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about 5,800 Words

## MOONSCAPE WITH BIRDSONG

by Mark Felps

Harry Tufnel left for vacation on a Friday, and reached the Moon on a Saturday. Not really the Moon, but Craters of the Moon National Park, in Idaho. Harry was going to watch birds, although he didn't like birds very much. Since Karen's death, he did a lot of things he didn't like, because they were the right things to do. They were the things that widowers did with themselves when half of them was ripped away.

Four weeks after Karen's death, in a numb haze, Harry cleaned the house, relegating some of her items to boxes, in an attempt to hide the things that reminded him most, the things that stabbed him in the heart when he saw them.

At the same time, he put more pictures of her on the mantel, his attempt to balance the removal of Karen from his life.

Six weeks after Karen's death, Harry bought a new car. He sold Karen's little Miata, the one she'd bought when she turned forty. They'd joked that the mid-life crisis had afflicted the wrong sex in their relationship. Harry also sold his Lexus LS 430, a car he'd only owned for a year. He'd bought the sedan after a promotion at work, to celebrate their new purchasing power. It had seemed the thing to do at the time. He replaced both cars with an SUV, a Volvo XC90. It was another thing that distanced him from his old life, the one he liked.

Six months after Karen died, Harry joined a birding club on advice from one of his employees in the software development department he managed. They told him that it was common for widowers to take up new hobbies, so Harry selected one from a list he pulled off the Internet. Birding seemed like a good way to avoid people and stay alone.

There was also equipment to buy, which distracted him from daily life. Harry liked buying equipment. He'd always loved gadgets, and after a few meetings at Audubon Dallas, where he got a thousand opinions on the right gear

to buy, Harry got online and bought everything, sight unseen, from a birding website. He spent just over five thousand dollars. He bought a set of Zeiss Victory II 10x40 Binoculars and Zeiss's monopod adaptor mount for them. For a spotting scope, he decided on the Swarovski ATS80 HD Scope with a 20x-60x eyepiece, and an adaptor for the new digital camera he bought. Harry selected the Sony 717 digital camera, which worked with the adaptor, largely because it also had a Zeiss lens. Finally, Harry purchased several field guides, including the National Geographic Society Field Guide to Birds in North America, complete with BirdQuick Index Kit. He had basic hiking gear from his trips into the Ozarks with Karen.

The birding helped him. It didn't help him to find peace, but it gave him something to talk about at work other than how he was doing. It was the question that made him the most tired. "How are you coping?" they'd ask. Harry had learned early that no one was looking for the truth. Just after her death, Harry had been honest with one of his acquaintances at work and told them he felt he was suffocating all the time, that the world had spun off center and that every day felt like a waking nightmare. All that did was make them nervous and more worried, make them check on his "condition" more frequently. The birding

helped, because he could fake enthusiasm and whip out pictures of a Golden-Cheeked Warbler from a weekend trip to Austin. He learned quickly that birding wasn't interesting to anyone but birders, and it kept the nannies and mommies in the office away from him.

So now, he was diving to Idaho on a four-day vacation to visit the Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve to watch birds. Harry acknowledged that sitting in the house all day wasn't acceptable, so he'd booked the vacation and made sure everyone knew he was out there, getting on with his life. His best friend at the office, a top developer who had managed not to lose his humanity while swimming through code, pointed out that Harry's choice of vacation spots seemed a little depressing. The developer had said that Craters of the Moon was an empty and blasted landscape, nothing but dead rock. Harry stopped himself from pointing out that empty and blasted were good descriptions of how he felt every day.

Driving through Idaho, Harry kept thinking about Karen, and how she would have hated his new hobby. She had been a frenetic woman, with a need to keep moving, to always be doing something. At home, when they watched television, with Harry stretched out on his recliner sorting through code and office politics in his head, Karen

would quilt, resting a wooden hoop on her knees. Her idea of a vacation was going places and then running around trying to see everything they could see. Harry often came home from his vacations more tired than when he left, but he couldn't deny her anything. It made her happy to be on the move, and her happiness had made him happy.

Now, nothing made him happy, and after the first year, nothing made him very sad. Harry believed that his emotions had died with Karen, writhing on a hospital bed, so filled with pain that she couldn't recognize her own husband. In the end, he watched her fingers shuttling back and forth. She was quilting. Long after the cancer and the pain obliterated her memories of her husband, her hands kept quilting. Harry remembered recognizing the stitch she used, but he tried to stay away from that memory. It still had the power to upset his equilibrium and equilibrium was everything these days.

