

## STEPHANIE MARTIN

*Black-Crowned Night Heron, 2017*  
Intaglio Etching, 7x7 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## KATHARINE HAAKE

# Breathing through Skin

## Notable Birds and Amphibians of My Life

### 1. A rookery of herons

Late one afternoon we walked out along the edge of a black water swamp and found ourselves in a rookery of herons.

There were other birds too—notably anhingas, dark and stately birds, long and narrow necked, with a furtive grace, but here they stood about stiffly, wings arced at their sides to dry. I want to say coots, but don't really know. There were brown and black birds everywhere, of various sizes, but though my friend had a book, the details of birds—curve of beak, spot of eye, ring of red—are hard to read. Do coots, best known for their practice of pecking the brains of dispensable young, model firm resolve and stoic mother love, or just Mother Nature at her most brutal?

For years I had imagined birds as giant insects, a disagreeable connection I'd picked up from my sister who'd once remarked as much over breakfast. Sometimes it riled me against her, that an offhand comment over coffee in an attic apartment above a flock of blackbirds on the icy roof below should have reduced the grace of birds for years and years to the vague repulsion of beetles.

Now, note the luminosity of beetles, their shimmering neon greens and refulgent golds.

From the rookery, sounds of rustling and clucking, gentle squawking, what might have been brushing of feathers.

The long delicate ruffle that ran down the back of one heron's neck fluttered in the breeze; another displayed a feather crown around his neck and back, an erect and quivering plume he seemed unable to retract. I don't know what this meant or why he hunkered solitarily on a lower branch while other birds coupled around him.

We don't have black water swamps where I live, a desert.

We do, however, have trees where crows flock, thickening the branches into black skeletal frames, just as elsewhere I've seen herons turn whole forests white. Urban parrot flocks sometimes also fill our backyard trees with their noisy greenness.

In the black water swamp, the herons were hard at work on great stick nests, which, while already well established, seemed to require their assiduous attentions. No lolling about for these birds once the hearth was wrought. But the males of this species, like those of many, lacked certain skills, and over and over, I watched the same domestic drama play out. A proud male bird would fly up to

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his nest, flourishing an outsized stick for his mate, who'd cock her head askance as if to say, *Now what am I supposed to do with that?* She'd tilt her head one way, he'd tilt his the other, back and forth, back and forth—*Please, I have brought this for you; But it's too big, it doesn't fit*—until she would finally relent and take the stick from him, but not without shaking it violently as if to rid it of vermin. Next began a haughty, disinterested attempt to find a place for the stick in the nest, but invariably it was too long or too fat or too crooked and presented awkward challenges for the female, who'd stab it here, there, but without success until, watching her, I had to believe she was about to discard it, rejecting the offering of her mate. Divorced now, without my own mate, I bit my lip, not wanting that for her. Finally, at what seemed like the last moment, a sudden *a-ha!* as the unmanageable stick disappeared into the nest every bit as if she'd know where to put it all along. You'd think the two herons would rest now—this had been so exhausting—but almost at once the male would set off on a search for another stick, leaving the female to fuss in flustered circles, before settling down to roost—at last—to roost.

Other notable birds of my life: a giant Peruvian hummingbird with a wingspan of more than eight inches

thrumming like a vacuum cleaner just above my shoulder; companionably twinned sunbitterns rising above a Central American river, their inauspicious brown wings unfolding to reveal the secret inner treasures of their twinned golden suns; the wounded hoot owl rescued by a friend of my sister from the woods around her home; and the single great blue heron that lived in the slough on the way to my grandmother's house at the edge of the most serene curve of the Monterey Bay and that every summer of my childhood marked the moment of arrival, from where we lived in the heat of the valley to the cool, cool world of the coast.

When the bird flu came it was, for me, a bit like 9/11. Wary of birds, apprehensive for years—wasn't there something terribly wrong about giant insects, hadn't my mother instructed me not to touch feathers because they were dirty and carried disease?—suddenly the skies exploded with them and I felt strangely at peace in the same way that my lifelong dread of flying ended that blue September morning the towers were brought down.

If this was the worst they could do, I told myself, even if it killed us all, remember the sandhill crane rising up from its winter-wet field.

## 2. The idea of bird flu

Not that we ever had the bird flu, only the *idea* of the bird flu, but that was bad enough. Sometimes it would happen that we'd come across dead birds inexplicably splayed on our neighborhood sidewalks. Maybe this still happens, but we *noticed* it then. The city had a hotline for dead birds the way it's got a hotline for water wasters now. We cautiously stepped around the dead birds and then we reported them.

