

REX WILDER

Mahler, 2024

Photography, colored pencil, and
mixed media on canvas, 34 x 40 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SARAHMARIE
SPECHT-BIRD

Love and Other Birds

Steller’s jays and
self-acceptance

It’s not until after I buy an enamel pin of a Steller’s jay that I realize that Steller’s jays are actually huge jerks.

What the internet tells me about this bird is mildly horrifying. A Steller’s jay will mimic the calls of other birds to lure them away from the nest. Then it swoops in and eats the babies. *Eats. The. Babies.* Though it will also eat anything else it can find: nuts, seeds, trash, whatever it can get its strong black claws on. Fair play, I suppose, especially coming from someone who regularly consumes mayonnaise-and-tuna wraps and often eats trash off the ground. Hiking a very long trail will do that to you. Who am I to judge a Steller’s jay when I get excited about ground Skittles? But still. You have to draw the line somewhere, and my line is way before eating babies.

I know morality has no place in the animal world. A Steller’s jay isn’t really a jerk. It’s just doing what evolution has made it do. Steller’s jays are omnivores and opportunists. They’ll eat seeds and steal trash just as soon as they’ll rob a nest. There’s nothing wrong or right about it. It’s just a bird. It just exists. It’s just the way it’s evolved to be. But I can’t help but be a little judgmental. I can’t help but think of those empty nests, eggs gone, songbirds robbed, the scarily beautiful cerulean bird swooping away cackling.

A flash of blue, a peaked black head. Black eyes that see all. Endless watery depths. “Look,” I say, pointing in the golden evening light in the valley below the mountain. A jay croaks and hops in the trees. “Just like my pin.” Touch the cool enamel on the side of my hat. Tap it against my skull once, twice.

His eyes aren’t the same blue of the bird I’ve become obsessed with, but they’re feathery beautiful above a smile deeply carved, making unintentional etchings on the surface of my heart. He kissed me that day in broad daylight. Unashamed. Oceanic. Nothing about it felt casual. I was already sinking while the afternoon glinted on my Steller’s jay pin.

* * *

I have come to adore love stories where the characters don’t end up with each other in the end. I think I am falling in love with the idea that love does not have to stay love for it to have been love. Or at least, for it to have been something.

In the opening scene from season two of the show *Fleabag*, in a swanky maroon-tiled bathroom, with jazz playing through the speakers, we see a woman wearing a sexy black backless jumpsuit, washing her hands in the sink. The camera pans to her reflection in the mirror. There is blood all over her face, below her nose, covering her mouth. She winces as she uses a cloth to wipe the red away. Then she hands a clean towel to a bewildered woman sitting on the floor, previously unseen, whose face is also bloody. The first woman, our heroine, Fleabag, looks in the mirror again and adjusts herself one last time. Finally, she brazenly breaks the fourth wall and stares directly at us as she quips, “This is a love story.”

That cheeky smile. Those devilish eyes. Is the “love” she’s referring to the love between *us* and *her*? Because I fall a little more in love with her every time I see that scene. We should know from that moment that it isn’t a traditional love story, or a straightforward love story, or a normal love story. We should know from that first bloody smirk that this might not even be a love story of love between her and another person at all. And if it is, it’s not going to go the way we expect or want it to. And that is the genius of calling it “love.”

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I suppose the reason that I find Steller’s jays so beautiful is because they are foreign to me. Not radically so, but just enough to fascinate. They are West Coast cool; a different dialect of the language of blue jays back East, where I’m from. Both varieties are in the same family, Corvidae, that of the crow, and both are intelligent and impressive birds. But the blue jays of the East seem somehow gentler. They are smaller, and they don’t have that deep-blue hue or the dramatic black peaked head: beautiful like a rich oil painting, haunting like the hood of an executioner. Eastern blue jays’ wing tips are dotted with white flecks, blank spaces on a wispy canvas. Their blue is that of the sky, not of the ocean. Blue of lightness, lightheartedness, laughter, and snow. Blue of the familiar and of home.

