

Heidi W. Durrow

He Runs

Jamie thinks Robbie is a bird flying down below his window. He has been waiting for this bird and runs downstairs without calling to his mother: "Going outside" which is what his mother has told him to say even if she doesn't hear him above the din of the television that plays loudly in her room.

Jamie knows that his mother is not watching television. She has a new friend in there. Jamie knows the television as something that makes sounds to keep the sound out. He's okay with that. The bird he has waited for has come. Of course, it didn't have to be this one, but it is. There are any number of hundreds of birds that don't belong in the Chicago sky.

There is a man who lives in the building next door who raises pigeons on the roof. His bird's won ten times out of its last twelve races. The man is young; he has muscles and a tattoo on both arms: a cross and the name of a girl on the other; and a large ring which bruised Jamie's thigh. Jamie stopped visiting the man then. He didn't want to be called Shorty and he didn't want the young man to call him pretty. Besides Jamie likes a fancier bird than a pigeon, a bird that not everyone knows or could name. A bird that, like him, didn't really belong here.

There are two windows in his apartment. One faces the alley and the other the courtyard. Jamie never watches out the alley window anymore. The bird-things that he sees fly by are never birds, but garbage bags hurled out the window from higher floors. They sometimes strike the air-conditioning units below. Whump. Sometimes catching there, and rotting hot during the summer months.

Jamie who is really James is named after his father but not named Junior because he is really the third. Jamie would rather have a strong name, like Steve or Brick. He has been Jamie since he was born even though there was no way to confuse him with his father, James. His father

has never lived with him. His father is a man he has only met in dreams. Jamie wants a name with a different history.

Jamie, who is really James, runs down the stairs. He will remember what he sees; he will write it down; he will record this date on his life list: the name of another bird.

He runs downstairs to find this bird, to identify it, to see it.

In his hands Jamie holds a book, the only gift he has ever asked for. It is the only thing he has ever asked for at all. He has no needs and desires so as not to embarrass his mother. This book was not a gift. His birthday, July 20, came and went with no celebration and no cake and no gift book.

Jamie stole the book from the library. When the metal detector went off, he laid on the table a pocket knife he found in the pants draped across the bathtub, the pants of his mother's new friend of two weeks ago.

"Young man," the stout lady library security guard said, "you know you ain't supposed to be carrying this kinda thing around."

Jamie nodded. "I'm gonna keep this here until you come back round with your mama and she says it's okay for you to have it." His plan worked. He left behind the pocket knife he took from the pocket of his mother's new friend of two weeks ago, and left with the *Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America*.

He runs downstairs with the *Peterson Field Guide*. *What is its shape? What shape are its wings? What shape is its bill? What shape is its tail? How does it behave? Does it climb trees? How does it fly?* Jamie has memorized these questions from the field guide. He repeats them so much in his head they seem to have a melody. He knows the whole topography of a bird. His favorite part of the book is the beginning and the end, not as if the book holds a story, but he loves the two sets of pictures of the birds' silhouettes. Number 13 is the Magpie, 25 the Meadowlark, 9 well, that's the Mockingbird, and 14 is the Nighthawk.

He runs downstairs. He is certain the silhouette of the Great Egret has passed his courtyard window.

He runs downstairs. One day he will leave this city, he thinks, taking

the stairs two by two and sliding on the sticky banister on the last three-step landing before the door. His life list will be long with exotic birds from all over the world that he can name and call.

When Jamie finally reaches the courtyard he sees that his bird is not a bird at all. His bird is a boy, and a girl, and a mother and a child.

The mother, the girl, the child. They all look like they are sleeping, eyes closed, listless. The baby is still in her mother's arms, a gray sticky porridge pouring from the underside of her head. The girl is heaped on top of the boy's body, a bloody helpless pillow. And yet, there is an old mattress doughy from the week's rain not even ten feet to the boy-bird's right arm, folded half-way beneath him.

Pain moves the boy's body. His bones jut from his wrists. His eyes are wide open. He can see me, Jamie thinks.

The boy seems to have landed feet first on the sodden cement alley filled with garbage bags bursting with scent and refuse. The bones from the bottom of the boy's leg poke through his jeans at his thigh. He lies on the ground on his back as if he has fallen from a large, comfortable nest.

