

THE GRACE OF WILDNESS

At midday the clouds blow off, like the unfurling of a curtain. We have descended deep within the canyon of burnished Wingate sandstone.

I round a bend to see one of the students running toward me: “Tom! You’ve got to come here, quick!” She signals me forward and points at the wet clay in the wash bottom. Lying there, shivering on the cold mud, is a robin-sized slate-gray bird with muscular black feet and a broad mouth. In all my years as a naturalist, I’ve never had an encounter like this—a bird on the ground, for the taking. Recalling handling techniques from banding birds two decades earlier, I carefully pick up the bird, nestle its back against my warm palm, and brace its head between my first two fingers. Its eyes glisten, but it remains motionless in my hand.

Though I have studied birds for over twenty years, I am disoriented—who *is* this? The visceral connection between the bird’s fluttering heartbeat and the

nerve-tips in my fingers focuses me on this animal as an individual being, not a member of a species. This bird man or woman, stunned by the cold, stares back at me. I feel power returning to its long wings. I carefully curl back my fingers and level my hand. The gray bird sits still for a few seconds, then leaps from my hand and flaps its long wings—once, twice, three times.

We humans cannot leap into dazzling flight. But we can access this tingling sensation—call it freedom, call it wildness—each time we enter these astonishing stone canyons.

The instant it’s in flight I recognize it as one of my favorite canyon birds, a White-throated Swift. It circles higher

and higher. From a nearby cliff, a second swift surges toward the first; they circle together, smaller and smaller, and disappear against the red cliff. The individual has disappeared back into the anonymity of the species. We humans look into each other’s wide eyes.

“What *was* it?”

“Why was it lying on the ground?”

“How did you know what to do?”

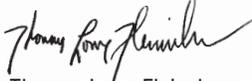
I answer as best I can. *It’s a White-throated Swift. I don’t know how it ended up on the ground, but once there, it was stuck—swifts can only take off by launching from a ledge. How did I know what to do? I just followed my instincts, remembering the proper way to hold a bird, and watching its eyes very, very closely.*

We sling our heavy packs back on and move downcanyon, toward water. Our eyes scan the cliffs for the catapulting flight of swifts. The sky trembles with a new possibility. My fingertips carry the lingering heartbeat of fear, and the joy of re-found freedom.

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ing stone canyons. We feel it in the vibrating shade below numberless cottonwoods, or within the glow of shimmering evening light on polished sandstone walls. We hear it in the sound of water plashing over a rock ledge, and in the sudden torrent of a Canyon Wren’s rippling song. And yes, we see it in the swooping flight of a swift. The landscapes that protect these simple, profound splendors are found nowhere else in the world—which is why travelers converge here from every corner of the globe.

Are we really so eager to trade these startling silences and unadulterated beauties—these rare places that harbor freedom—for the same dismal grind and clang, the same acrid smoke, the same standardized monotony of industry’s footprint? Why would we trade the rare elation of real freedom for the mundane ordinariness of plundering the world?



Thomas Lowe Fleischner
(b. 1954)