so badly broken, the ceremonies had to be respected. Sage advice.

Byrd's nobility allowed him to cross the line of species. He became a part of me, a human force. Or, perhaps, I had crossed into his species. In the end, it doesn't matter. Nobility is not a gift to only one species. All have a being of spirit and flesh, and an origin in fire and stardust.

I began the thought of a grave marker. I couldn't let Byrd disappear into oblivion. Even though the memories were with me, I needed something that I could touch. I needed something with permanence. I had to create a grave site to honor his spirit and to funnel my sorrow. I'd build the Taj Mahal if I could. The myth of ages was again needed to help me to endure his death. I reviewed memorial stones on Internet sites. Although these stones were very nice and relatively inexpensive, my gut wasn't leading me to a purchase. The investment had to be greater. The stone had to be created with my own hands. Byrd earned that right. My feelings, my memories and my love were woven into the tapestry of his life. I couldn't stand the thought of any future memory of cheapness. Anything less than the work of my own hands ultimately showed a lack of respect for myself, too.

I reviewed garden books for instruction upon how to make a memorial stone. After buying the cement and an orange coloring agent, I asked for guidance from my brother. The simple cement stones that he had created for his garden had inspired my idea. He couldn't help me for a couple of weeks; however, he gave me a metal screening material to add strength to the marker.

I decided to make the memorial stone by myself. I rummaged through my kitchen cabinets for a plastic container not only with depth, but of a size appropriate for lettering. Oddly enough, the plastic container that suited the

purpose originally contained a rotisserie chicken. After greasing the interior of the plastic mold thoroughly with Vaseline, I went to my garage to mix the cement. After pouring the contents of a commercial bucket of fine cement into a plastic pan, I added water intermittently, trowelling until the combination of cement, water and coloring agent resembled the consistency of a very thick cake mix. I scooped the cement into the mold, pressed the screen an inch or two into the cement, and then brought the mold into my front room to dry.

I made the mistake of mixing the cement in the afternoon. My estimate of the setting time was far too short. I was able to press some of Byrd's toys into the face of the marker, but by midnight, I still could not letter the marker face because the cement was too wet. I went to sleep, anticipating that by morning the cement would be hard enough to letter. When I awoke five hours later, the stone was almost solid. My mind was in a craze. This was Byrd's marker and I couldn't err. I grabbed an awl and began to scrape lettering into the face. My tears spotted the surface as the cement stubbornly gave way. All of the while I worked on the stone, Byrd's body was beside me. I gently positioned him as if he were sleeping at the leg of the stool at which I practiced guitar. Hours expired, but I accomplished the task in clear, angular lettering.

The stone is as I intended it to be. The top line shows his name in large letters. Since his birth date is unknown, the second line is the month that he found me. The third line shows the date of his death. The fourth line is the one word that summarizes his life and its meaning to me: LOVED. A glass bird in flight is pressed into the stone face, as if it is launching from rock into air. A penny and a paperclip, favorite toys of his youth, are pressed into the lower portion of the stone.

After days of letting the cement marker harden, I turned my attention toward preparing his body for burial. I held him and stroked his soft, handsome feathers and kissed the crown of his head. Even though his toenails were already of a proper length, I trimmed them closely. I noticed a single shred of scale on one of his legs and peeled it off. Six months ago, I removed the plate-like scales from his legs so prominently shown in his photo of Chapter

13. In his youth, he shed one set of leg scales—I found what appeared to be a hollow stick at the bottom of his cage. But in his old age, the scales just grew larger. Stroud advised rubbing olive oil on them in order to soften them for removal. Byrd tolerated this kingly rubbing of oil on his toes and feet without fussing. Unfortunately, it didn't soften the scales sufficiently. A week later, following his bath, the scales were soft enough to be carefully peeled away. Byrd tolerated this well, too. After the scales were gone, his legs were youthfully thin and he walked about with greater ease. After recalling that memory, I carefully placed him head first into the black, nylon burial bag that I had saved for the occasion. Since his tail feathers protruded, I trimmed them slightly. He was then placed in a thin, white cardboard box of his approximate size.

