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Learning to Surf

Because stability just might be overrated

OUT JUST BEYOND the breaking waves they sit there bobbing, two groups of animals, avian and human, pelicans and surfers. As they rise and fall on humps of water, the pelicans look entirely unperturbed, their foot-long bills pulled like blades into scabbards, fitting like puzzle pieces into the curves of their throats. The surfers, mostly kids, look equally casual. A girl lies supine on

her board, looking up at the sky, one leg crossed over the other in an almost exaggerated posture of relaxation. For the most part the birds and surfers ignore each other, rising up and dropping down together as the whole ocean heaves and then sighs.

Pelicans are particularly buoyant birds and they bob high on the water as the surfers paddle and shift in anticipation. There is no mistaking that this is the relatively tense calm of *before*,



rest before exertion. Soon the waves pick up and the kids paddle furiously, gaining enough speed to pop up and ride the crests of breaking surf. They glide in toward the beach where I stand, the better ones carving the water and ducking under and cutting back up through the waves.

I just recently moved to this southern island town, but I have been here long enough to know that those who pursue this

sport are guided by a kind of laid-back monomania. Each morning I bring my four-month-old daughter down to the local coffee shop, and each morning the talk is of one thing. The ocean, I've learned, is always referred to as *it*.

"What did it look like this morning?" one surfer asked another a few mornings back.

"Sloppy."

Remembering my own early-morning glance at the water I could understand what he meant, the way a series of waves came from the northwest, while another group muscled up from the south, and how the two collided and kicked up. Aesthetically it was beautiful, but practically, at least from a surfer's point of view, it made for a landscape of chop—not much to get excited about.

Another morning I heard this:

“How does it look today, dude?”

“Small.”

“Nothing?”

“You can go out there if you want to build your morale.”

It's easy enough to laugh at these kids, but I like the physical nature of their obsession, the way their lives center on being strong animals. In *When Elephants Weep*, Jeffrey Masson speculates that animals feel *funktionslust*, a German word meaning “pleasure taken in what one can do best.” The strongest of the surfers, the ones who have grown up on the waves, must certainly feel this animal pleasure as they glide over and weave through the water.

I watch the surfers for a while longer, but when the pelicans lift off, I turn my focus toward their even more impressive athletic feats. Pelicans are huge and heavy birds, and the initial liftoff, as they turn into the wind and flap hard, is awkward. But once in the air they are all grace. They pull in their feet like landing gear and glide low between the troughs of the waves, then lift up to look for fish, flapping several times before coasting. If you watch them enough, a rhythm reveals itself: effort, *glide*, effort, *glide*. They are looking for small fish—menhaden or mullet most likely—and when they find what they are searching for they gauge the depth of the fish, and therefore the necessary height of the dive, a gauging guided by both instinct and experience. Then they pause, lift, measure again, and finally, plunge. The birds bank and twist and plummet, following their divining-rod bills toward the water. A few of them even turn in the air in a way that gives the impression they are showing off. If they were awkward in takeoff, now they are glorious.

There is something symphonic about the way the group hits the water, one bird after another: *thwuck, thwuck, thwuck*. At the last second before contact they become feathery arrows, thrusting their legs and wings backward and flattening their gular pouches. They are not tidy like terns and show no concern for the Olympian aesthetics of a small splash, hitting the surface with what looks like something close to recklessness. As soon as they strike the water, instinct triggers the opening of the huge pouch, and it umbrellas out, usually capturing fish, plural. While still underwater they turn again, often 180 degrees, so that when they emerge they'll be facing into the wind for takeoff. And when they

pop back up barely a second later, they almost instantly assume a sitting posture on the water, once again bobbing peacefully. It's a little like watching a man serve a tennis ball who then, after the follow-through, hops immediately into a La-Z-Boy.

THE PELICANS CALM ME, which is good. I have tried to maintain a relaxed attitude since moving to this island, but at times it's hard. I had vowed that I would stay forever on Cape Cod, my old home, but it was my writing about how much I loved the Cape that led to the offer of a teaching job in this overcrowded North Carolina resort town of outboard motors, condos, and southern accents. My wife, Nina, had just given birth to our daughter, Hadley, and the lure of health insurance and a steady paycheck was irresistible.

