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The Birdbath

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“The Birdbath”

VICTOR F. JOHNSON

The night at work had been hot and muggy; one of those when your shirt clings to your side and back and the occasional breezes bring only more heat on their breath.

Arriving home this morning I drove the car over the bridge that crosses the shallow reluctantly moving creek in front of the house and parked. I got out and being in no hurry to squeeze between two limp sheets, I leaned on the fender to stay a few moments and breathe in the still air of the waking day.

There was promise of another dry hot day in the empty sky; not a feather of a cloud in it. The sun stood red and heavy on the rim of the dune behind the house and had already robbed the grass of its dampness. The brilliant early green of the woods was a sharp contrast to the opaque blueness of the sky.

A flash of orange in the rushes along the bank caught my attention and I stooped to see what it was. There are a lot of birds around the house and usually I don't take a second look. But, this one, a barn swallow, was travelling with the speed of harnessed lighting.

He didn't fly. He hurtled himself along the marble surface of the creek, his wings seemed not to lift him but, to push him headlong, beating a thousand times a minute. He careened abruptly from bank to bank, narrowly missing the branches and rushes jetting out from either side.

He raced himself in this zigzag fashion to the railroad trestle about a hundred yards upstream, where, with a powerful thrust of his wings and a quick movement of his “V” shaped tail he threw himself straight up into the warming air.

And up he climbed—one hundred . . . two hundred . . . feet . . . and still higher. And then, like a jet out of fuel, he went into a classic stalling position. Ceasing all attempts at climbing and pausing in mock indecision, he balanced on the point of his knife-like wing. Then he heeled over into an erratic arching dive.

And down he came, straight for the bridge, beating his blurred wings in a frustrating attempt at more speed, more inertia and more power.

He missed the light pole by a fraction of a foot, nearly pulling his feathers out by their roots as he spread his wings fully, needing

every inch of their vibrating surface to stop the impending crash with the bridge. He skimmed over the railing and dropped to the water, striking it with his orange belly and sending small geysers of water up in front of him, forming a momentary rainbow in the flat rays of the sun.

Then, he was off again; down the creek to the tressle and up, repeating the whole reckless process again and again. Up! Stall! A living vibrating boomerang silhouetted against the sky. Now . . . dive! His brain madly calculating the distance to the bridge. Now . . . pull away . . . pull away . . . splash!

And still once more he went over the arc and into his singing dive. But, this last time he didn't splash just once. He bounced along the surface like the flat skipping stones I threw when I was a kid. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five times he bounced, raising a miniscule rainstorm around him with every contact.

At last, with a flurry of thrashing wings he pulled himself away from the water and up to one of the light wires running to the house.

He perched with his wings hanging forward, limp and shining, his beak open and his round black eyes staring full into the yawning face of the sun.

Yes, it was going to be a real scorcher.

The Gray Blue Mountain

The gray blue mountain
On the oriental silk
Is outlined in black,
And on a cloud like limb
A blacker bird stares
Into the valley.

A fishing boat is frozen still
On a small white sea,
And the silent man there
Catches snow into his net.

DAVID PETTY