Since I regularly visited my parents on late Sunday afternoons, I decided that the burial should occur at that time. I gently carried Byrd's stone and his makeshift coffin in one hand and a spade in the other. The foot of the lilac bush in my parents' garden was Pinky's final resting place and it would also serve Byrd for that purpose. I set him upon on a dry log and raised my spade. The Ohio earth was crusted with ice on that February day, but the impact of my spade, fueled by welling emotion, split the soil readily. Even roots of the lilac bush gave way.

After all of our years together, I couldn't imagine placing Byrd's body into a shallow, icy hole. The thought of an animal digging up his body horrified me, so I dug deep. At six inches, tears were running down my face. At 12 inches, a tightness in my chest turned into thudding punches of grief. At 18 inches, the punches dizzied me. My knees began to shake and my grip upon the shovel loosened. I dropped to a knee, covered my face with raw hands and wept deep sobs as the final rays of sun began to disappear.

After recovering, I began to dig more, but the same wave of grief enveloped me. I was burying my guardian angel. I was burying the child that I never fathered. I was burying my teddy bear. I was burying my own life force. Steady tears heaved from a well of pain deep in my chest. Again, I fell to a knee in order to brace myself.

I completed the task with a hand shovel, my tears falling into the pit. After flattening the clay at the bottom of the grave, I opened the coffin and kissed Byrd for a last time. After gently replacing him, I set his coffin at the bottom of the pit, and then hand shoveled the finest soil on top. After a firm layer of fine soil, the bigger chunks filled the hole. I placed the stone over the coffin, taking my time to position it in the crumbly soil. Byrd was gone forever—to sleep with every being who had lived before him. Only memories and myth remain.

## 15 Changes

*I needed the strength to change. From Byrd's example, I drew inspiration.*



Byrd molting his head feathers. Approximately 1993.

The economy cycled back to lousy, and as a result of prolonged unemployment, I had to take a lousy job. I became a lab technician with an oil testing firm in the October before Byrd's death. For \$9.00 per hour, I was expected to learn a dozen tests using equipment worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pay increases of 50 cents per hour could be achieved by learning more tests. The maximum pay was \$10.50 per hour. No health care benefits were offered. And despite consistent 50-hour work weeks, the job was considered to be part-time. Depending on the number of customer oil samples delivered from local carriers, work days could last 4 hours or they could last 12 hours or more. The work area was arranged to necessitate standing through the entire shift, sometimes, in one place for hours. I missed the defunct magazine that I used to write for on a full-time basis from 2004 to 2006. Hell, I missed the high school job that I worked for comparable pay, better work conditions and reliable hours back in 1981.



Going to work at the lab was always difficult, but the Monday morning following Byrd's death was particularly difficult. I fought to hold back crying bouts. The sadness was cyclical. A thought of Byrd was followed by the sense of loss, intense sadness and watery eyes. Finally, I had to force my attention back to the task at hand. In 10 to 15 minutes, the cycle began again. I barely made it through the day. I knew that the next would not be any easier.

When I came home, I let myself freely think about him. During his life, Byrd was courageous and bold. He challenged the vacuum cleaner, chased off another robin, protected me from the evils of the night. He performed circus-worthy feats that robins had never achieved before. A world-class soprano would envy his voice. And as in an opera, he died in the arms of his beloved.

Was I living up to Byrd's example? Would he be proud that I work a near minimum-wage job without any idea of when I'll return home at night? Would he be proud that I developed pain in my middle back, lower back and feet due to 6 to 10 hours of daily standing? Would he be proud that I now subconsciously believed that I deserved such abuse?

Such thoughts led me to others. If I had missed his death for my lousy job, I could never have forgiven myself for such outright stupidity. Byrd would have died alone, perhaps frightened. I would never have had the opportunity to share his final moments, to comfort him, to be his last thought. I would have given everything to be at his death. And if he would have died on a weekday, I would have missed it!