The truth is, the move has unsettled me: in coming to this new place I find myself, and my confidence, getting shaky. If I've behaved well publicly, in the privacy of our new apartment I've at times started to fall apart. As each day unfolds, I grow ever less sure of myself.

One of the things that disorients me is the heat. It's the kind of heat that makes you want to lie down and give up, to start to cry and throw out your arms in surrender. I've known brutal cold in my life, but cold has the advantage of invigoration, at least initially. Now I understand the logic behind siestas; every instinct tells you to crawl to a cool dank place and lie there and be still.

Lifting my daughter into our un-air-conditioned Honda Civic feels like sliding her into a kiln, so we are desperately trying to buy a new car. But today the Toyota guy calls with bad news. Our credit report has come back and our loan has been rejected.

“You have weak stability,” he tells me, reading from the report.

I nod and consider the poetry of his words.

BUT THERE ARE OTHER MOMENTS, moments when I sense that this may not be such a bad place to live. With summer ending, the parking lots have begun to empty. There are fewer beach walkers and more pelicans. Each morning I take long walks with Hadley, and have begun to take field notes on my daughter. I'm struck daily by her creatureliness, and the fact that this squirming little apelike animal, barely two feet high, has somehow been allowed to live in the same house with us. Nothing cuts through my doubts about having moved here quite like this new ritual of walking with my daughter in a papoose-like contraption on my chest. On good days we make it all the way to the south end of the island where we stare out at the channel.

Many things have caught me off guard about being a father, but the most startling thing has been the sheer animal pleasure. “Joy is the symptom by which right conduct is measured,” wrote

Joseph Wood Krutch of Thoreau. If that's true then my conduct these days must be excellent.

This morning we watch two immature, first-year pelicans fly right over the waves, belly to belly with their shadows. It's exhilarating the way they lift up together and sink down again, rollercoasting, their wings nicking the crests of the waves. Eight more adult birds skim right through the valley between the waves, gliding by the surfers, sweeping upward before plopping onto the water.

Feeling that it's only polite to get to know my new neighbors, I've begun to read about the birds. I've learned that the reason

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they fly through the troughs between the waves is to cut down on wind resistance, which means they, like the surfers they fly past, are unintentional physicists. When I first started watching pelicans I kept waiting to hear their calls, expecting a kind of loud *quack-quork*, like a cross between a raven and a duck. But my books confirm what I have already noticed, that adult pelicans go through their lives as near mutes. Whether perched atop a piling in classic silhouette or crossing bills with a mate or bobbing in the surf, they remain silent.

Another group of adult birds heads out to the west, toward the channel, as Hadley and I turn home. Before moving here I never knew that pelicans flew in formations. They are not quite as orderly as geese—their Vs always slightly out of whack—and the sight of them is strange and startling to someone from the North. Each individual takes a turn at the head of the V, since the lead bird exerts the most effort and energy while the birds that follow draft the leader like bike racers. These platoons fly overhead at all hours of day, appearing so obviously prehistoric that it seems odd to me that people barely glance up, like ignoring a fleet of pterodactyls.

Yesterday I saw a bird point its great bill at the sky and then open its mouth until it seemed to almost invert its pouch. My reading informs me that these exercises are common, a way to stretch out the distensible gular pouch so that it maintains elasticity. Even more impressive, I learn that the pouch, when filled, can hold up to twenty-one pints—seventeen and a half pounds—of water.

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I'M NOT A GOOD WATCHER. Well, that's not exactly true. I'm a pretty good watcher. It's just that sooner or later I need to do more than watch. So today I am floating awkwardly on my neighbor Matt's surfboard, paddling with my legs in a frantic eggbeater motion, attempting this new sport in this new place while keeping one eye on the pelicans. Even though you can't bring your binoculars, it turns out that this is a great way to birdwatch. The pelicans fly close to my board, and for the first time I understand how enormous they are. I've read that they are fifty inches from bill to toe, and have six-and-a-half-foot wingspans, but these numbers don't convey

the heft of their presence. One bird lands next to me and sits on the water, tucking its ancient bill into its throat. Up close its layered feathers look very unfeatherlike, more like strips of petrified wood. I watch it bob effortlessly in the choppy ocean. Most birds with webbed feet have three toes, but brown pelicans have four, and their webbing is especially thick. While this makes for awkward waddling on land, it also accounts for how comfortable the birds look in the water.