But the Steller’s jay blue is fathomless, and unfathomable. Stare into its depths and you might never climb back out. Blue of wonder, mysticism, distance, ocean; blue that makes you want to write strange poetry. Warning. Danger. Blue that swoops down from conifers and caws ecstatically

and watches from the branches. Blue that calls for caution. Blue that sings a siren song; blue that draws you in helplessly before you even think to wonder what happened.

* * *

He asked me twice if I was okay with “casual.” Twice, I said yes. The first time, I meant it. The second time, I lied.

First, it was in a house in a town in a dusty valley. Creaking old wooden shelving in the watery orange darkness. Finally showered after days in the sunlight. Shampoo and skin smell, mixed with mountain air. It seemed fine. I thought I could be okay with it. I thought I could float on the surface.

Second, it was an echoing apartment in a city. *Are you sure? Are you sure? Because I don’t want to hurt you.* Yes, I’m sure. Yes, I know. Yes, I’ll be fine, I understand. Lies. Shadows on midnight walls. Dark-blue endless ocean spilling over. Waves moved, tidal, and all the while I was trying to make myself grasp that it was nothing. All of this, all of this random depth, this heedless diving, meant nothing. I wanted to believe it, wanted to be fine. I wanted so badly to be okay with “casual.” I wanted to be cool and weightless, like him. I wanted to be free. I wanted to float.

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I read an article once about private book collectors and their libraries. There were disagreements about e-readers versus physical books, and when to save a book and when to keep it. At one point, the author debated various collectors’ ideas about how many books made a library, or at least how many books it took to make you feel cozy. One said 1,000 and then amended it to 500. Many of those interviewed said they preferred to have a good chunk of books that were unread. Unread books mean possibilities; even if you cannot possibly read all of them before you die, just the thought that you could open a cover and dive into a world you’ve never been to before is enough to set some people’s hearts racing. Or at least, it’s enough to make them feel confident that they will always have an escape from the creep of boredom or the darker times. They sit among the unknown, the unfinished, the not-quite-remembered, and they are at peace.

I’m getting to the point where I’ve read most of the books in my “library.” I feel proud of this sometimes,

but it also induces a kind of vertigo when I think of all the stories teeming between those covers. How many of them do I remember? And will the worlds be the same when I dive back in? I think this is a beautiful and terrible thing, being surrounded by so many intangible unknowns. Sometimes when I’m sitting by the window in my favorite bookstore, I look at people walking by and feel an aching sadness that I have passed so near a universe that I will never crack open and understand. It’s not even *possible* to crack open and understand. Everyone has so much inside them, a limitless depth of story and stars and possibility. We can’t come close to reading everything that is written in those waters.

But loving unread books, needing unread books, is both a comfort and a source of wonder. It is the most alive thing to accept that there are stories, places, possibilities, and people that we will never see, touch, or have.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit describes climbing Tumanguya, so-called Mount Whitney. On the summit, she sees the wide snowy expanse of the Sierrra on one side and the vast desert on the other. She comments that climbing mountains is supposed to make you feel huge, but the irony is that the farther up the mountain you go, the smaller you realize you are. You cannot touch all the places on a map, no matter how hard you try. You can’t even fly over them all. And being joyfully lost among that—who you cannot have, where you cannot be, what you cannot read—is maybe the most worthy goal of all.

* * *

So, this is a love story.

Fleabag spoilers ahead. You were warned.

In the final scene of season two, the Priest and Fleabag are sitting at a bus stop at night in London. They have just come from Fleabag’s father’s wedding. Fleabag and the Priest are in love. But the Priest struggles with it, and Fleabag knows deep down that it’s not really her that he’s in love with.

“It’s God, isn’t it?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

She tells him that she loves him, and he doesn’t crumble or scoff. He takes her hand, smiles sadly, and says the most perfect thing, “It’ll pass.”

He doesn’t say, “No, you don’t,” or, “I don’t feel the

same way.” He doesn’t brush her off or make her feel small or sugarcoat the truth. He says the only possible thing.

Alone at the bus stop after the Priest leaves, Fleabag takes a deep breath, stands up, and begins to walk away in the other direction. The camera prepares to follow her, as it has done for the whole show. But she smiles and shakes her head. *No, not this time*, she seems to say. She holds her head up, waves a little, and turns her back to us as she blazes into the night.

