Listening to the Music of a Vulture's Egg

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Is it more unlikely that the vulture's egg remained unbroken over the fifty-two years it's been in my possession, or that it reached Ireland unscathed after the long journey from wherever it was laid? Both circumstances suggest a history of careful handling. For a long while I kept it with a swan's egg. They sat together side by side on a shelf in a glass-fronted bookcase, each one large enough to fill a gently cupped hand completely, with the fingers only slightly bent. But at some point along the way, probably in the course of one of my many house moves, the swan's egg got smashed. Accidents happen. Birds' eggs are fragile. I find it more remarkable that the vulture's egg has survived intact than that the swan's egg hasn't.

I know where the swan's egg was laid—on the shore of New Lake, near the village of Dunfanaghy in County Donegal, Ireland, on land belonging to my great-uncle's farm. He gave me the egg when I visited as a boy. It was one he'd taken from a nest himself and kept in a down-at-heel cabinet of curiosities whose shabby collection included a tortoise's shell with dried shreds of flesh still attached inside it, a chipped flint arrowhead, a fox's skull missing one incisor, and a fist-sized rock empurpled with a crusting of amethyst crystals.

I don't know where the vulture's egg—a griffon vulture's—was laid, only where I found it when I was twelve. Improbably, it turned up for sale in Lisburn, my County Antrim hometown, only a few miles from Belfast. Griffon vultures—also known as Eurasian griffons—have a wide range that takes in southern Europe, North Africa, and parts of Asia. So the egg might have been laid in Spain, Morocco, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Kazakhstan, India, or even Tibet.

Whoever took the egg must have been determined. Griffon vultures are large enough to be intimidating. They have a wingspan of between seven-and-a-half and nine feet, their bodies are three to four feet long, and they weigh up to twenty-five pounds. With a hooked beak designed for tearing carrion and a bald-looking head and neck, the better for reaching into carcasses without getting covered in blood and entrails, they look far from approachable. They nest in colonies, usually on cliff ledges, and a pair will defend their precariously sited nest against intruders.

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If you want to collect birds' eggs, you have to learn how to "blow" them. It's a simple enough process involving the making of small holes at each end of the egg. Then, as the name suggests, you apply your lips to one hole and blow—not too hard, not too gently—so evacuating the perishable contents through the hole at the other end. The holes my great-uncle made at each end of the swan's egg were irregular. They looked as though he might have used a penknife, or perhaps punched them with a nail. However he did it, the impact caused deltas of tiny cracks to flower around each uneven puncture, no doubt weakening the shell. Beside the carefully drilled holes in the griffon vulture's egg, my great-uncle's jagged efforts look inept—the botching of an amateur.

Whether the vulture egg was taken from the nest by the person who so expertly blew it, or acquired by them directly from the nest robber, or via a middleman or chain of intermediaries, I've no way of knowing. But the drilled holes with their perfect symmetry and the absence of any fracture damage, together with the way "griffon vulture" has been printed on the shell, suggests the professionalism of a dedicated egg collector.

I found the griffon vulture's egg for sale, along with scores of other birds' eggs, in a shop that styled itself "antiques and curios" but whose stock suggested

"junk." I was twelve years old and a recently reformed egg collector. The shop's eggs might have represented what remained of the original collection the vulture's egg belonged to. Or it could have been that the eggs displayed in the window came from several different collections, a hotchpotch gathered from a range of different sources that ended up in this particular assemblage. Whatever its provenance, the collection the vulture's egg was part of was, when I encountered it, fast disappearing; it was being sold off piecemeal, egg by egg.

