

"The Cranes"
Peter Meinke

Oh!" she said, "What are those, the huge white ones?" Along the marshy shore two tall and stately birds, staring motionless toward the Gulf, towered above the bobbing egrets and scurrying plovers.

"Well, I can't believe it," he said. "I've been coming here for years and never saw one. . . ."

"But what are they?" she persisted. "Don't make me guess or anything, it makes me feel dumb." They leaned forward in the car and the shower curtain spread over the front seat crackled and hissed.

"They've got to be whooping cranes, nothing else so big!" One of the birds turned gracefully, as if to acknowledge the old Dodge parked alone in the tall grasses. "See the black legs and black wingtips? Big! Why don't I have my binoculars?" He looked at his wife and smiled.

"Well," he continued after a while, "I've seen enough birds. But whooping cranes, they're rare. Not many left."

"They're lovely. They make the little birds look like clowns."

"I could use a few dozen," he said. "A few laughs never hurt anybody."

"Are you all right?" She put a hand on his thin arm. "Maybe this is the wrong thing. I feel I'm responsible."

"God, no!" His voice changed. "No way. I can't smoke, can't drink martinis, no coffee, no candy. I not only can't leap buildings in a single bound, I can hardly get up the goddamn stairs."

She was smiling. "Do you remember the time you drank 13 martinis and asked that young priest to step outside and see whose side God was on?"

"What a jerk I was! How have you put up with me all this time?"

"Oh, no! I was proud of you! You were so funny, and that priest was a snot."

"Now you tell me." The cranes were moving slowly over a small hillock, wings opening and closing like bellows. "It's all right. It's enough," he said again. "How old am I anyway, 130?"

"Really," she said. "It's me. Ever since the accident it's been one thing after another. I'm just a lot of trouble to everybody."

"Let's talk about something else," he said. "Do you want to listen to the radio? How about turning on that preacher station so we can throw up?"

"No," she said, "I just want to watch the birds. And listen to you."

"You must be pretty tired of that."

She turned her head from the window and looked into his eyes. "I never got tired of listening to you. Never."

"Well, that's good," he said. "It's just that when my mouth opens, your eyes tend to close."

"They do not!" she said, and began to laugh, but the laugh turned into a cough and he had to pat her back until she stopped. They leaned back in the silence and looked toward the Gulf stretching out beyond the horizon. In the distance, the water looked like metal, still and hard.

"I wish they'd court," he said. "I wish we could see them court, the cranes. They put on a show. He bows like Nijinsky and jumps straight up in the air."

"What does she do?"

"She lies down and he lands on her."

"No," she said, "I'm serious."

"Well, I forget. I've never seen it. But I do remember that they mate for life and live a long time. They're probably older than we are! Their feathers are falling out and their kids never write."

She was quiet again. He turned in his seat, picked up an object wrapped in a plaid towel, and placed it between them in the front.

"Here's looking at you, kid," he said.

"Do they really mate for life? I'm glad -- they're so beautiful."

"Yep. Audubon said that's why they're almost extinct: a failure of imagination."

"I don't believe that," she said. "I think there'll always be whooping cranes."

"Why not?" he said.

"I wish the children were more settled. I keep thinking it's my fault."

"You think everything's your fault. Nicaragua. Ozone depletion. Nothing is your fault. They'll be fine, and anyway, they're not children anymore. Kids are different today, that's all. You were terrific." He paused. "You were terrific in ways I couldn't tell the kids about."

"I should hope not." She laughed and began coughing again, but held his hand when he reached over. When the cough subsided they sat quietly, looking down at their hands as if they were objects in a museum.

"I used to have pretty hands," she said.

"I remember."

"Do you? Really?"

"I remember everything," he said.

"You always forgot everything."

"Well, now I remember."

"Did you bring something for your ears?"

"No, I can hardly hear anything anyway!" But his head turned at a sudden squabble among the smaller birds. The cranes were stepping delicately away from the commotion.

"I'm tired," she said.

"Yes." He leaned over and kissed her, barely touching her lips. "Tell me," he said, "did I really drink 13 martinis?"

But she had already closed her eyes and only smiled. Outside the wind ruffled the bleached-out grasses, and the birds in the white glare seemed almost transparent. The hull of the car gleamed beetle-like -- dull and somehow sinister in its metallic isolation from the world around it.

At the shot, the two cranes plunged upward, their great wings beating the air and their long slender necks pointed like arrows toward the sun.