

Jeffray Harrison
"Unhatched"

The fifth of May was a week away and the ducklings still hadn't hatched. Felix sat back on his haunches with a clear plastic container held between his knees, gently tossing out birdseed to the mama duck incubating her eggs. The container had come with the wonton soup from the Chinese restaurant down the street, but Felix had recycled it to portion out birdseed from the ten pound bag he had bought for the mother duck, and of course the ducklings, when they hatched. He had hoped they would hatch by Easter, even on Easter morning. Based on his cursory research, there should definitely be a brood of ducklings peeping around on or at least near the Holy Week. He had first noticed the clutch of eggs in the hollow of a felled and rotted tree on the first of March, and according to the all-knowing internet it should take anywhere from twenty-eight to thirty-five days for those eggs to hatch. It would have been such a beautiful coincidence for the kids to get up on Easter morning, ready to hunt eggs in the grass of the common area of the condo, and find fifteen soft, yellow-brown ducklings in the clutch they had visited every day. Felix had thought of all kinds of object lessons about restoration and new life to help his kids revel in the moment.

But Easter came and went and there were no ducklings. Felix still came every day and fed the mother, talking to her in an encouraging voice as he told her about his day. He used a bottle of water to refill the baby bowl wedged between the bush and the wall of the condo building, but once thirty-five days from his discovery passed, he brought the kids out less and less, fearing the worst. Once he had refreshed the water and the duck had eaten her fill of the birdseed, Felix would talk to the duck in soft, encouraging tones, and then go back inside for the day.

"Okay, Mama Duck," he said, rubbing his legs as he rose to his feet, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Two more days passed without event, and the first of May arrived. May Day, another fitting day for newly hatched ducklings. But this time, when Felix rounded the corner to the spot where the clutch nestled beneath the bushes, the eggs were unattended. The pile of smooth greyish white eggs tufted with feathers lay cooling in the air. Felix's cheeks flushed and his eyes burned. He spun around and scanned the parking lot on the other side of the walkway, but didn't see the mother. Walking around the corner of the building to the left, he kept his eyes on the spaces below the bushes, hoping to see a flash of the black-green of her back or the white head bobbing somewhere underneath. He still saw no sign of her when he got to the corner and checked the side of the building, so he trotted back to the right, awkwardly stooping and crouching to look for any sign of her, until he reached the common area guarded by the four towers of the association. He found her waddling back to her clutch with stupid slowness, as if she had nothing better to do.

"What the hell!" Felix barked. The duck ruffled and honked back, picking up her ungainly pace. She skirted the wall to keep away from him, nestled back onto her clutch, spread herself out over the eggs, and gave Felix one throaty hiss as a warning.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

“What could you possibly need over there?” Felix demanded, “Your water is full, I bring you food every day? What else have you got to do right now?”

The duck hissed again, and Felix slowly settled on one knee, a few feet away from her, suddenly aware of how loud he had yelled. He looked around to see if any of the neighbors were nearby. His shoulders were heaving, and he set down the container of birdseed and leaned onto his hand, concentrating on his breath to stop the shaking, the way his therapist had taught him. His eyes were still hot, and he settled onto both knees, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

The image of a baby floated to him in the darkness, and he pressed his hands harder into his eyes, but the memory only got clearer as he fought it. A boy baby wrapped in a white hospital blanket with red and blue trim, wearing a pale green cap. His little eyes were closed, barely slits in his creamy face, his mouth a tight, serene line neither smiling nor frowning. Other than the dark purplish bruise covering the side of his face and his lips, he looked very much alive.

“I’m sorry, mama duck,” he said, feeling the concrete of the sidewalk under his fingertips.

Soon it would be his first born baby’s birthday, if you could call it that, and every year it got a little easier, but only a little. Felix told himself he should be over it by now. He had two other children, a boy and a girl, both healthy middle-schoolers who drove him crazy with affection and angst alike. He should be able to go inside his home and talk to his wife about how he still grieved every year around this time, how he dreaded the silence and normality of the fifth of May, how he wanted to be able to go about his business like everyone else.

He knew his wife suffered, too, and yet he crouched outside on the pavement, talking to a duck.

After scattering some birdseed around the clutch, close enough for the duck to reach without moving, Felix pushed himself to his feet, dusted off his pants, and headed inside.

That night, he woke up after midnight, his eyes wet and his chest sweating. Amber lay next to him, sound asleep, and he eased next to her until every part of him touched her sleeping body, his mouth next to her ear. He hoped she would wake up, and she did, just long enough to caress his face, trace with her finger the line where his beard framed his cheek. Then she draped her arm backwards over his midsection and drifted back to sleep. But it felt good, enough for now, in a season where so many things were not perfect but enough for now. He felt her hand heavy on his hip and surrendered to sleep as well.