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I was pleased to buy the griffon vulture's egg together with a few less exotic specimens. They were welcome additions to my own small egg collection, at that point newly stalled. I'd just come to the realization that I no longer felt comfortable about taking eggs from nests. In those days that was something routinely done by friends and condoned by adults—so long as we obeyed the rules: only one egg to be taken from a clutch, and care to be exercised so as not to scare the adult birds and risk them deserting the nest. But what once seemed acceptable had started to feel wrong. The aesthetic appeal of eggs remained a potent lure, but a growing awareness of the life that was quickening inside them made blowing seem too much like murder. I'd had the unpleasantly awakening experience of trying to blow an egg that contained a well-developed embryo. When the egg smashed with my repeated efforts to evacuate its contents, it became clear that the on-the-point-of-hatching chick had been harpooned by the needle that I'd used to hole the shell. Buying eggs seemed like a guiltless way of augmenting my collection—acquiring new specimens without getting blood on my hands.

The griffon vulture's egg was the second largest in the collection. It and all the others were dwarfed by an ostrich egg. This was the centerpiece of the shop's display and priced accordingly. It was well beyond what my pocket money could run to. On several of the larger eggs, the species' name was written on the shell. The smaller eggs had tiny numbered labels affixed to them. The corresponding names were given on a typewritten list displayed beside the eggs. The eggs represented a mix of British and foreign species. All the ones I recognized were correctly named, so I'd no reason to doubt that the vulture's egg was anything other than what the writing on it said. Subsequent checking against pictures

and descriptions confirmed its identity.

The eggs weren't priced according to any ornithological scale of value. Instead, the shop's proprietor, with a canny eye for what appealed, made the most attractive-looking and the largest eggs the most expensive, with lower prices for the plainer, smaller specimens. If I could have afforded to, I'd have bought them all. The eggs held the appeal of jewels and seeing them displayed in the shop window, laid out en masse on a large china platter, was like finding a treasure trove. It acted as a magnet for a crowd of boys. We stood at the window after school and on Saturday mornings, our egg-lust holding us transfixed by this unexpected, but steadily depleting, bounty. Like me, the others were in part just held in thrall by the raw appeal of what they saw. But they were also calculating what they could afford, matching their modest finances against the prices given on a sheet of paper taped to the inside of the window, and weighing up the pros and cons of any swaps that were proposed.

Buying the eggs singly, or a couple at a time, had a curious feel to it. Yes, there was satisfaction at acquiring what would otherwise have been unobtainable—the collector's delight at adding new specimens to his hoard. There was an element of competitiveness, too—pleasure in securing eggs that others wanted, and disappointment when they beat me to a prize. But there was also a kind of furtiveness and guilt, a sense that this was something illicit, forbidden. Somewhere in my mind I guess I knew that I was engaged in nest-robbing by proxy. Each transaction had the same soiled feel as those occasions when we bought cigarettes in ones and twos from the dingy newsagent's stall in the town's train station.

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The fact that I still have the egg, intact, complete, pretty much as I bought it all those years ago, no doubt helps to maintain the luster of my memories. Each time my eye falls on it, or whenever I pick it up, it gives a tangible prompt, recalling the circumstances in which it came into my life. But even if it had been smashed and the fragments thrown away—like the swan's egg—I think this memory would still be a strong one. Even without the egg to prick remembrance with its presence, it feels as if this is something fixed immovably in mind. The picture of that ramshackle antique shop, its beacon of birds' eggs beckoning

from the window, drawing a gaggle of boys to stare as helplessly as if they'd been summoned by pheromones, glows in my mind, a little cameo scene, one of those memories that seem permanent. It's like an inner icon whose incandescence burns independently of the egg-ember I still have in hand.

The hoard of birds' eggs is of course the central feature of this icon; its devotional heart. But present in it too is an image of the shop's proprietor: an exotic-looking dark-haired man with a goatee beard, who wore a burgundy velvet jacket and bowtie and smoked thin, pungent-smelling cheroots. He mostly lounged in a battered easy chair at the back of the shop, reading a newspaper and smoking. Customers—or perhaps it was just repeat, small-spending, juvenile customers like me—were given scant attention beyond an unwelcoming scowl and surly service. On the rare occasions when I heard him speak, he did so with a strong foreign accent that I didn't recognize. He caused a certain amount of interest locally in that no one knew where he'd come from, who he was, or how he'd ended up in so unlikely a venture as opening an antique shop in our hardheaded town, where people weren't much given to spending money on things that had no practical use.