I'm not nearly as comfortable. Two days ago I spent an hour out here with Matt, and yesterday we came out again. Despite his patience and coaching, I never stood up on my board, in fact I never made more than the most spastic attempts. Today has been no better. The best things about surfing so far are watching the birds and the way my body feels afterward when I am scalding myself in our outdoor shower. So it is with some surprise that I find myself staring back with anticipation as a series of good waves roll in, and it is with something close to shock that I find myself suddenly, mysteriously, riding on top of that one perfect (in my case, very small) wave. Before I have time to think I realize that I am standing, actually standing up and surfing. The next second I am thrown into the waves and smashed about.

But that is enough to get a taste for it.

I HAVE NOW BEEN PRACTICING my new art for three days. The pelicans have been practicing theirs for thirty million years. It turns out that the reason they look prehistoric is simple: they are. Fossils indicate that something very close to the same bird we see today was among the very first birds to take flight. They were performing their rituals—diving, feeding, courting, mating, nesting—while the world froze and thawed, froze and thawed again, and while man, adaptable and relatively

frenetic, came down from the trees and started messing with fire and farming and guns.

What struck me first about these curious-looking birds was the grace of their flight. Not so the early ornithologists. In 1922, Arthur Cleveland Bent wrote of their “grotesque and quiet dignity” and called them “silent, dignified and stupid birds.” A contemporary of Bent’s, Stanley Clisby Arthur, went even further, describing the pelicans’ habits with something close to ridicule. Arthur writes of the pelicans’ “lugubrious expressions” and “ponderous, elephantine tread” and “undemonstrative habits,” and says of their mating rituals that “they are more befitting the solemnity of a funeral than the joyous display attending most nuptials.” His final insult is calling their precious eggs “a lusterless white.”

Even modern writers seem to feel the need to lay it on thick: as I read I make a list of words that includes “gawky,” “awkward,” “comical,” “solemn,” “reserved,” and, simply, “ugly.” It never occurred to me that pelicans were so preposterous, though I’ll admit that recently, as I kayaked by a sandbar full of birds, I laughed while watching a pelican waddle through a crowd of terns, like Gulliver among the Lilliputians. But “ugly” seems just mean-spirited.

When not seeing pelicans as comic or grotesque, human beings often describe them as sedate and sagelike. Perhaps this springs from a dormant human need to see in animals the qualities we wish we had. Compared to our own harried, erratic lives, the lives of the pelicans appear consistent, reliable, even ritualistic, as befits a bird that has been doing what it’s been doing for thirty million years. And compared to their deep consistent lives, my own feels constantly reinvented, improvised. But before I get too down on myself, I need to remember that that’s the kind of animal I am, built for change, for adaptation. Long before we became dull practitioners of agriculture, human beings were nomads, wanderers, capable of surviving in dozens of different environments.

Though barely able to hold their heads up at birth and fed

regurgitated food by their parents while in the nest, newborn pelicans fledge within three months. The one year olds I watch flying overhead are already almost as capable as their parents, while my daughter will need our help and guidance for many years to come. But this too makes evolutionary sense: one reason for our long infancy and childhood is to give the human mind time to adapt creatively to thousands of different circumstances. Pelicans, on the other hand, are ruled by a few simple laws and behaviors. Still, at the risk of romanticizing, I like the sense of calm the birds exude, the sense of timelessness, of ritual and grace.

We humans face a different set of problems. Our bodies still run on rhythms we only half understand (and often ignore), and we have adapted ourselves beyond ritual. To a certain extent all rules are off. The life of a hunter or farmer, the life that all humans lived until recently, directly connected us to the worlds of animals and plants, and to the cycles of the seasons. Without these primal guidelines, we are left facing a kind of uncertainty that on good days offers a multifarious delight of options, and on bad days offers chaos. Ungrounded in this new place, I am acutely sensitive to both possibilities. And while it isn’t comfortable building a foundation on

uncertainty, it has the advantage of being consistent with reality. Maybe in this world the best we can do is to not make false claims for certainty, and try to ride as gracefully as we can on the uncertain.