That was an edgy time in general. I still had boys at home. Like others, I hoarded duct tape and plastic, I carried iodine pills in my purse. I wrote heartfelt notes to my sons and tucked them in places they'd be sure to find them. And even though I know how it might sound to say so, I think I miss that time. When everything changes like that, no matter how sad or terrible it is, at least you are alive. For a while, everyone was.

For a while—a brief while, before the rage set in—we were even thoughtful. What have we done, we thought, to incur such wrath? How are we complicit in it?

Looking back, I should have bought the boys a dog. A dog might have been a comfort we, their parents, were not. Or a bird. Birds, at least, can talk to you or imitate a vacuum or a doorbell.

Instead, my kids got lizards. Lizards and fish, languid and bright in their tank.

The neighbors had dogs—two dogs, a tiny yippy something and a great Siberian husky that lay panting in the sun all day on their concrete driveway, while the favored yippy one paraded in and out of the house, on and off the owner's lap. This went on right beneath my kitchen window; the husky and I would often eye each other—he in his cage and me in mine—but as many times as I told myself I should offer to walk that dog, I never did. And if I couldn't walk that gorgeous dog, what business did I have with a dog of my own?

Once, I almost gave in. You'll clean up after it, I pressed them, and feed it? You'll take it for walks?

*Oh yes*, the younger boy said. *Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes!*

But the older boy just shook his head ruefully before explaining the way it always was: the kids would say yes, but then when the dog came, they wouldn't and the mom would end up doing all the work and being mad, even though the kids would really love that dog.

The fish tank broke. One whole side of it blew out one day and all the fish flopped around on the carpet.

The lizards weren't really lizards but anoles. In the store, they were a bright neon green that was hard to pass up, but at home, they quickly morphed into brown and listless lumps you could hardly see against their bed of bark. Anoles, I now know, are plentiful in the wild—thus, cheap—but do not domesticate well and turn brown in times of stress. They were stressed all right. It's fair to say we all were.

About that time, I chaperoned a classroom field trip for my younger son to the Casa de Tortuga in Orange County, what was then the largest private collection of turtles in the world. There, citizen-herpetologist Walter Allen shared a tract suburban home with 450 turtles from more than one hundred species, including a great two-hundred-pound Galápagos tortoise, Darwin, which Allen himself had raised from four-and-a-half-ounce infancy. Some of these turtles were prized collectibles, but most were sanctuary turtles. You find a turtle in your backyard,

you take it to the Casa de Tortuga. If they couldn't keep it, they would find a home for it. No one loved turtles like Walter Allen.

When Allen died, the shelter shut down. You find a turtle now, you're on your own.

These days, the neighborhood cats have adopted my deck every bit as if I were the attentive caregiver. They hunt for rats and bask in the sun, and then they are gone, no trouble at all, except for the fleas.

One day, the first anole's mouth seemed to have gotten stuck in what might have been a wide and threatening roar or sleepy morning yawn. It couldn't eat, it couldn't drink, presumably, it couldn't sleep. Who knew that such a thing could happen? Eventually, I put it in a plastic bag and stomped on it with my cowboy boots—genuine, from Wyoming—until it was dead. It's a longer story really—I had my reasons and was wholly well-intentioned—but all in all, that is the gist of what I was driven to do.

After the second one also succumbed, after the requisite tears, the pleading for another one—a *green* one this time—the consoling caresses, the ice cream, my sons reverted to their original desire for a dog.

During this time, my once-attorney husband was writing a novel to make us rich. He'd go into his office in the morning and emerge at dinnertime, garrulous or sour. I did not know about the drinking yet, but was already honed to an exacting calculus of love and consequence.

I had no idea, my husband said, how hard it was to write a book.

When my former mother-in-law heard he'd quit his job, she sent me the book *The Second Shift*, then very much in the news and recently rereleased for its twenty-five-year anniversary. In it, sociologist Arlie Hochschild reports on her then-groundbreaking study that counts the steps of working couples throughout the daily labors they perform and finds that women just walk more than men—shopping and cooking and doing the laundry, vacuuming and sweeping and making the beds, tending to children and husbands. This amounts to what Hochschild calls a “second shift.” At first, I was touched by the gift, sensing a rare solidarity with my mother-in-law, but later she explained that this was just the way things were. He needs his fallow time, she said, referring to her son, and after all, you have more energy than he does.