How did we know that the proprietor was Russian, and that he'd fled some persecution in his homeland? I'm not sure whether this information came from him directly, or from someone else, or if it was true. There were certainly some skeptical voices. They claimed to have heard (though the source was never specified) that he was a bankrupt divorcé from Belfast. They dismissed the accent as an affectation. Like the velvet jacket, bowtie, and cheroots, it was designed to create an aura of sophistication. Unsurprisingly, the shop failed to flourish and soon closed. By then, its birds' eggs had all been sold. No one knew what happened to its clutter of old furniture, china, paintings, and tarnished silverware, still less what befell "the Russian" as he was referred to by everyone, whether or not they believed in his foreignness.

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The griffon vulture's egg used to be no more than a touchstone of childhood, a token from my personal history that recalls some happy-enough moments from my past. But along the way, something happened to it; it changed. It's no longer just a cozy talisman of memories. Instead, it's now become supercharged

with a newfound electricity. Its voltage crackles along previously unsuspected cables to destinations that have nothing to do with childhood. I know the egg is blown, the shell contains nothing within the perfect arc of its empty enclosure. But it's as if the stale, sepulchral space inside it has somehow been ignited, fecundated, vivified with a fire of previously unnoticed connections. When I consider it now, far from appearing as a dusty remnant from a vanished time, an eggshell drilled and blown, defused, long emptied of its charge, it seems to tempt and threaten with the explosive possibility of multiple hatchings.

I'm not sure precisely when or how this happened. It's the result, I think, of a series of accretions that occurred gradually, rather than there being some single moment of dramatic transformation. And there's a strong element of accidentalness about it too—I might easily never have encountered what's acted on the egg to change it. But because of the course my life has taken since buying it—the people I've met, the books I've read, the places I've visited, the dreams I've dreamt—the mind has forged a ream of links out of the tangle of what came along, cradling the egg in a nest of new associations. It's become less a souvenir from childhood and more a kind of whirlpool that tugs the attention into its currents. Looking at it now, I'm not just taken back to the familiar ground of a Lisburn junk shop in the 1960s. I'm also drawn into far less comfortable territory. The egg hatches images that are more disturbing—more exciting—than anything simple reminiscence could summon. And the new vistas that it shows me are accompanied by something completely unexpected: the strains of flute music, haunting and insistent.

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The egg once brought back into mind a catechism of familiar things: the Russian sitting in his easy chair in that dingy Lisburn shop, smoking his strong-smelling cheroots and reluctantly getting up to serve a succession of boys drawn by the egg collection in the window. But now it summons an unsettlingly different set of pictures. I've come to see the Russian not just as the dapper cheroot-smoking figure he used to be, but also as a naked corpse abandoned on a rocky mountainside, his velvet jacket shredded to make a tatter of crude prayer flags. They're staked around him and flutter in the breeze. Vultures congregate beside his body, poised to continue the process they've obviously begun of

eviscerating and consuming the cadaver. Far from being merely macabre, an ugly snapshot of physical dissolution effected by the most unsubtle means, my vision of the Russian cascades into a torrent of images. They flow in rich profusion from his embryonic existence, his form moments after conception, through the line of ancestors who kindled it, stretching back—breeding pair by breeding pair—to the moment life began. And braided together with this ribbon of his lineage there's a parallel lifeline. His story has become fused—confused—with that of vultures. I think of the pair that laid the egg, long emptied, that once sat in the window of the Russian's shop and now sits on my bookshelf, a kind of ghost egg, a wraith of absence, the clasped grip of the shell cupped around an emptiness that's somehow become filled with imaginative substance. I picture all the antecedent birds that led to this particular egg, how—pair by pair and egg by egg—they studded time with this life-form's episodic story. Like the line traced out by the Russian's forebears, the line of vultures leads back, eventually, through a blizzard of different creatures, to the dawn of life's first light, that initial spark that lit the conflagration we're all part of.