It is not until the policemen rake through the courtyard's waste that Jamie can turn away. The policemen collect matchbooks, soda bottles, and empty brown paper bags, scraps of paper and other possible clues: a jack of clubs playing card lying on a brown-stained sheet, and a ticket from Saturday's Quik Pick Lotto. Jamie is still holding his *Peterson's Field Guide*. He has no names for what he sees.

Jamie who is really James visits the courtyard shrine every day until it rains.

The shrine is made of an old board elevated by two cement blocks a foot off the ground. On the board, there are candles, flowers, a teddy-bear, and balloons—two already popped—attached with barely sticky tape. And there is a coffee can with a hole poked out of the plastic lid, like the one passed around at church, that says "collections." Jamie puts a quarter in the coffee can on the first day. He wants to put in more.

On the first day, there is a crowd. It bows to the shrine, whispers, cries.

The crowd looks up into the sky—away from the bloodied earth. It looks for signs. It draws lines in the air, flight patterns.

The bird-boy smiles at Jamie from a framed photograph set in the shrine's middle. It is a school portrait, the bird-boy, at age six maybe seven, Jamie thinks, because he's missing the same two teeth as me when I was that age.

There is another photograph of the mother, the girl, the boy and the child. The mother is seated in a wicker chair holding the baby, and standing on each side are the boy, and the girl. The bird-boy's face is not new. His is an old face, a face that Jamie remembers. He is the boy from the sixth floor.

What is its shape? What shape are its wings? What shape is its bill? What shape is its tail? How does it behave? Does it climb trees? How does it fly?

The melody plays in his head.

The television cameras come only on the first day. Channels 11, 4 and 7 interview neighbors Jamie has never seen. These neighbors say many things:

She seemed regular.

Kept to herself.

Didn't cause no trouble.

Always made sure those kids were clean.

The bird-boy's family is just this: a collection of impressions, and then a tragedy, a shame.

“Acquire the habit of comparing a new bird with some familiar ‘yard-stick’—a House Sparrow, a Robin, a Pigeon, etc., so that you can say to yourself, ‘smaller than a Robin; a little larger than a House Sparrow.’”

What is its shape?

The shrine is still there the next day. The cameras are gone. The coffee can that says “collections” remains—no thief brave enough to steal away money meant for a grave.

Jamie puts in close to twenty dollars in change. He emptied his mother’s pocketbook. He ran his hand beneath the couch cushions where the new friends sometimes sat. He walked along the sidewalk near the bus stop looking for loose change. He collected one dollar and eighty-three cents and three beer bottles he recycled for change.

Jamie stands before the shrine. The yellow police tape—that cordoned off the spot where the bird-boy and his family lay—is torn. Part of it has blown away and the rest flaps in the wind. Jamie thinks of his life list—how it is still a list of ordinary birds: robins, sparrows, pigeons, gulls. The Great Egret, snowy white, airborne. If only the Great Egret was what he had seen that day. His would be the name next to the find, the one who could see things. He’d become someone worth knowing. It would be in all the papers, he thinks, maybe even TV. His father, James the third, would see him and know him. He thinks of how the bird was his way out. He wonders how he could have been so wrong. How could he have made the shadow of a boy into a bird? There are questions he must learn to ask to train his eyes to see.

What shape are its wings?

His mother holds him when he comes inside. She coos: “You okay, baby?” No new friends in the last three days and his mother needs touching. He fits in the triangle of her arm. She is yeasty and pale. She rocks him.

Her arm is like the clock on a bell, dangling limply across his shoulder. “Your mama’s not so bad, is she?” He takes the love she gives, these broken pieces of affection. Maybe the bird-boy has changed things after all.

The bedroom door opens. Jamie is wrong again. There is a new new friend standing in the doorframe. “What you waitin on, girl?”

Only then does he see the familiar marks on his mother’s arm, and the haze that she seems to be seeing him through, the glassy look in her eyes.

The feeling that rose between them becomes a chasm, an opening wound. He cannot be certain of what he sees.

There are questions he must learn to ask to train his heart not to feel.

His mother retreats to the bedroom. "Mama's gonna go rest. Tell me if you go outside." The television is on again. He hears the sound that keeps out the sound.