This was also the time I was writing my own book on feminist theory and teaching fiery, ebullient classes to lovely and passionate students. And then I went home to the daily catechism of what my husband called my “wifely duties.”

The travails of marriage are as common as flies, and like the herons in their nests, each partner brings into the compact both proclivity and temperament, with every union its own impossible knot, a private reckoning as internally exacting as it is intractable.

And anyway, it’s not as if my former husband did nothing to help out. As time went on, as the boys grew older, he made them breakfast and drove them to school. He bought groceries and sometimes did the dishes (but not the pots and pans). If their teams were winning, he’d go to their games. Eventually, he went back to work. In general, I can say that he tried. He was powerless before his own about his distemper, a word I use in its archaic sense: as in ill humor, as also in disease. His mother’s word was “mean streak.” Either way, it was toxic all right.

In other words, as Karl Ove Knausgaard writes in *My Struggle: Book One*, the father controlled the mood of the house, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Looking back, I’m pretty sure I was right about the dog.

### 3. Axolotls

As for me, if I were to have a pet, it would be an axolotl, an otherworldly creature that has stirred powerful feelings in me since I first read Julio Cortázar’s eponymous story, which is about another strange kind of love.

Also known as Mexican walking fish, vaguely humanoid creatures like tiny alien cousins from another world or time, axolotls, on average, are twelve inches long and weigh up to three pounds. They are wide headed with lidless eyes and their heads are flanked by three pairs of fluttering, feathery gills; their bodies, by underdeveloped short legs that end in long, thin sensuous digits. The round sweet Os of their mouths suck prey through barely visible vestigial teeth with vacuum force. Males have swollen cloacae, lined with papillae; females are fat full of eggs. Brown spotted or black in the wild, those bred for captivity come in exotic hues that range from pale pink to a golden albino.

Also, the axolotl is neotenic, a rare biological condition in which adults retain physical traits of the young, while yet still being able to reproduce in sexually immature states. Left on their own in their natural habitat, they’ll stay that way forever—natural Peter Pans—but if someone moves them (if *you* move them), metamorphosis takes over, priming their sexual organs and giving them the capacity to live on land, where they may be mistaken for the tiger salamander, a glamorous name for a dull, mud-colored, and otherwise undistinguished creature.

Such metamorphosis can also be achieved by forced exposure to hormones or iodine, although this is said to be bad for the creature and shortens its life span.

Like the African spiny mouse, axolotls have the power of limb regeneration.

Even with fully developed lungs, amphibians, in general, continue to breathe at least in part through their skin, effecting cutaneous gas exchange by the pulsing of throats, and it has been surmised that perhaps it is this very permeability of skin that makes them the canaries of our planet.

Neoteny is said to be a form of regressive evolution. So maybe axolotls are not so much like little alien relations as they are precursors of our future selves. And how will we recognize ourselves when we become them? Will our toes and fingers web? What will yogic breath be like when respiration reverts to skin, the largest organ of the body?

As a girl, too, I loved amphibians, which awakened the cloistered tomboy in me and induced me to bring jars and not books on our springtime Sunday afternoon drives, hoping for bodies of water where I might hunt tadpoles or long filaments of eggs. On occasion, I’d manage not to kill them, but to nurture them through their various, fascinating stages. I’d kneel by our Pyrex terrariums and anxiously watch as their tails disappeared into their bulbous bodies.

Today, metamorphosis seems every bit as miraculous as it did to me when I was a child. But unlike the caterpillar, which does its work in private and emerges transformed from its chrysalis, the amphibian flaunts itself for everyone to see. Perhaps I sensed this even then. Where, I marveled, had these tiny buds of appendages come from? Were they somehow folded up inside the bulbous body, like teeth? Or did they grow from cells likewise embedded?

For I was growing, too, with changes—some subtle and some not—going on inside my body. I may not yet have known this, but I was.

Now, I review the body that is mine and perhaps, I don’t know, still feel some affinity with that prior girl’s body, but by far my stronger feeling is for the axolotl, its grownup body trapped inside its softer, younger one, caught there forever on the cusp of becoming. Whereas the bodies trapped inside our own are those we have outlived, their sole remaining traces stamped deep inside our brains. Even if my hands are still my same hands, they are not my same hands. These aching, liver-spotted hands have more in common, now, with my mother’s hands—my *grandmother’s* hands—than with those of the girl, plunging for tadpoles. Where did those prior hands go?

