

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Roger Real Drouin  
**Birds of Dusk**

*This story is a fictional account of real events.*

*"Today we enjoy the beauty of our Florida wading birds largely because of these men." — reads the free standing historical marker, 26 degrees, 54.615 minutes north, by 82 degrees, 05.740 minutes west. <sup>1</sup>*

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*Can't find any relations, the deputy says, standing on this side of the open door.*

*He has some kin back in Placida, Pearson says, and he asks for the reckoning. With some reservation yet an earnest lawman's exactitude, the deputy proceeds to tell him what they know: a cast netter, Sunday past, came upon Columbus' launch submerged under eight feet of dark water; to keep the boat down, two heavy sacks of sand had been fashioned under the thwarts; his body was never recovered despite the long search of northern harbor and creek waters, but his shredded hat was inside the skiff, with bits of hair, skull and brain matter clung to it. Little other information has been secured.*

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*A week previous, upon the cold and wet beginning of November, back where the point of cypress and sweetgum come to the slough, Columbus G. McLeod watched the clouds move in and quiet the light from the sky. The wind filled the absence left by the sharp sun now gone.*

*Columbus, originally of Placida, watched the clouds, and the curlew circling above, the glossy golden-green and purple, and the pure green of the primaries reflected even without the light.*

*But the curlew was the only movement above.*

*He began walking the point, fulfilling his duty, counting.*

*Since winter of 19 and 03, the water birds were roosting further in, further between, and fewer than ever seen in these parts. Now, one could count seventy fewer.*

*The rains would be coming soon enough.*

*Pearson, who had hired him on two previous summers ago as warden of the estuary, says keep watch of the point, and the Myakkae and the northern islands of the harbor, where the egrets and white pelicans would just be putting in their appearance for the winter. But Columbus had learned he'd have to watch over the whole damn estuary. He'd watch it as best as one man could.*

*The winds turned the leaves of the sweetgum, and further in the hickories and stopper where the curlews and greater egrets and little snowies would soon have built their nests sheltered from snake and gator. Working industriously, there were at least two men, leaving behind scattered plumes, half buried in the muck now at Columbus' boots, and the spent*

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10 shot, as well as the broken blade and burnt tins discarded in ash. In the wind, Columbus discerned the odor that'll soon bring the vultures and coons, and he watched above the only movement in the clouds, *plegadis falcinellus*, glossed curlew.

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Middle of the morning, still raining nails, the two men waited under the big water oak. Atoning for his whistling and his dry aigles, the older of the two waiting men, offered the bottle almost full.

Charlie drank the burn and took another, the whiskey coating his gut and warming his blood, but when it reached his feet, all he felt was the hard cold inside his boots and his feet starting to blister. He didn't mind none the hard dirt sleeping ground, nor these winter rains, nor bitter coffee, nor the cold before light. If he could keep his boots dry. But Charlie's boots were soaked through. Later he could dry them by the fire when they finally got to Ogden, but he knew that would make no difference.

The older man, who goes by Tosch, leaned back. From his shirt pocket he retrieved a single egret plume, tucking it up in the dirty hatband, the feather a ghost bright in the dark. With a fashionable twist of his long, gangled finger, he pushed the hat back down on his brow, winking and grinning to Charlie, who took another drink of the burn.

It was a time after the rains let up, out under the oak, when Tosch with his owl ears was the first to hear the distant sparrowhawk, *klee klee klee klee*. He turned slowly towards the high-pitched calls, but then he was sitting cross leg'd, still as rail iron, preparing for his ritual. The old man placed his rifle and the old, engraved breech-loaded, and the tin of sweet oil, before him on the yellowed newsprint. He poured the oil out on the cloth and got to rubbing down everything except the stock on the rifle, slowly pouring some of the oil on the bore rod.

*You's pissin' in the wind if you don't swab out the bore*, he declared.

Though Charlie could not rightly reckon who had had more from the bottle of whiskey near empty, he rightly knew his barefeet were numb'ed by fire, the dampened snags dragged from the prairie wood burning good enough now. He considered his numbed feet. Recalling aching feet, he remembered the work of his younger years, him and his cousins digging and harrowing past dusk. But he did not leave to leave anything save his old man. One more drink of the burn, he takes. That's a burn not unlike the fire. He put another sang down, and he listened for the hawk, or a panther purring somewhere distant, but he could only hear the sang hissing, smoke rising among the flames, and embers crackling. His feet were numbed good. The embers burning in the wind like stars.

Firelight showed month-old headlines across the top of the newspaper:

ORVILLE FULLY RECOVERED FROM INJURIES; WRIGHT BROTHERS'  
THIRD – AND FIRST PUBLIC – AEROPLANE FLIGHT SCHEDULED

HARD HIT STOCKS BREAK ON SELLING

PLANT AND CO. PLAN NEW RAIL EXTENSION

Charlie helped himself to another drink, a good burn of it, the bottle

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just about empty, and he watched the smoke drifting until it was invisible against the sky pitch dark.