The thing that gets me about this scene is that it isn’t sad. It’s hopeful. The great irony of season two is that Fleabag, an emotionally damaged woman who uses sex as a way to dull her pain, happens to fall in love with someone who has taken a vow of celibacy: literally, someone she cannot have. Instead of this breaking her, it forges her. She burns more brightly as herself during and after their relationship. She holds her head up and knows what she’s about. And so does the Priest: having loved Fleabag, he knows for certain that God is his life. They walk away better for it. They dwell in each other’s orbit for a while, read each other’s stories, know a little bit of their universe, and then close the book and move on.

Like I said: Love story.

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Evening, golden. Dry, quiet gloaming. Alone, walking along a ridge, tears streaming down my congested face. *Can I push the SOS button on my GPS for an emotional emergency?* I wonder absentmindedly. *I’m falling apart. Can I call a helicopter for that?* I’ll push the button and they will arrive. *What’s the emergency?* they’ll ask, and I’ll gesture vaguely to my chest, and I’ll choke through curtains of snot that there is something wrong with me, that my heart is in tatters for no good reason at all, that I need to be lifted out. *Take me out of here*, I want to wail, while all the while I’m ashamed of my wailing. *It hurts*.

I crave a well-constructed plot, despite my awareness of life’s lack thereof. I want a fairy tale, despite knowing the inherent messiness of human existence. I long to read every word when I know it’s not possible for the heart to hold them all. I always want the wrong people to be something more, something literary, avian and soaring—when all they’ve ever done is be human: what biology and childhood and adolescence and life have made them to be.

Steller’s jays are not moral or immoral for eating whatever comes their way. For cawing and croaking and shitting like they do. They’re just birds. It’s not that deep. They just do as evolution commands. *It’s random*, he said to me by way of explaining his lack of reciprocation. If someone comes to save me now, I can ask why this fact of his not wanting me is so horrible. I can ask why I have to feel so much. I can ask why I always willingly slice my heart and serve it raw to such arbitrary hands.

He asked me twice. *Are you sure?* He covered his bases. He tried to tell me who he was. He offered me wings. He tossed me a life raft, and I still dove right in.

There is no morality in nature. Nothing about it guaranteed me anything, not love or a time frame or undying devotion. So why do I still feel like a songbird robbed?

* * *

The lease for my apartment in Columbus ends in January on a sharply cold Saturday morning. In three months I will begin hiking the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada, but in the meantime, I’ll be hauling all of my stuff two hours south on I-71. It’s the second time in four years that I’ve moved back to Cincinnati to prepare for a long-distance hike.

Not that this is a bad thing. It feels like it’s time to go home. I’ve enjoyed Columbus, but I don’t want to stay here. It’s just a place I moved to because of my now-ex-boyfriend. It was a truly great relationship, full of love and adventure and honesty. Part of me is terrified that I will never find anything like it again. But it just wasn’t right. Something didn’t click. And, as is the way of things, it ended.

But the silver lining is that our friendship remains. More than remains, even—it’s almost as if we leveled up, ascended to some higher plane of connection. We did it the opposite way of the normal narrative. Romance was the introduction; now we’re in the real meat of the story.

He came over to help me the day I moved out of my apartment. We carried the heavy old love seat down three flights of stairs and maneuvered it into the U-Haul. We lugged boxes that contained the pots and pans we’d used to cook black bean burgers and wild mushroom soup, the coffee maker that had brewed while we listened to NPR’s *Up First* in the morning over everything bagels and cream cheese. We reminisced about the past two years,

what they had gifted us, and what they had wrecked on the world.

Standing in the partially packed truck, he gazed wistfully at the furniture and appliances and boxes and sighed. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“Yeah, it did,” I countered.

He was still standing there, wasn’t he? I was still moving toward my dream, wasn’t I? I’ll hold my year and a half in Columbus swaddled tightly in my heart forever: the parks, the Japanese restaurants, the friendships, the love. Most of all the love.