From that moment of hard-to-imagine beginning, these two filaments of being—two among billions—reach forward, boring their passage through the eons, creating individual after individual until eventually we reach the Russian and my griffon vulture egg and the moments that they occupy. And these moments in their turn are soon left behind as the filaments of species-continuance rush on into the multiple tomorrows they would claim.

Flute music plays and the focus shifts from species history to individual history. I see the Russian moving from fertilized egg to embryo, infant, child, and adult, a tiny fraction of his existence spent as proprietor of a failing antique shop in a Northern Irish town. I see the moment of transaction when I slid the coins, still warm from my pocket, across the counter and he handed me the griffon vulture's egg. Then his life's current crackles forward into regions I can only guess at, until it reaches old age and death. I think of all the griffon vultures alive in the world today, of the corpses they feed on, of the bones now growing in living bodies that will, in time, provide the calcium for eggshells. The slow wave of time's tsunami, surging from beginning to end, is of course impossible to picture. But sometimes it can be fractionally glimpsed in the streams of individual passage that flow within it. The Russian, a griffon vulture, you, me—we all create little rivulets of presence whose glint can catch the eye

and reflect back something of the saga that contains us.

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Where did this cornucopia of images come from? How is a blown egg, emptied of its contents, able to suggest such a rich kaleidoscope of patterns? And why does the sound of spectral flute music weave through them? It's hard to provide definitive answers, but I can identify one of the sparks that helped to ignite the emptiness within the egg, transforming it from confined space filled only with childhood memories into something gravid with a far higher voltage. The spark came when I was reading Tim Birkhead's *The Most Perfect Thing*, his engaging study of the inside and outside of a bird's egg. I was struck by many of the observations he makes. For instance, talking about the appeal that eggs exert, Birkhead casts light on what so powerfully drew me and those other little boys to gaze longingly at the hoard displayed in the antique shop window:

> There is something sensual about eggs. Of course there is: they are part of sexual reproduction, but birds' eggs have an erotic aura all of their own. Perhaps their wonderful curves trigger deep-rooted visual and tactile sensations.

Certainly the griffon vulture's egg, like all the eggs on that china platter, triggered something deep-rooted, connected not just to aesthetic appreciation but to the nerves that run in those thick, hidden cables that pulse with the body's primal urges.

But what really stopped me in my tracks in Birkhead's book was something he said on page 195: "The egg of a griffon vulture weighs 250g and takes forty-nine days to hatch." It wasn't the weight that was arresting—though it's impressive for a bird's egg—but those forty-nine days between laying and hatching. That number stirred memories, forged a connection, and eventually prompted me to rule a mental line between the egg and one of the volumes on the bookshelves below where it's sitting. The line acted almost like a two-way umbilical cord, allowing ideas to flow between egg and book.

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No more than half a griffon vulture's wingspan separates the egg from my copy of the *Bardo Thodol*, more commonly referred to as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In fact, that title is of questionable accuracy. It was chosen by W. Y. Evans-Wentz, the American scholar who brought an awareness of this esoteric text's existence to the West. He was influenced in his choice by *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, but the similarities between the two works are tenuous and indirect at best. A more apt rendering of the Tibetan text's title would be something like "Liberation Through Listening Whilst in the Bardo State." The bardo state is the postmortem plane of existence in which, so Tibetan Buddhists believe, the newly dead find themselves for forty-nine days. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* describes the different stages of experience the psyche will undergo during this period, which is seen as crucially transitional between the end of this life and whatever life or state comes next. The *Bardo Thodol*, in other words, is concerned with what happens between the laying of death's egg and its hatching into our next manifestation after its forty-nine-day incubation period. The text is read to a dying person, and also recited by lamas as a kind of prayer for the departed in the immediate aftermath of their demise. The intention is to provide guidance for the deceased, whose psyche will encounter all manner of visions, alluring and terrifying, during its forty-nine-day sojourn on the bardo plane. But reading this spiritual guide is also intended to alert the grieving living to the nature of their existence and what they, too, will eventually have to face.

