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Eye on the Environment --
Valley of the Hush

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Since the dawn of civilization, man has turned his eyes toward the sky, tying his future to constellations, watching birds as they wing steadily across land it would take two feet a lifetime to cross. To fly was power, something godlike, then. It still is.

Last year, my friend's little boy jumped out his bedroom window wearing a bicycle helmet, miraculously unharmed. Boys of a certain age are always in danger of flinging themselves off sheds and roof tops, trying to scratch the surface of some great impossibility. It's an age-old lust. If man could master flight, it seemed he could master anything.

Leonardo DaVinci studied birds and bats, searching for the key to man-propelled flight. His first flying machine sketch was called and ornithopter which flapped its wings. Two hundred years later, a sea captain named Jean Marie Bris was inspired on a voyage around Cape Horn to come up with a design called the Artificial Albatross.

The great engineers burned through man-powered beetles, gulls, and hawks, winged ships and balloons with animal cages and kegs of beer dangling from their holds—this was called La Minerve-- often losing their lives in the quest for a single moment of weightlessness.

The Wright Brothers found the key to controlled flight in the study of a pigeon. Watching the front edge of the wing turn up and the corresponding wing edge turn down when the bird banked, they began to design the aileron.

I read an article in the current issue of Montana Quarterly, which said that the high speed Japanese train sonic boom problem was solved by studying the shape of a kingfisher's bill. The bird makes no splash as it penetrates the surface of the water, and now the first cars in Japanese trains resemble them.

While some mysteries of flight have been solved, much about birds might never be. I came up with the idea for my second novel two autumns ago in this place Kenny Huston called in his oral histories interview, the Valley of the Hush. It was the sky that pointed me in the right direction.

We were renting a cabin for a month at the Tamaracks then, lost and struggling to figure out how to build a house we couldn't afford in a place we knew little about. A million stars graced the sky above Seeley Lake. The dark shapes of muskrats scurried beneath the dock. An owl hooted from the silent trees. Winter was coming on then, as it is now, and I began to think about the first pilots.

What might have inspired them to fly through fog and snowstorms before instruments worked and cockpits were open—to brave the elements for the sake of a few envelopes? Well, the mail meant everything, then. I have

begun to seek to understand birds in an effort to scratch the surface of what inspired these men and women to lay their lives on the line. They must have watched the skies and wondered. Why do some birds come and go, while others winter in the Swan?

In the season some call dead, this place truly does become the Valley of the Hush. The out–of-state campers have all gone home. The Neotropical songbirds left a month ago for Mexico, some traveling as far as Central America. They swooped in great flocks south down the flyway, navigating in clouds by magnetic field. At night they followed constellations. No amount of nectar could convince the hummingbirds to stay. Ken Wolf of the Grounded Eagle Foundation tells me the baby ospreys knew even in the smooth dark circle of the egg womb that they would be bound for Baha. They left without anyone there to tell them what to do. The juveniles won't return for three years.

The bald eagles we see in the summer, are not usually the same ones that winter here. Our summer bald eagles head for Oregon. Our winter eagles soar down from Canada. They come to the Swan to feed on carrion and road kill, their bellies heavy, white feathers stained with blood as they stumble up into the air over Highway 83.

Last week I heard the Canada geese flying so high in the sky over our half finished barn, they sounded like distant coyotes. They were the tiniest of specks flying in a staggered "v" formation, to avoid the disturbed air generated by each other's wings.

I have heard that when birds fly high, it means they are headed great distances, but the mother and babies Boyd Kessler saw last week crossing the bridge at Guest Ranch Road, plopped into the waters of the Swan River, and were most likely headed north toward the open fields and large waters of the Flathead.

The Swainson's hawks that haunt the Blackfoot Valley have left for Patagonia, and because hawks don't fly over open water, bird counters on the tiny tip of Vera Cruz, Mexico are perched on rooftops, eyes filled with tears of wonder as one hundred thousand stoic hawks pass overhead, the wind filling their wings like sails.

So strong the compulsion to travel the same routes year after year, the hawks in Ken Wolf's Grounded Eagle Foundation would have tried to migrate even with broken wings-- and never have made it. For now they are winter residents of the Swan like the dippers that cluster on the rocks beneath the bridge at Lindbergh Lake, attracted to the rough quick headwaters that rarely freeze. All winter long they will dip and rise like gray river stones trying to skip themselves. They'll dive for insect larva and pupa attached to logs and buried in mud. They have nasal flaps to keep out water, and can walk submerged along the bottoms of creeks, gripping stones with their toes. They are capable of seeing underwater, and of withstanding temperatures of forty below zero.

The belted kingfisher will stay too, though some are migratory. It perches on naked branches above streams and rivers, diving for small fish in the icy water. Perhaps versatility allows it to winter here. Sometimes it will abandon its riverbank burrows for the warm shelter of thick-branched conifers. Finding no fish, it will resort to frogs hibernating half submerged in the mud—glucose pumping through their livers like antifreeze. Or it will snack on

caddis fly pupa, while other birds and small mammals hunt the rotten logs and hardening trees for insects that lie dormant in the bark, their exoskeletons containing a single drop of liquid so small and pure it is incapable of freezing as long as the insect doesn't move.

As for the great blue herons, Claudia Kux has seen these solitary birds standing s on their long thin legs in the bitter cold water by Cygnet Lake, ice crystals clinging to their feathers. How miserable they look, but they'll stay until there are no unfrozen shallow waters left to fish. Why do they stay at all? The migration is often just as brutal.

An alarming release was issued in June by Montana Audubon remarking on drastic statewide downtrends in the populations of blue herons, belted kingfishers, killdeer, blue-winged teal, and American redstarts, and so there is much we can learn from birds, even now that we've mastered the mechanics of their flight.

These population downtrends for wetlands birds are due to the diminished amount of riparian habitat because of development and drought. Birds can't count on the same nesting spots year in and year out any more than those who remember the good old days can count on traveling back roads from place to place.

What now? We wait for the hush to come over the valley. The trees are hardening. People comb old burns for firewood. The birds shiver. I'm hoping for a big winter like the good old days. The white snow, my blank page spreading out over the thirsty ground in this Valley of the Hush.

What must it have been like for the Hollands who settled here, or the Lundbergs, the Hills, leaving their homelands forever in a time when forever meant forever? Freedom demanded sacrifice. Town, which took twenty-four hours to reach, might take a bird a single hour.

To watch a winged creature must have been something then; to wonder at the places they'd seen, soaring over the jagged peaks of the Swans, to head south. To winter in Mexico. They must have wondered if there ever might be a way to move with such ease.