How does it behave?

"Going outside," he says a few moments later. He grabs his book and walks down to the second floor landing where he sits and reads.

"Learn bird songs. They can identify a species even when the bird may secrete itself in thick cover." He thinks of the sound of the robin and the sparrow. He can hear the sounds like a memory of a song. He thinks he could have known the new new friend was there. He thinks: had he listened for the sounds, he would have heard thick shoes on the bare parquet floor, the belt clasp undone, and its click on the opening zipper. He would have heard the folding down of sheets. He would have known his mother's limp hug was pure apology.

After twenty minutes in the drafty and stale stairway—minutes that feel like hours as he waits for the new new friend to leave—Jamie walks outside to the shrine with the *Peterson Field Guide* in his hand.

A reporter—pretty and young like his first school teacher—wants to make the bird-boy's story one that makes sense. It is two days later. Forty-eight hours have passed and people are already tired of trying to figure out the reason why. The people before the shrine will not speak.

The reporter tries to coax them like Mrs. Marshall would when she wanted the kids to say their A-B-C's. The grown-up people do not talk to her. Then she approaches Jamie.

"Hey," she says. "Did you guys play together?"

"No." He mutters. The *Peterson Field Guide* is his armor, hugged

tightly against his chest. It wasn't that he didn't want to. He'd seen the brother and sister play together from his window. It just wasn't something kids in his building did. He'd not once in the three months they lived there tried to join in.

"Go to school together?"

"Huh-uh."

The reporter writes "no."

There are questions she should ask, he thinks, these are not the ones.

"What did you see?"

I saw a bird, he wants to answer. A Great Egret in the Chicago sky. I saw it swoop down below my window. I wanted to see it land.

Jamie who is really James does not give this answer. What did he see? It does not matter. His eyes see everything wrong. Shadows, mothers, birds. Love.

Instead, he says: "I saw a man. At the top of that building. He pushed them off and ran."

The reporter asks him more questions and he answers. Jamie who is really James is shaking inside with delight. The reporter writes down every word he says.

"Yes, ma'am," he says. "That's exactly what I saw—The way it happened."

"Great," and she continues scribbling. "Did you tell the police?"

"Ma'am?" But the reporter's forgotten the question as soon as she's asked because she turns and says to the photographer: "I want a picture of him."

"Could you hold this up?" the photographer asks Jamie and hands him the family photograph. His hands are trembling with excitement.

Click.

"Thanks, young man."

"What's your name, sweetie? And tell me how to spell it," the reporter asks.

He has watched the news reports. The words "the neighbor," "a long-time resident," "the building supervisor" appear at the bottom of the

screen: not names. The people who say things on TV remain strangers. They remain unknown. Jamie who is really James at first doesn't know what to say. But as he thinks of the Great Egret, of his photograph, of his father James, he says: "My name's Brick. I'm nine. B-R-I-C-K."

It rains the night Jamie who is really James becomes Brick. He hears the rain hit upon the courtyard window. He hears the wind and the clank of metal garbage cans that have lost their lids. Learn bird songs. The call note, the song. Jamie hums himself to sleep, the tune buzzing into his dreams.

In the morning, he leaves for school without eating the cereal his mother has left for him on the table. The milk is warm and the bowl is half-full of corn flakes that are mostly crumbles. Jamie stops at the newsstand by the bus stop to see the morning's paper. Page B3. His is the hand that holds the photo of the dead family. He sees his new name.

When he returns home from school that afternoon, he sees that the shrine has not survived the storm. The rain has soaked what is left: the teddy-bear, the candles, the family portrait in the frame. The coffee can is gone. Jamie who is really James picks up the board and replaces it on the cement blocks. The soggy teddy-bear squishes like a sponge when he puts it on the shrine again. He pours the water from the candles' burning wells and wipes the rain from the family portrait now wet beneath the frame's glass leaving pock marks where there were small pools of rain.

Jamie who was really James but is now Brick places the *Peterson Field Guide* on the shrine, just next to the bird-boy's family photograph. He has no need for names. From now on, he will simply listen. He'll know things even when his eyes are closed. He'll know them by sound.

Copyright of Literary Review is the property of Fairleigh Dickinson University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.