When Harry pulled into Arco, Idaho, just eighteen miles away from Craters of the Moon, he was tired and ready to collapse. The driving had taken its toll, but the real fatigue came from fighting off specters. The trip backfired on him, making him think of Karen every time he saw a roadside attraction or a crappy little truck stop. They loved road trips, and had driven through forty-eight

of the fifty states, so there were reminders everywhere he looked. Still, Harry was in town for three more days, so he pushed those feelings into the abyss and kept driving. When he pulled into the parking lot of the D-K Motel, his lodging for the weekend, he was glad to be done with the driving portion of the trip. They had never hiked in Idaho and never gone birding. Those should be safe.

The next morning, Harry woke early, gathered his gear and drove onto the moon. The closer he got to the National Monument and Preserve, the more dead things looked. Each revolution of his tires leveled the distance between Harry's inner landscape and the world around him. By the time he reached the ranger station, after passing a cinder cone that rose into the heavens higher than he could see, Harry began to understand why it was called Craters of the Moon.

He stopped in at the ranger's station, taking the opportunity to snap off a few shots of the Sunset Cone, across the road from the visitor center. The rangers were friendly, and after a few minutes of conversation, he had the necessary permits and instructions, along with advice on the best places for birding. Harry was surprised that he would be able to drive part of the way. Map in hand,

Harry climbed back into his new car and started down the road.

Driving through the landscape, Harry imagined himself on the real moon. Everywhere he looked, he saw desolation. Scrub being strangled by black lava flows, a landscape that had been burned to its core. He could see cinder cones rising in the distance, mountains of volcanic ash, devoid of life. By the time he reached the North Trail Head, Harry felt perfectly at home.

He parked his new car, gathered the shoulder bag that held his equipment, and started off along the trail. The ranger had suggested stopping at a spot between the Big Craters and the Silent Cone. The names conjured up pleasant visions for Harry. Underneath the shadow of the Silent Cone was where he belonged. Silence would be nice. For the last two years, he'd lived with a yammering in his head that wouldn't stop. It screamed and tore at him, reminding him of what he'd lost.

The fine-grained ash flow crunched underneath his boots as he made his way down the trail. After nearly thirty minutes with no noises other than the occasional birdsong and the grinding ash below his feet, Harry reached his spot. He stood and scanned the landscape. To one side the Silent Cone rose more than a mile in the air, to the

other the earth had buckled and fallen into the range known as the Big Craters, some of which were as deep as the cones were tall. Everywhere he could see was blasted from the heat of an ancient explosion, the fury of which rolled forward into the future.

He set up his spotting scope and camera attachment, tilting the LCD screen of the camera so he could view it without too much bending. He was already tired from walking, tired from living each day without her. Once the gear was set up, he sat on the ground, covering his khaki pants with fine grains of black sand, and he started crying. It all came out in a rush, salty water streaming down his contorted face. Only when he was alone, completely alone, could he release the barrier he'd thrown up there in the hospital; it was the barrier that kept him going, kept him on his feet, when all he wanted was to seek oblivion like his dead wife.

It had been cancer, first in the colon, but eventually everywhere. They thought they had beaten it, had even celebrated after surgery, when the Doctors told them it was gone. For almost two years, things went swimmingly. And then a routine check revealed dark spots in her lungs. The colon cancer had invaded her lungs and gone metastatic. Metastasis. It was a dark word and it meant death. From

there, things moved quickly. None of the treatments worked, unless the aim was to make Karen sick all of the time, to make her hate the last few months she had left. The vomiting, the diarrhea, the fainting - they turned a vital woman into a skeleton, and Harry was forced to watch. While she was still alive, strength came easily. Once she was gone, there was nothing left inside but a single echoing scream that wouldn't stop. Harry knew that if he let it out, it would consume him.

For nearly two hours, Harry cried, soaking his shirt and frightening the birds away. Tomorrow. He would come back tomorrow and try again. He'd made so much noise that there was no way he would get a good shot at any of the birds. He needed those pictures, needed them for show and tell at work, to prove that he was okay, to make everyone leave him alone. Standing next to the tripod, Harry stared at the grainy image on his LCD and thought, for the thousandth time, about suicide. How easy it would be, here in the wilderness, to arrange an accident. There were dark caves on the other side of the preserve, with names like Beauty and Dewdrop. The ranger had warned him that they could be dangerous, with steep drop-offs and no natural light. If he fell there, if he died there, would anyone

notice? Would they care? Or would they cluck to themselves and say that he had gone to join his wife?