I cried when he drove away. I thought I’d break when I stood in my empty, echoing one-bedroom apartment and closed the door for the last time. But then I drove southwest toward the bleeding-orange winter sunset, and I felt a delicious rightness. The Cincinnati skyline burst into view out of nowhere like it always does, and I knew that it had worked out after all. This is my city. This is my path. This is my love story.

* * *

I saw him again, a few months after. The “casual” guy. My Steller’s jay. It was a disaster. I thought enough time had passed and that I had moved on well. That I had risen to the surface and seen the ridiculous truth of it all, and that we could now be friends. But put a few drinks in me, and show me those eyes again, and I fall right back in.

Walking through an unfamiliar city in the freezing cold. Drunk. Far too drunk. Tears gushing when he tells me he’s been seeing someone. It’s only been a couple of months. What the fuck? Robbed, I shatter. I tear at the poorly mended seams. I scream at him. I call him names. I want it to hurt. Screech and rend. Eat the eggs and rip apart the nest, vomit up a stick-laden sludge. Salt water and sea gunk pour out of me onto the frozen sidewalk. I can no longer lie, no longer restrain. I caw, I caw, I swoop down and peck him to pieces. Attack, attack, attack. Executioner’s hood. Fathomless depths. I agreed to this. I agreed. I lied. I consented to it all. I did this to myself. *Are you sure you’re okay with casual?*

* * *

Sometimes I feel like Fleabag when I sit in the rubble and cast about for safe ground. The older I get, the more

I understand her. It’s an addictive and easy reflex to reach for people to hold you, but it is also beautifully human.

Fleabag had to fall in love with the Priest in order to fall in love with herself. She had to see herself through his eyes. His leaving her was the kindest and most loving thing he could have done. He gave her a better gift than a relationship: he gave her herself. He gave her God.

* * *

It’s a chilly morning somewhere in Oregon. We’re moving slowly. There are no dramatic views for these early miles today. The forest encloses us in a misty coniferous swirl above the soft soil path. Sunlight filters through. We pass a turnoff for a campsite where another hiker is waiting to turn onto the main trail, but instead of passing us, she walks with us for a few miles. We exchange the usual pleasantries and discuss ideas for what we’re going to do after the PCT ends.

I notice her numerous enamel pins and indicate my own. “Oh, I’ve got a Steller’s jay there, too!” I say, reaching my hand up to the mesh of my trucker hat, where the bird has lived ever since Southern California, nearly 2,000 miles ago.

It isn’t there.

I reach to the other side, fumbling for the cool metal, the plastic backing. I take my hat off and inspect it.

It’s gone. The shiny bird, the black hood and sapphire blue resting on a green branch: gone. It must have fallen off.

The real Steller’s jays are long gone from the trees now too. They seem to have disappeared as we’ve moved farther north. I’ve been looking for them, but we must be out of their range. Elsewhere they go on, stealing eggs and eating babies and cawing and gleefully pecking at abandoned food. Their own story continues, diverging from us, as we peel ever farther toward Canada.

* * *

You could say things haven’t worked out romantically for me in the past. You could say I’ve just been trampling like wildfire through one unconventional relationship after another. You could say that I’m a little more broken now than I was before. But that wouldn’t be quite true. These others cowrote a chapter in the tale of myself, every time. They helped me recognize what’s right in front of me. So you tell me: is this not a love story after all?

I have read most of the books on my shelves, but I do not remember all the details of every story. I love some books more than others. I cherish a few. There are some that I have started but not finished, and others that are unread, and I do not know if I will ever read them all the way through. That’s okay. The thought of so many stories around me, the beloved and the partially discovered and the completely unknown, fills me with a hope, a terror, and an excitement that I cannot name.

I stood on holy Tumanguya for a second time on that long walk in the American West. At sunrise, I looked out into the vast expanse of the continent with the ocean of snowcapped mountains on my left and the brown desert floor on my right. There was a path for me to follow up that mountain, but it did not touch a fraction of the possibilities that exist.

It is okay to be joyfully lost like this. It is okay to be a little broken, a little unsure, a little reeling after something doesn’t—or does—work out. It is the best way there is. It is beautiful to fly alone on blue wings into the unknown leap of distance. It is the best love story I know.

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