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“... the Lacey Act and the new restrictions have thus far only increased the value of fashionable plumes poached from the wild for the millinery trade. Some poachers continue to gun down entire flocks, oblivious to the newly-enacted state laws and Audubon-instated wardens.” — The DeSota Morning Record, Sept. 5, 1908.

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Columbus woke the morning of the second of November to the wind against the old oak struck twice by lightning. He lit the small fire in the cookstove, and set himself before the stove.

Well before first light, in the small outpost where he lived and resided alone, he fixed his coffee, as he does. In the framed picture on the backside clapboard, the thin reddish egret in his burnished copper and slate plumage stalked the flats waters. Pearson had given him the framed drawing, titled sketch no. 18, *reddish egret, drawn, engraved, and coloured from nature, by A. Rider.*

Coffee in thermos, bread in cloth, Columbus buttoned his long shirt-sleeves. With first light, he was motoring east across Isokpoga, then southward, shutting down the engine and letting the long-hulled launch drift where the lake meets the shallow passages of creekhead.

The sun returned, as it does after the rains, yet the clouds, like blocks of granite and basalt swirled in the light coming across, are the first clouds of early winter.

On another morning, through oak and cabbage palm Columbus might've bided his time, letting the launch drift along as slowly as one could through the early light, even stopping about here where the creek flows over, flooding the palms and stopper in still waters.

This was a good place in the first light, where he could make his own modest sketch in his journal book.

The fishing pied heron a worthy subject. In the warming light, the *ardea tricolor's* chest plumage glass cobalt and amethyst. Or perhaps he'd sketch the Henslow's, putting in his appearance over there low in the fetterbush, the tiny sparrow singing his soft, two note song. Upon first appearance drably painted browns and grays, but when seen well a striking sparrow, his cheeks and nape the emerald of the bush, tail forked, belly streaked, and rust patched wings.

At times, Columbus would just sit and watch, observing the heron's patience. Born in September, he's seen the turning of sixty two Novembers, and a drifting pace now suited him acceptably.

But this morning the warden lowered his hat to the light and having drifted a ways from the fishing egret, the sparrow's soft *tsi-tsi tsi-ick* faded behind him, he turned over the engine, catching that first odor of the unburnt naphtha. Narrower than the myakkae, yet longer, deep in its heart, the web of creeks converge and drift all the ways to the waters of the harbor.

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He steered his skiff due south through the darker, crimson waters. Bout halfway between the point and the first of the islands of the harbor. Unnamed still on the map, though some have called the middle creek little myakkae, it wound like a bellyful moccasin through the dark of stopper and oak climbing cyrilla. The wind came through the trees.

Columbus was never married, though there had been a woman a long time ago. He thought of her at times, and when he did, he held onto the thought if he could.

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From Ogden, having unloaded and picked up fortifications, they came down through the sun lighting up the river.

*Reckon the Wright boys made it?* Charlie asked above the clanking of the outboard.

*HA, now that's pissin' right in the wind,* said Tosch.

*Oroville almost made it, before,* Charlie said.

*Al-most,* the older of the men said, as he produced his pipe from his long pocket, holding the wheel with his left palm, the pipe with thumb and trigger finger. He packed it up with tobacco and myrsine, keeping the dory skiff mostly straight. *Before he crashed and crumpled his flyer.*

Where the river comes through sweetwater, the younger of the men pointed out the first of the cypress knees just breaking the surface and the weathered smooth snags. Tosch navigated the dory round.

Due south, southeast a ways, where they could make out the spit they call windy point, Tosch nodded to an old pine growing aslant.

*Two winters 'go, he began, I watched a sparrowhawk dive like light'ning from that very slash. Nailed his prey down there in the willow thick'ts. Then this heavy-weight eagle, rough and ready, soars out of the blue sky, tailing that hawk like a shadow.*

Charlie says, *Nineteen times outta twenty, eagle got the odds.*

Tosch carefully lit the pipe.

*Well, yes. That eagle snatched the dropped blackbird right up in his big talons. He took his first smoke, and continued, but, not without a hell of a chase. That little hawk held onto his prey and shot off, flyin' fast and hard, and nearly bugging his 'pponet out. At this he waved his pipe to illustrate, as best a hand could, the hawk's movement. Now, that was an aviatational feat if I've seen one.*

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Columbus has spoken to men, informing them of poaching laws and his jurisdiction. But he reckoned there would be a time when men wouldn't listen. It was back in 05,' four years after the Lacey Act, when Pearson had to tend to Guy's grieving wife down in Monroe. Guy was a good warden. Nearly half Columbus' years and known as an uncanny marksman. He was fatally wounded in duty during an argument with two known plumers.