THE HUMAN BRAIN IS NO MATCH for depression, for the chaos of uprootedness. To try to turn our brains on ourselves, to think we can solve our own problems within ourselves, is to get lost in a hall of mirrors. But there is a world beyond the human world and that is a reason for hope. From a very selfish human perspective, we need more than the human.

Water and birds have always helped me live, have always lifted me beyond myself, and this morning I paddle out beyond the breakers and lie with my back to the surfboard just like the girl I saw in early fall. But while my legs may be crossed casually, I spend most of the time worrying about falling off. Even so, as I bob up and down on the waves, the whole ocean lifting and dropping below me, my niggling mind does quiet for a



minute. And then it goes beyond quiet. I'm thinking of Hadley, sitting up now and holding her own bottle, and I feel my chest fill with the joy these small achievements bring. She will be a strong girl I suspect, an athlete. And, no doubt, if we stay here she will become a surfer, delighting in her own funktionslust.

Glancing up at the pelicans flying overhead, I notice that there is something slightly backward-leaning about their posture, particularly when they are searching for fish, as if they were peering over spectacles. From directly below they look like giant kingfishers. But when they pull in their wings they change entirely: a prehistoric Bat Signal shining over Gotham. Then I see one bird with tattered feathers whose feet splay out crazily before he tucks to dive. When he tucks, dignity is regained, and the bird shoots into the water like a spear.

Inspired by that bird, I decide to turn my attention back to surfing. I catch a few waves, but catch them late, and so keep popping wheelies and being thrown off the surfboard. Then, after a while, I remember Matt telling me that I've been putting my weight too far back on the board. So on the next wave, almost without thinking, I shift my weight forward and pop right up. What surprises me most is how easy it is. I had allotted months for this advancement, but here I am, flying in toward the beach on top of a wave, its energy surging below. A wild giddiness fills me. It's cliché to say that I am completely in the present moment as this happens, and it's also not really true. Halfway to shore I'm already imagining telling Nina about my great success, and near the end of my ride, as the great wave deposits me in knee-deep water, I find myself singing the *Hawaii Five-o* theme song right out loud.

Though no one is around I let out a little hoot, and by the time I jump off the board I'm laughing out loud. A week ago I watched some kids, who couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen, as they ran down the beach on a Friday afternoon. Happy that school was out, they sprinted into the water before diving onto their boards and gliding into the froth of surf. I'm not sprinting, but I do turn around and walk the surfboard back out until I am hip deep, momentarily happy to be the animal I am, my whole self buzzing from a ride that has been more the result of grace than effort. Then, still laughing a little, I climb on top of the board and paddle back into the waves.

I COULD END ON THAT NOTE OF GRACE, but it wouldn't be entirely accurate. The year doesn't conclude triumphantly with me astride the board, trumpets blaring, as I ride that great wave to shore. Instead it moves forward in the quotidian way years do, extending deep into winter and then once again opening up into spring. As the days pass, my new place becomes less new, and the sight of the squadrons of pelicans

loses some of its thrill. This too is perfectly natural, a process known in biology as habituation. Among both birds and humans, habituation is, according to my books, the "gradual reduction in the strength of a response due to repetitive stimulation." This is a fancy way of saying we get used to things.

While the pelican brain repeats ancient patterns, the human brain feeds on the new. On a biological level novelty is vital to the human experience: at birth the human brain is wired so that it is attracted to the unfamiliar. I see this in my daughter as she begins to conduct more sophisticated experiments in the physical world. True, all of these experiments end the same way, with her putting the object of experimentation into her mouth, but soon enough she will move on to more sophisticated interactions with her environment. She's already beginning to attempt language and locomotion. Although pelicans her age are already diving for fish, she, as a *Homo sapiens*, can afford to spot *Pelecanus occidentalis* a lead. She will gain ground later. Her long primate infancy will allow her relatively enormous brain to develop in ways that are as foreign to the birds as their simplicity is to us, and will allow that brain to fly to places the birds can never reach.