Then came the fourth of May, and another normal day at work, and home again. Without stepping more than three feet in the condo Felix grabbed the container of birdseed and the bottle of water and dashed back out, headed around the side of the building to the line of bushes with the duck’s clutch underneath. He scattered a handful of seeds and then dragged out a bucket he had hidden under the bush to sit on.

“I don’t know, Mama,” he said, tossing pinches of seed near her head,

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

"If those eggs were going to hatch, they would have hatched by now."

He dipped his finger into the water bowl and tested the level. "It happens. It's okay to close the book on this one and move on."

Felix set down the birdseed and poured half of the water into the bowl. As soon as he pulled his hand away, the duck poked her bill into the bowl and scooped up three gulps of water before pecking at the seeds again.

"Tomorrow is my son's birthday," Felix said, resting his face in his hands. "He'd be fifteen tomorrow. We don't talk about him much."

The duck stopped eating and hunkered down over her clutch, flattening herself out until she covered the entire opening of the rotted stump, sealing her warmth in the hollow.

"The kids don't even know about him, I think. I don't ever remember talking about him in front of them, or them asking any questions. Maybe their mom has talked to them. I'm not sure."

"The thing is, when I think about him, especially this time of year, it's like I'm right back in that hospital room again, waiting to hear him cry, or see him move."

Felix picked up the container of birdseed, shook down the contents and checked the amount. He would have to refill it from the bag when he finally went in, the bottle too.

"They had told us what was going to happen, no heartbeat, no movement. It's not like we were unprepared. But there was nothing we could do about it except hope," Felix said, sliding the bottle into his front pants pocket. "So that's what we did."

The duck looked away from him, her head drawn to her chest.

"Can you feel their heartbeats under there?"

Felix rose and hid the bucket back under the bushes, scraping the concrete and startling the duck a little.

The next day, Felix woke before everyone else, while the sun barely broke the horizon. There were disconcerting dreams he couldn't remember fresh in his head, and he couldn't go back to sleep. Slipping on his sneakers with no socks, he crept down the hall and out of the condo with the birdseed and bottle, making sure to make any noise closing the door.

As he rounded the corner, he heard them. A faint sound, muffled, but clearly the peeps of baby birds. Felix stopped several feet away from the bushes and the clutch, crouched down, and saw them. The duck stretched on her feet as high as she could get, and a mass of golden-brown ducklings climbed over each other, piled up in the rotten, hollow stump, trying to stay directly under their mother. Felix couldn't tell where one duckling began and another ended, but they all had their necks stretched up to the mother duck, fighting each other for closeness and rubbing themselves against her underside.

Felix stayed low and slowly moved closer, his breath coming harder now. Just a couple of feet away, he settled back on his heels and watched the ducklings climb and roll over each other as the mother stretched

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

herself over them. Inching closer, Felix tried to count the ducklings, but couldn't get a fix on any one of them. Then he noticed the flash of greyish off-white near the edge of the nest, beside the flurry of ducklings. Three eggs hadn't hatched, cooling in the side of the nest.

Felix pressed his hand into the sidewalk and cautiously leaned forward. He didn't know what to do. It didn't seem right to leave them there. Were they still alive or not? The duck might abandon them, but if he moved quickly, maybe he could get them inside and incubate them some other way, a heating pad or a lamp or something. People do it, so there must be a way.

Instinctively, he held out a hand near the clutch, but the mother seemed too occupied with the tumbling, peeping pile of ducklings to notice. Slowly, he poised forward on his left and reached inside the nest with his right, closed his fingertips on the topmost egg.

Without warning, the duck slashed forward and bit him. Felix snatched back his hand and fell backwards on his behind, his injured hand between his knees. He looked at it. She had gotten him in the meat between the thumb and forefinger, and broken the skin. A trickle of blood flowed down his wrist where he held it.

"Okay, Mama," he said, pushing himself back up on his feet while the duck hissed at him once more. "It's okay. You're right."

He opened the container and dumped out the birdseed in a long pile near the nest, long enough for all of the ducklings to get some without fighting, when they were ready. Then he rose and backed away.

Once inside, he found his wife in the kitchen, getting breakfast and lunches ready.

"You okay?" she said, chopping sandwiches into triangular halves. "You snuck out this morning."

Felix moved to the sink.

"I need to talk to you," he said, running cool water over his hand.

His wife put the knife down and turned to him. "Are you bleeding?"

"It's his birthday today," he said.

Closing her hand around his under the stream of water, his wife nodded. "It's always a rough day for you. I know."

"I need to talk to you."

She held his hand in one of hers and caressed his face with her other, wetting his cheeks and neck.

"So talk then," she said.