As always, he imagined Karen, swathed in white linens and shriveled so that he could barely look at her, and the promise she had extracted. "Don't do anything silly." It wasn't much, but they understood each other. Silly was giving up. Silly was hurting himself. He'd promised her, so he pushed it all back down and started disassembling his gear. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would return and he would snap a few pictures of the Clark's Nutcracker so common in these parts. No one at work would know the difference. Then he would go home and sink into routine. Routine and denial were his two lifelines. If he could hold on long enough, he wouldn't have to break his promise.

Harry spent the night trying to sleep, trying to still his racing mind. Sleep was a phantom since she'd left his bed, a return to his pre-Karen days when four hours was a blessing. There was something about knowing you were in the right place, about knowing that your role in the world was to be curled up around the one you love, that worked like the best anti-insomnia drug on the planet. Harry had forgotten how gray the world could turn with chronic insomnia, but he adjusted to it just like he adjusted to

cooking for himself, because there was no choice. He took no pleasure from either activity, but they filled the time.

Lying in a bed that smelled of antiseptic, staring up at a strange ceiling, Harry rewrote time. Karen's cancer had never shown up, he'd never had to watch his wife die, he wasn't in a strange state taking pictures of birds to appease the people who cared about him. In the fractured insomniac logic of hypnogogic sleep, Karen and Harry sailed on the Mediterranean and drank Ouzo at a little café, in the beautiful Attic light. They ate fish and chips at a little sidewalk stand, huddled under a green umbrella, in Kilkenny. They watched as Japanese "pushers" crammed people onto the Yamanote line. In his mind, late at night, Karen was alive and their life kept going. There, in his own head, was where Harry really lived, where he could look out and see something more than death and wasting. Harry fell asleep with a smile on his face.

The next morning, Harry drove back out to the Craters of the Moon National Monument and found his spot again. The fall air was still warm, and as he crunched his way out into the sea of black sand, Harry started to wish he had left his sweater at the hotel. When he reached his spot, he painstakingly set up his gear again, pointing his spotting scope out toward Silent Cone. For almost an hour,

Harry switched between watching through the spotting scope and using his hand-held binoculars. He was beginning to think the ranger had pointed him to a bad spot, when he saw movement out on the black plain.

Harry flicked his binoculars in front of him. About forty feet ahead of his position, he saw movement. When he finally managed to frame the bird in his binoculars, he saw it was a Horned Lark, easily identifiable, even by him, by the dark tufts at the top of its head. Harry blinked, reached over and adjusted the spotting scope. The bird was nearly thirty feet in front of him, just strolling along the black sands. Harry had the scope centered and was triggering the digital camera when another bird landed next to the first.

Harry stared at the scope, dumbfounded. A Robin had dropped out of the sky, red breast puffed out, and landed next to the Horned Lark. Harry stared as the Robin looked directly at the Horned Lark and hopped a little closer. Harry had read the birding books he'd bought, mostly to fill the long hours of a night alone, and he knew how unusual it was for two birds of a different species to come together so peacefully. Both birds were in the frame now, and Harry was tripping the shutter of the camera as quickly as he could, hoping that at least one of the photos would

come out clear and sharp. He was so focused on getting his shot, he didn't see the Kestrel float down from the skies until it was almost on top of the two other birds.

The Kestrel came down like a hovercraft, gliding on the air, seeming to drop straight down, until it reached the flat black plain, where it dropped nimbly to the ground, directly between the two other birds. Harry couldn't understand what he was seeing. A Horned Lark and a Robin together he could fathom, but a Kestrel ate small birds. Both of the smaller birds should have been racing into the sky. Instead, the Robin regarded the Kestrel with a jaundiced eye, while the Horned Lark began to walk in circles around the other two.

Harry was so confused he turned to his guide, to see if he had made a mistake identifying the birds. It took him only seconds to get the book open to the page on kestrels, where he saw a picture of his bird. Through the zoomed lens, he could see the Kestrel's "killing tooth", a notch in the bird's beak used to crack the skulls of prey. He could see the dark eyes, the rusty-red feathers, and the deep black banding near the tail feathers. The image was so clear that Harry could see the Kestrel's mustache, two black marks in its plumage on either side of the beak. It

was definitely a Kestrel, and it was peacefully standing next to two much smaller birds.

Harry kept shooting, worrying that he would run out of memory, but certain that the guys at the birding club he visited every so often would be astonished by this strange and peaceful scene. The birds weren't attacking each other; they weren't running. Harry rubbed his forehead in bewilderment. They seemed to be talking to each other. The Horned Lark, not hopping like a normal bird, but striding in sweeping circles around the other two, was singing to them, his song a twinkling "tsee-ee" as he walked.