While I acknowledge these vast differences between bird and human, there is something fundamentally unifying in the two experiences of watching the pelicans and watching my daughter. There is a sense that both experiences help me fulfill Emerson's still-vital dictum: "First, be a good animal." For me fatherhood has intensified the possibility of loss, the sense that we live in a world of weak stability. But it has also given me a more direct connection to my animal self, and so, in the face of the world's chaos, I try to be a good animal. I get out on the water in an attempt to live closer to what the nature writer Henry Beston called "an elemental life."

I keep surfing into late fall, actually getting up a few times. But then one day I abruptly quit. On that day *it* is big, much too big for a beginner like me. I should understand this when I have trouble paddling out, the waves looming above me before throwing my board and self backward. And I should understand this as I wait to catch waves, the watery world lifting me higher than ever before. But despite the quiet voice that is telling me to go home I give it a try, and before I know it I am racing forward, triumphant and exhilarated, until the tip of my board dips under and the wave bullies into me from behind and I am thrown, rag-doll style, and held under by the wave. Then I'm tossed forward again and the board, tethered to my foot by a safety strap, recoils and slams into my head. I do not black out; I emerge and stagger to the shore, touching my hand to the blood and sand on my face. The next night I teach my Forms of Creative Nonfiction class with a black eye.

So that is enough, you see. One of the new territories I am entering is that of middle age, and the world doesn't need too many middle-aged surfers.

I feared fatherhood, but most of the results of procreation have been delightful ones. One exception, however, is the way that disaster seems to loom around every corner—disaster that might befall my daughter, my wife, myself. No sense adding “death by surfing” to the list.

WHILE I HAVE NATURALLY begun to take the pelicans for granted, they still provide daily pleasures throughout the winter. What I lose in novelty, I gain in the early stages of intimacy. I see them everywhere: as I commute to work they fly low in front of my windshield; they placidly perch atop the pilings while I sip my evening beer on the dock near our house; they bank above me as I drive over the drawbridge to town. My research reveals that in March they begin their annual ritual of mating: a male offers the female a twig for nest-building and then, if she accepts, they bow to each other before embarking on the less elegant aspect of the ritual, the actual mating, which lasts no more than twenty seconds. These rituals are taking place, as they should, in privacy, twenty miles south on a tiny island in the mouth of the Cape Fear River. The eggs are laid in late March or early April and a month-long period of incubation begins.

Around the midpoint of incubation, my human family achieves its own milestone. Throughout the spring I have continued to carry my daughter down the beach to watch the pelicans fish, but today is different from the other days. Today Hadley no longer rests in a pouch on my chest but walks beside me hand in hand.

I remind myself that the mushiness I feel at this moment, the sensation that some describe as sentimentality, also serves an evolutionary purpose. With that softening comes a fierceness, a fierce need to protect and aid and sacrifice. This is not a theoretical thing but a biological one. In fact this transformation borders the savage, and here too the pelicans have long served humans as myth and symbol. “I am like a pelican of the wilderness,” reads Psalm 102. At some point early Christians got it into their heads that pelicans fed their young with the blood from their own breasts, a mistake perhaps based on the red at the tip of some pelican bills, or, less plausibly, on their habit of regurgitating their fishy meals for their young. Whatever the roots of this misapprehension, the birds became a symbol of both parental sacrifice and, on a grander scale, of Christ's own sacrifice. The images of pelicans as self-stabbing birds, turning on their own chests with their bills, were carved in stone and wood and still adorn churches all over Europe.

Later, the parental symbol was sometimes reversed, so that Lear, railing against his famous ingrate offspring, calls them “those pelican daughters.”

THE YEAR CULMINATES in a single day, a day full of green, each tree and bird defined sharply as if with silver edges. I kiss Nina and Hadley goodbye while they are still asleep and head out at dawn to the road where Walker will pick me up. Walker Golder is the deputy director of the North Carolina Audubon Society, a friend of a new friend, and today he takes me in a small outboard down to the islands at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. We bomb through a man-made canal called Snow's Cut and I smile stupidly at the clarity of the colors: the blue water, the brown eroding banks, the green above.