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For a twelve-year-old boy growing up in Ulster in 1967, a vulture's egg was something utterly exotic. Like the Russian who sold it to me, it spoke of distant horizons, as yet unexplored territories. But despite the vividness with which this alien talisman and its acquisition came to be imprinted on my memory, it was a different sort of foreign egg, a different kind of hatching, that was to have a more profound impact on my life. Only a few years after my purchase from the Russian, Buddhist teaching fell upon my adolescent Presbyterian mind with the force of revelation. No doubt its impact was strengthened by a similar aura of exoticism to that which attended the vulture's egg. My first encounter with Buddhism was mediated via a clutch of books—Paul Reps's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Edward Conze's *Buddhist Meditation*, various volumes by D. T. Suzuki,

and, of course, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It's tempting to see their laying in my mind as a kind of cuckoo-like process, with alien interlopers displacing the fledglings of my native religious heritage. But it felt more like a benign cross-fertilization—even an unexpected homecoming—than any kind of predatory colonization.

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It's a short step from The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to the practice of so-called "sky burial," a traditional means of disposing of the dead in Tibet. Corpses are left in remote designated locations in the mountains, there to be consumed by vultures. In part, this procedure is simply practical. Grave digging is problematic in a region of frozen, rocky terrain. Likewise, a scarcity of fuel makes cremation difficult. But in part it also underscores a theological point. After death, the body is regarded merely as an empty shell; its live contents have been evacuated as completely as if it was a blown bird's egg. Whatever passes on to a new rebirth (or to the liberation of enlightenment) has gone. Attachment to the husk of the remnant left behind would be utterly misguided. As Heinrich Harrer puts it in *Seven Years in Tibet*, describing a sky burial he witnessed, for Tibetans their bodies after death simply "have no significance."

The thought of a body being ripped asunder and consumed by vultures may seem horrific. But as Thom Van Dooren observes (in his book *Vulture*), "discomfort about the prospect of being abandoned to vultures after death is culturally specific." So the Parsees of India and Tibetan Buddhists are accustomed to the practice and regard it without abhorrence. For them, disposal of the dead by deliberate exposure to scavengers is something sanctioned by their religious teachings and with deep roots in their history and culture. To a contemporary Western perspective, though, such a practice would be viewed askance; it would be seen as signifying what Van Dooren calls "a kind of abandonment by the human community, a sign that the deceased is not being cared for properly." Yet such funerary practices may not be as alien to Europe as present-day revulsion would suggest. Archaeological finds in Scotland indicate that a form of sky burial was once practiced there, though via the agency of sea eagles rather than vultures.

In *Tomb of the Eagles: A Window on Stone Age Tribal Britain*, John W. Hedges

describes the discovery made in Orkney in 1958 of a chambered Neolithic cairn near the cliffs at Isbister. Bleaching and weathering of the human bones it contained suggests the dead were given sky burials, with the bodies left exposed to the elements and to scavengers before being collected for interment in the cairn. Of course, it's impossible to say with any exactitude how these ancient people treated their dead, but Hedges favors the hypothesis that "the dead were exposed on constructed platforms with excarnation being effected by decay, carrion-feeding birds, maggots, and the elements." Certainly, judging from the number of sea eagle remains found in this ossuary alongside its hoard of human bones, it seems likely that these magnificent birds fulfilled an important totemic function. Their likely role in stripping flesh from the bodies of the dead is something James Macdonald Lockhart touches on in his 2016 book *Raptor*. After examining the Tomb of the Eagles at Isbister, and the nearby museum devoted to it, Lockhart concludes:

> That the sea eagles were involved in the excarnation of the human dead is almost certain given that the bird is such a prodigious carrion feeder.