Other names for liver spots are solar lentigo and senile freckle.

Sometimes I like to imagine a world in which, like the axolotl and the African spiny mouse, human beings have developed the power of limb regeneration. In such a world, as soon as our hands began to look like someone else’s hands, we could check ourselves into a clinic to have them removed, and then we’d grow new ones as supple and lithe as the ones we started out with. In such a world, your hands would always be your hands; only your head and your heart would grow old. Imagine how wise and how kind we would be.

By the time my boys were small, the world was already shedding its fragile amphibian population, but we had no creek to take the boys to anyway, no tadpole-slick ponds. Once, the younger one brought home a cocoon. It was old but still intact, and he, always the optimist, was fully entranced. Now, normally so difficult to rouse, he’d pop up every morning, running to its jar to press his face right up against the glass with a look of such exquisite expectation that I could hardly bring myself to hurry him along for school. Get dressed, I’d say, eat your breakfast, but my heart wasn’t in it. If you shook it, you could hear a dry rustling within, and even though he knew not to shake it, I’d often catch him at it, as if such violence would force it to reveal its miracle.

It was perhaps at this time that I bought the anoles, shockingly green in the store.

How I wish I had known then that you could mail-order

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axolotls, just fill out a form and wait for your pets to arrive in their optimal chemical bath. Healthy axolotls live for years. The Internet would come. My boys could have taught themselves on forums where people post such questions as: My axolotl ate a rock, what should I do? Can my axolotl be gay? My axolotl swims up and down the tank, crashing into the glass at either end: is this normal? How can I tell if my axolotl is dead or just sleeping?

How would my boys be different if I’d bought them axolotls, if the axolotls were still alive today, one for each of them in their own new lives?

But I don’t have an axolotl, and I don’t have boys anymore either.

What I do have is plenty of ambivalence about this space I now inhabit, which, with a better attitude, I could fill with axolotls—all the axolotls I could ever want. Some of these axolotls would be the contemplative type, while others would have soft, friendly eyes. I don’t know why I never thought of this. There’s always a next time.

Therefore, this time I would not be neglectful like my prior self, but more like Walter Allen, dogged and devoted in my efforts to care as best I can for my axolotls. I wouldn’t

be disgruntled either, or primed for disillusionment or failure. And at the very first hint of something even just barely starting to go wrong, I'd call the veterinarian; I'd take them in. My former home gone, my children grown, I'd be clear with myself—from now on, it's just my axolotls and me.

Of course, in other, subtler respects, it's a relief not to have to visit, in the home that is no longer mine, the rooms that once were the boys' rooms, filled with boy things. If I lived there still, what would I have done with all those rooms? You can only use so many guest rooms; I already had an office. No doubt the boy things would just be gathering dust, awaiting visitations from their prior owners, just as my own girl things await me in my home of origin whenever I visit my parents. How strange those things are now, the wallpaper I chose, eccentric even in the sixties, the antiwar memorabilia, now antique.

Even here, in the absence of rooms empty of boys but full of their things, there's almost too much space for only one person. So much space can be a problem if you're not careful, even if it's filled with light. So much space can feel like the emptiness it is.

If I were to fill my home with axolotls, we'd be full up here. But what kind should they be? You can get them in so many genetically altered colors—royal blue, deep purple, golden albino. Some even glow in the dark. Most common—the leucistic—are pinkish. Pink becomes me in my later years.

From the right angles, axolotls look enough like you and me to be good company—a creature both from here and not. Of course, they'd have each other, too, and would spend their days visiting among themselves, just as the boys used to play with their friends, creating a generous feeling of companionability. They'd stop their gabbing, though, whenever I came back, looking at me with their curious eyes and pressing the flats of their padded feet to their glass in a welcoming, hospitable way, silently opening the pale-pink Os of their mouths to welcome me home.

**Katharine Haake's** most recent work is a chapbook of fabulist parables from Gold Line Press, *Assumptions We Might Make About the Postworld*. Her other books include an eco-dystopian science fiction fable, *The Time of Quarantine*; a hybrid California prose lyric, *That Water, Those Rocks*; and three collections of short stories. She is a graduate of University of California, Santa Cruz, and and teaches at California State University, Northridge.

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*Kestrel, 2017*  
Intaglio Etching, 11 x 8 in



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