We stop at four islands. The southernmost of these is filled with ibis nests—11,504 to be exact. Ten percent of North America's ibises begin their lives here, and at one point we stand amid a snowy blizzard of birds, vivid white plumage and flaming bills swirling around us. Next we visit an island of terns, the whole colony seemingly in an irritable mood. This island, and its nearby twin, were formed when the river was dredged in the '70s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which used the sand to consciously aid the Audubon Society in an attempt to create nesting grounds. Terns, like ibises and pelicans, require isolated breeding areas, preferably islands, and this human experiment, this marriage of birders and engineers, has worked to perfection. We watch as a pair of royal terns spiral above us in their courtship dance.

The terns are impressive, but the highlight of the day for me is North Pelican Island, the nesting ground of almost all of the pelicans I have watched over the last year. Hundreds of pelicans sit on their ground nests, some of which are as big as beanbag chairs. They watch impassively as we approach. The old naturalists might have called these birds “undemonstrative” and “lugubrious,” but I'll go with “calm.” In fact, while we're anthropomorphizing, I might as well put “Buddha-like” in front of calm. It's hard not to project this on them after experiencing the wild defensiveness of the tern colony. The pelicans barely glance up at us. Theirs is a much different survival strategy, a much quieter one, but natural for such a big bird with no native predators on these islands. I crunch up through the marsh elder and phragmites to a spot where two hundred or so pelicans are packed together, sitting on their nests, incubating. Some still have the rich chestnut patches on the backs of their heads and necks, a delightful chocolate brown: leftover breeding plumage. They sit in what I now recognize as their characteristic manner, swordlike bills tucked into the fronts of their long necks.

While the birds remain quiet and calm, there is a sense of urgency here. This marsh island, like most of the islands that pelicans breed on, is very close to sea level. One moon-tide storm could wash over it and drown the season out. It is a time of year marked by both wild hope and wild precariousness, danger and growth going hand in hand. The birds are never more vulnerable, and as a father, I know the feeling.

I'm not sure exactly what I gain from intertwining my own life with the lives of the animals I live near, but I enjoy it on purely physical level. Maybe I hope that some of this calm, this sense of ritual, will be contagious. If the pelicans look lugubrious to some, their effect on me is anything but. And so I indulge myself for a moment and allow myself to feel unity with the ancient birds. It may sound trite to say that we are all brothers and sisters, all united, but it is also simply and biologically true. DNA undermines the myth of our species' uniqueness, and you don't need a science degree to reach this conclusion. We are animals, and when we pretend we are something better, we become something worse.

Having seen these fragile nesting grounds a thousand times before, Walker is to some extent habituated to them. He is also more responsible than any other human being for their protection. "We only visit briefly in the cool of the morning," he explains, "so not to disturb the birds." Playing tour guide, he walks in closer to the nests and gestures for me to follow. He points to some eggs that look anything but lusterless, and then to another nest where we see two birds, each just a day old. Though pelicans develop quickly, they are born featherless and blind, completely dependent on their parents, their lives a wild gamble. Heat regulation, Walker explains, is a big factor in nestling survival. Pelican parents must shade their young on hot days, and one dog let loose on this island while the owner gets out of his boat to take a leak could drive the parents from the nest, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of nestlings.

But we are not thinking about death, not right now. We are instead watching these tiny purple dinosaurs that could fit in the palm of your hand, the beginnings of their extravagant bills already in embryonic evidence. And then, in a neighboring nest an egg trembles. There's a tapping, and a pipping out from within.

A small blind purple head emerges from the shell. "Something only a mother could love," Walker says, and we laugh. But we are both in awe. It is the beginning of something, any idiot can see that. But what may be harder to see is that it is also a great and epic continuation.

While we watch, the almost-pelican cracks through the eggshell, furious for life. Then it shakes off the bits of shell and steps out into a new and unknown world. 🐾

Snow Moon Hunger Moon

the shoulder widens as the snow
begins to thaw along Route 14
a school bus drops off couples
draped across each other pine siskins
come for the salt outside the Quik
Stop they flock around the ice
cooler jackets undone kids grown
restless for the glint and bite
the crust dismantling this morning
the taste of snowmelt in our
water thin deer angled from their
beds before straggling into brush
the hollows they leave pregnant
my belly flared out like that
the first time I had sex was in
an old house through panes of
wavery glass broke a word for this
be/longing lit by nothing good
or evil the moon held sway
a bird feeder swung empty

—Jody Gladding