



Flight Lessons

by Tom Bentley

The natural world is one of the few things that can still provoke a sense of wonder—and even transformation—in a witness. And those precious promptings from the world needn't be images from the impossible depths of space or the flares of fiery volcanic explosions. Often, it's the more subtle signals of life's complexities that carry the most magic.

A couple of springs ago, my garage was host to a pair of mating swallows. My ill-humor at their muddy nest-building attempts moved to deep curiosity at their persistence, to awe when the hatching came, and at their departure, to a profound sense of connection in the threaded web of life.

But first, I have to push profundity aside and discuss poop, because poop first alerted me to my new tenants' presence. I had seen swallows darting in and out of the garage, but because I live in a semirural area, partial to strawberry fields, small ranchettes, and woodsy hills, the pirouetting play of swallows in the spring air was ever more pleasure than problem.

The problem surfaced on my car's surface. I noticed that birds were leaving their signature elements on my shiny '71 Volvo

P1800, a car much too pretty to carry the aftereffects of my winged friend's picnics. At first I thought my ride had been victimized while I was out and about town, but after a few such episodes I put it together: those swooping swallows knifing through the local air were making more than pit stops in the garage; they were making privy stops as well.

A quick reconnoiter of the garage rafters clearly stated the case: not only had my friends been making hay in my garage, they'd been making a family as well. Two small eggs lay in a tidy nest on top of one of the roof beams. Well. All my plans on erecting some kind of swallow snare to discourage their car bombings were pulverized: I was now an uncle, albeit a begrudging one.

I settled on a nightly sheeting (and frequent washings) of my car to protect the paint and settled in to observe the parents-to-be. Over the next several weeks, the mated pair spent many hours zipping in and out of their adopted home, showing visible signs of distress when we ventured in to the garage for any chore or trip. Their amped-up air-anglings made my daily checks (using a mirror, so as to least disturb) on the eggs harrowing for us both, and unrewarding as well, for the eggs always lay in calm repose in the nest.

Until the morning came when the eggs were no longer eggs, but shells. Breakthrough! Two quivering chicks, with translucent skin and cloudy eyes, with sporadic tufts rather than feathers, lay on the nest floor. They were surprisingly large, seeming to greatly exceed their chamber. I was thrilled. My garage, an avian nursery!

And an active nursery it was. The chicks developed quickly, boosted by their parents regular attentions to their children's fre-

quent appetites. From jiggling blobs in the nest, mere weeks brought helpless youngsters to fledged adolescents, nervously stretching their necks and extending unused wings.

For a day or two, the fledglings moved about on the rafter beams, hopping and stretching their wings while their parents shot in and out of the garage, demonstrating the tricks of their airborne trade. This was truly a teaching moment, but it was more moments than I could observe without shying from my home-office job, so I wasn't witness to the first flight of the most nimble sibling.

But that might have actually been a lucky break, for it was the process by which the now-flying adolescent encouraged his agitated sibling to take wing that was high drama. The airborne chick hovered in front of the flightless bird, chirping and squawking and then lighting down, then hovering again, doing everything in its power to demonstrate technique and to bring his brother bird off his perch. I watched for forty-five minutes, enthralled at this tableau. Then, a stirring sight: the land-bound bird took off, shot out from the garage, and then returned in an instant. This was repeated several times with the entire family joining in, shooting through the air around my garage and yard. I was mesmerized and felt as though I'd had a magic gift unwrapped before my eyes.

It was too, too soon before they all disappeared, less than a week after the young birds conquered gravity. But what an impression it made on me: to see instinct, intelligence, and emotion conveyed by these creatures. Today, when I see the swallow shooting in their springtime sorties around the neighborhood, I wonder

if one of them is the adult version of that inexperienced flyer, now a seasoned veteran of the sky. Nature sometimes presents us with perfect moments, and—P1800 paint be damned—the moment just as that little bird took off was precious to me.