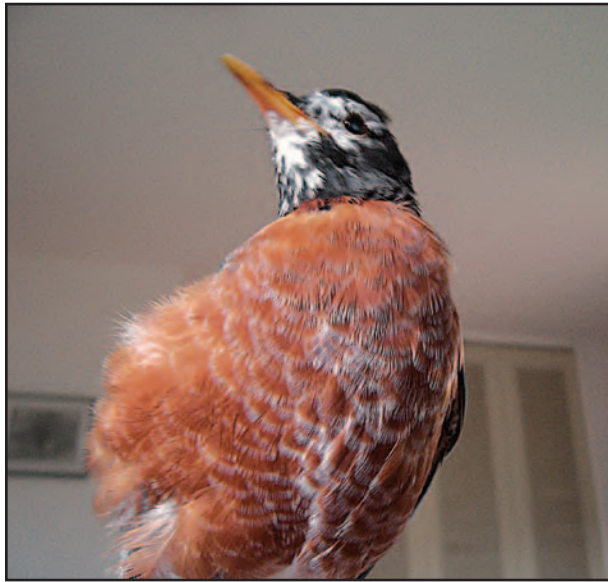
I didn't have Byrd anymore, but his mythical spirit still lingered upon my hands—the same hands in which he died. I devised a new job description for myself that involved steady hours and physical mobility. The owner read the proposal in my presence, admired my effort, but refused the offer. Upon refusal, I gave my notice. I had no idea of where I'd go next, but knew that I had to molt that old life.

Less than two weeks after my resignation, I was contacted by the lab owner. I accepted a different job within the firm. Although the pay is similar, my

work hours are 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. I sit frequently and move freely during my work day. When I return home, I now have the energy to write. Thanks, Byrd.

**16**  
**Moving Forward, Looking Backward**

*I now realize that I didn't train Byrd to do tricks. He trained me to live life. The grief at his loss is as great as his influence.*



Byrd strikes a pose reminiscent of many years ago. 2008.

I also have to thank Byrd for leading me to trust gut instinct—something I hadn't done in critical years. I now realize that I forced myself into military service in order to pay for my college education. I wished years of my life away, counting down every day of miserable military life until my active service ended. Immediately afterward, I forced myself into a college program that wasn't a field of my passion, but one of which I had moderate interest and from which a decent income could be made. I did well in my speech pathology and audiology classes, even achieving a graduate assistantship that paid for my Master of Arts Degree. However, after clinical internships, I had no desire to enter the field of study, rendering the degree almost worthless. When financial times became desperate after graduation, a job as claim examiner for the United States Department of Veteran's Affairs was available and I took it. One wrong turn led to another which led to another.

My strengths were not of the calculator but of the heart. The sensitivity and natural abilities that I had as a child had never been considered in my major life choices.

Byrd broke that destructive cycle. Only heartfelt feeling could direct a desperate man not only to take a wild bird into his home, but to communicate with him, and eventually, to love him. “Dat... dat beeg bird... he... he beet me,” my Russian girlfriend exclaimed as she stood close to me messaging her hand. As Byrd looked up to me from the front room carpet, the look in his brown eyes told me that he indeed did bite Allie while I was out of the room. Rather than scold him, I just laughed. Inevitably, she tried to have an 18-year-old bird climb upon her hand without giving him the respect of his own space in his own home. Deep inside, both of us knew that Allie’s wanderlust for world travel would soon carry her away. Regardless, Byrd did what he felt. And I loved him for it.

The courage and boldness of Byrd’s nature began to affect me. I began to make life-changing decisions based upon gut instinct. By 1996, I left the Veteran’s Administration. Although a well-paying job with excellent benefits, I hated working there. The negativity of angry coworkers, poor training from disinterested instructors and illogical methods of evaluating work performance by passive section chiefs were killing my spirit. When I thoroughly doubted my own intelligence and work ethic, I left to begin songwriting and working various part-time jobs.

By 2002, I returned to college. A local community college offered some of the classes that I should have taken so many years ago—the classes that well-meaning people told me not to take because they were not lucrative. When teachers began to use my research papers as class examples, I felt that I was onto something. Against the wishes of the school career placement head, I applied for an unpaid internship at a local trade show company in 2004 as a writer for their magazine. Even as a 40-year-old intern, I learned quickly and wrote market research articles for 8 weeks without pay. On my final day, the company offered me a full-time position. My gut told me that their initial offer was far too low. My counteroffer was almost 33% higher.