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In the last moment of a dream some nights before, before the numb weightlessness of just waking, Columbus could see through the rain heavy, his steps lighter and lighter, so light, muscles moving before he told them to. He was sprinting or maybe flying. He woke breathing heavily when he came to, laying awake on hard sheets.

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After the cedars and big ferns, the river opens into bullbrush where it crosses the little myakkae, and Tosch opened the throttle. A good time before dusk the men see harbor waters, though they can't yet make out the first of the islands to the south.

Having flat-bottomed the skiff in limestone sand at bluff's edge, Tosch spit and grinned, securing line to a river elm, its faded leaves ready to drop. Once again, he produced his pipe from his long pocket, topping it off with myrsine.

Charlie climbed the lookout of an elm, climbing steadily as he did as a boy, branch at a step, until he was up in the heart of the tree's shadows. He stepped out balancing along a sturdy branch, toward the light.

Standing up in the winds churning, he followed a large snook below, and he watched the horizon. Only a speck of a fisherman's mullet skiff a far ways out. To the south, the birds of plume coming in. Like clockwork, they come in to roost before dusk. Snow white egrets soaring low, their reflections inching over the water.

Tosch below smoked his pipe, awaiting the report.

*No sign of any warden*, Charlie reported. And though there's no sign of man other than the mullet skiff, he thought of the names on the maps changing. To the south he glimpsed shell key, which it's always been, but is now Chaise's Key. Tosch says they want to fill in the mangroves there, plant more of them cajeput trees that suck up all the water. And further south, he looked to the land once owned by Culver, where years ago his grandpa, while digging a well for Culver, found gold escudos, and now old man Culver's tractor left to rust and his storehouse left to fall, where instead of growing citrus and tomato, they're plating the fallow farmland. *The carpet baggers ain't gone*, Charlie thought, *just new ones have arrived with new schemes*.

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The largest of the islands of the northern harbor measured a mile north to south, bout two miles across. In the middle of dusk and the middle of the pine and palmetto of the interior, the fire burned low, cleanly.

Columbus had company at his small camp. The chirping dripping down from the lone, tiny Henslow's, maybe the same sparrow from the creek, singing softly and skipping between the branches, and above the snowies and the greater egrets drifting, along with the glossy curlews, wood storks, and the pink curlews, conducting their business.

He leaned back against the pine, one of the old growth spared by the storm of ninety seven, with its furrowed bark and long branches, one of the tall pines you can see when you approach the island from the north, taller than the surrounding wood.



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It was a moonless night.

The warden leaned back against the furrowed bark of the oak, watching the birds of dusk.

He slept past first born light and woke to the sun rising and the sound of rifle shot, shot after shot, quieter than birdshot.

He leaned up and reached over for his boots and gun and his hat. The tall grass was cold wet with dew.

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As the men would reload, another would fly up, and the entire flock of egrets would follow, in a half circle before eventually flying closer to the men. Fearful. Confused. They beat their wings and squawked. But they wouldn't leave.

*What dumb birds*, one of the men shouted. Closer, the warden could see the plume in his dirty hat. The other, younger and stouter, stood with his back squared to the warden.

The egrets circled and flew closer yet. They could leave. But they wouldn't. They were trying to save each other.

A wounded one kicked and rustled in the mud.

One of the men had a shotgun, the other a long-barreled. The wounded egret no longer rustling, clouds mirrored in water's edge.

The younger man with the rifle turned.

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*"... In 1901, the Audubon Society persuaded the state to adopt laws protecting Florida wildlife, especially plumage birds. Even so, no funds were allocated. The state, however, agreed to deputize two wardens hired by the Audubon Society. The danger of this work was evidenced when Guy M. Bradley, charged with protecting the Everglades area, was found shot to death near Flamingo on July 8, 1905. Columbus G. McLeod of Placida, charged with protecting the rookeries here in northern Charlotte Harbor, disappeared under suspicious circumstances and was presumed murdered on November 30, 1908. This second death of an Audubon warden sparked a national campaign against the wearing of feathers, and shifted public sentiment in favor of stronger enforcement of wildlife protection laws and the prosecution of plume hunters. Today we enjoy the beauty of our Florida wading birds largely because of these men."* — reads the free standing historical marker, 26 degrees, 54.615 minutes north, by 82 degrees, 05.740 minutes west.

### (Endnotes)

1 Historic Markers Across Florida. <<http://www.lat34north.com/Historic-MarkersFL/MarkerDetail.cfm?KeyID=08-05&MarkerTitle=Columbus%20G.%20McLeod-Protector%20of%20Plumed%20Birds>>