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Discovering the griffon vulture's forty-nine-day incubation period and making the link between this and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* has invested the blown egg that sits on my bookcase with a new potency. Its evacuated contents have been replaced with a fecund mix of ideas, as if a rogue quicksilver yolk of unexpected connections had been covertly injected into its emptiness. The egg has taken on a weight and gravity it did not possess before. It summons into orbit around itself a sense of time that ruptures the little scale of memory's calibration. Instead of looking back to the moment when I bought it in 1967 and forward to the present and near future, the egg seen through a lens ground by ideas about the bardo calls into view a more sweeping timescale. It makes me think of the beginning and end of an individual's life, the beginning and end of a species' lineage, the beginning and end of time itself.

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And what about the flute music, which has come to weave its mysterious trajectories of sound around all my vulture's egg imaginings? Why this particular instrument and not some other? The notes, tentative yet insistent, stem from another accidentally encountered splinter of information—a splinter that now clings to the egg as if it was a shard of iron filings drawn to a powerful magnet. Unlike the forty-nine-day incubation period, I can't recall exactly where or when I came across this musical splinter, but the facts are easily enough recounted. In 2008, what many view as the oldest musical instrument ever discovered was found by archaeologists. Their find was made at Hohle Fels, a Stone Age cave in southern Germany. The instrument was a flute. Originally thirteen inches long and less than half an inch wide, it has a v-shaped mouthpiece and five finger holes. But what stuck most in mind was the material used to make this ancient instrument—the wing bone of a griffon vulture.

Finding out about this forty-thousand-year-old vulture-bone flute means that as well as drawing into orbit around it *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, sky burial, and an expanded sense of time, the egg on my bookshelf has now acquired another satellite. This one takes the form of the shadowy figures of our ancestors putting bone flutes to their lips and blowing. And I can't help wondering as the breathy notes sound in my imagination—notes threaded with the cry of sea eagles—what our forebears heard in the music of the things around them. Could they detect themes and variations that we've grown deaf to?

Blowing eggs, blowing bone flutes. Our breath warm against these hard artefacts conjured by the intimate, unseen metabolism of vultures. Stilled breath, bodies become cadavers, their meat and matter torn asunder and devoured by Eurasian griffons, their substance built into what, years hence, others may make music from. The cycle of life and death and the faltering notes of our efforts to make sense of it. What is the true nature of our flesh and bone and heartbeat across all the centuries in which there's been a human pulse beating out the rhythm of our theme tune? Are we kindled and extinguished, built and broken purely in the realm of the bodily? Is the drama of our species performed entirely in the theatre of what's corporeal, or are there other parts to it beyond the obvious three-act storyline of birth and life and death? Might it be that we are creatures of flesh and blood and bardo? Is there in some hidden interstice of our substance the lilting refrain of a flute, its notes reaching into aspects of us words can't map? Within the emptiness of hollow bones, is there a trace of some

sound-marrow, some stratum from which breath might awaken notes that hint at something beyond the blown eggshell of the corpse?

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The vulture's egg I bought when I was twelve still sits on my bookshelves. It's like an unexploded bomb that has somehow acquired the power to detonate repeatedly. If I look at it now, I know my attention will trigger an explosion of images and ideas. If I could defuse it, cut its wires of connection, render it safe, I might be tempted—let it become again just a harmless memento of childhood, something that takes me back no further than that Lisburn junk shop and its Russian proprietor. Yet to geld it thus, even if it was possible, would be to yield to nostalgia and timidity. No matter how discordant and disturbing it may be, the music that the vulture's egg contains is more in tune with the way things are than the usual registers by which we measure them. We exist in a world whose lineaments are on a scale that dwarfs the simplicities of memory. The contour lines of the quotidian by which we navigate our days seem like a child's scribbling over altitudes and depths that mock such paltry efforts to contain them. I suspect the uncomfortable truth is that however much we might prefer our own familiar refrains, we cannot really pinpoint our location, or calibrate our journey, or see clearly where and who we are without listening to the notes that issue hauntingly from the unlikely orchestra of my griffon vulture's egg.