After two weeks of consideration, the company accepted my offer.

I let my gut lead me to other challenges. In 2005, I volunteered at an animal shelter for Monday night dog walking, never missing an evening for the two years of my volunteer service. When the magazine closed in 2006, I began to write screenplays. By 2010, Byrd's inspiration led me to write his story, my first book. With Byrd as my mentor, I've finally found satisfaction.

Byrd showed me how beautiful life can be. As a tribute to his natural beauty, I covered his burial site with Lord's Ladies, Rain Lilies, Dutch Wildflowers and ground cover. And as he lived to his natural end, so must I. Nature shouldn't be rushed or feared. I discounted the value of my life, too often looking forward to its end.

I'd like to think that I never took Byrd's precious life for granted. The clicking of his claws on my hardwood bedroom floor still echo. Well into his 16<sup>th</sup> year, he continued to flutter from his cage, come to my bedside and sing morning songs from the floor. Well into his 17<sup>th</sup> year, I would enter the apartment door and ask, "Are you still alive, Byrd?" After he shot me a dirty look, I'd cheer, "Yaay, you're still alive!" I'd rush to his cage, escort him out and we would have dinner. Byrd still enjoyed moist raisins, a bit of meat, a strand of pasta. Perhaps, his life of over 18 years and my grief over his death are the best testament to a life well lived.

And love... yes, I did love him. As odd as it sounds, I would have died for him. With the threat of imprisonment, Federal law dictates that wild birds are not to be kept as pets. I would never have given Byrd up under *any* circumstance. Who among you would give up their son, daughter or aging parents without a deadly fight? Enough said. I never mentioned Byrd to anyone other than immediate family and a very small number of my closest friends.

My heart still aches. I want to write "I love you, Byrd" a million times. I want to use my paycheck to pay for Byrd to return to this earth, to my room, to me for the rest of my life. And at the moment of my death, I want to feel the peacefulness of an early morning in bed; of Byrd sitting on the windowsill; and as he watches over me, his sweet song riding the cool breeze flowing

from one window to the window across the room. Repeat the moment... Repeat the moment... Forever, repeat the moment. Crazy stuff. But I still feel the same sentiment.

For now, I have his food bowl. On one of my worry-laden nights of so many years ago, I opened the door of a rural discount store only a 10 minute walk from my Ravenna dive. The store had the grittiness of cigarette-smoke discolored walls, a dingy drop ceiling and an interior reminiscent of the 1960s. As I surveyed the scant selection of pet products on the worn, beige, display unit, a little, yellow bowl caught my eye. Although the bowl had a label with a picture of a gerbil, it was not only the right size for my intention, but it was also weighted to prevent spillage. I wonder whether the designer, the production line worker or the retail stocker could ever know the attachment and love that would find that bowl. I remember the first time I held it. Its weight tugged at my palm as my fingers comfortably wrapped around its slick, plastic surface. How could such perfection be found in such an imperfect surrounding? It was the last one on the shelf. The last one! And it was mine. Mine to give to a baby bird who was waiting just for me.

If I were rational, I'd move his bowl from my kitchen counter top. I'd put a red heart sticker on it, just like I did so many times in the past. I'd keep the bowl next to my computer. Every now and then, I'd toss it into the air, just like I used to toss Byrd into the air. Byrd would like me to do that. But I can't.

Although I dismantled his cage, Byrd's food is still in the freezer and his little, yellow bowl is still on my kitchen counter top, neatly tucked into the corner—the same corner that it's been in for over 18 years. The bowl sits atop a translucent plastic container lid—the same lid that I used to cover his food as it soaked to softness. I notice the bowl everyday as I prepare my own food. The bowl has been untouched for well over a year. I can't move that bowl. I can't touch that bowl. It's his. The space is his, too.





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He will soon release "Herman and the Hawk," a story of the struggles  
of a young man and the guidance of a mystical hawk.