Harry decoupled the camera from the spotting scope and began walking quietly forward. The constant grind of sand against boot didn't seem to bother the feathered trio as he crept closer and closer to them. He had plenty of distance shots, and they all seemed so calm. Maybe he'd get close enough for a really tight shot, something to show the people back home. If it were good enough, they'd quit asking about his hobbies and believe the fiction of interest he'd created.

Harry didn't know much about birding, so he wasn't too surprised when he got within six feet of the birds, snapping pictures with each step he took. He was raising

his boot for another step closer when the Horned Lark spoke.

"Hey, fucktard. You gonna come a-creepin' all day, or are you gonna to make it over here at some point."

Harry, foot in the air, froze. He stared at the Lark. Its head tilted to the side, staring directly at him, the horns producing a devilish air.

"Great," the Lark said, "now you're pretending to be a statue." The Lark turned back toward the Robin and said, "What is it with the monkeys? They all think we're stupid or something."

The Robin hopped forward, coming to rest next to the Horned Lark. "Patience. It's not everyday that we speak to one of them. They respond poorly to surprises."

Harry, frozen in mid step, felt himself falling, swirling down into an abyss. Something had gone horribly wrong. Maybe the time alone, or the grief for Karen, had finally unhinged him. He could hear the chirrup of the Robin and the twinkling of the Lark under their words. They seemed to be singing still, but now the song had become words, and crazy or not, Harry could understand what they were saying. He considered running, but the image of fleeing from three birds in the middle of the day shamed him too much to move.

"Enough," roared the Kestrel, batting the ground with his wings. When he moved, the Robin leapt into the air in panic, flapped twice and then fell back to the ground. The Horned Lark seemed unperturbed.

The Robin spun on the Kestrel and said, "Calm down and quit creeping us out. We're here for a reason, but I can smell the blood of birds on your breath, Brother Kestrel, and I don't trust you."

The Kestrel puffed itself up and aimed a dark eye at the Robin. "Little Robin, I am what I am, what I was made to be. I abide by the agreement, but I am destruction on wings, and I don't have time for games with monkeys."

The Horned Lark guffawed, sounding like a set of glassware breaking, and said, "Destruction on wings? You're a damned sparrow hawk. You hunt the tiniest birds imaginable, and dream yourself an Eagle. Quit puffing yourself up, it's scaring the monkey."

Harry heard himself say, "I'm not a monkey, I'm a man."

"Just because I'm a Robin doesn't mean I'm not a bird, and just because you're a man doesn't free you from your essential monkey nature."

Harry sat down, hard. He sunk into the black sand, and tried to understand what was happening. Was it a

stroke, or had he finally plunged into insanity out of grief?

The Horned Lark strode toward him. "Calm down, Harry. You haven't gone bonkers. Just because we don't talk to your kind very often doesn't mean we can't talk. We invented songs, Harry, we've been here for a long time."

"Here," Harry said, "in the park?"

The Kestrel picked at a tuft of feathers on his chest and said, "Park? Parks are something you monkeys do. Surrounding the world in a fence doesn't change the nature of the world. This isn't a park, it's a graveyard."

The Horned Lark kicked sand back at the Kestrel, using its larkspur to toss the grains up into the bird of prey's face.

"Shush, Kestrel. We're not here to batter the poor man with diatribes about loving nature. The world, including man's part, is as it is, and no amount of jawing is going to change that. We're here to talk about death."

"Death?" Harry said, letting the word dribble from his lips.

The Robin dug in the sand with its beak, shifting the black sand. "Death? I thought we were here to talk about life?"

"Life? We're here to talk about love," the Kestrel grated out.

The Horned Lark turned, tilted his head toward the Robin and the Kestrel and said, "And what makes you two think there's a difference between life, death and love? They're woven together like a nest we all live in. Just different threads in the same cloth."

Harry started to rise, saying, "I don't know what's going on, and I don't care. Something's happened to me, an episode, a fugue, and I think I should head back to the ranger's station and have them check me out."

Harry was scrabbling away when the Horned Lark spoke. "We know about Karen, Harry. We know about death, Harry. Yesterday you came here and watered the dead ground with tears for your dead wife, and today we're here to let you know we understand."

Harry stopped, his heart swelling to the bursting point at the sound of her name. He turned, his face scarlet with anger, and said, "You know nothing about Karen! What could you possibly know about me and the pain I'm in. You're birds for fuck's sake. You eat seeds and flit around."

The Robin looked up at Harry, and Harry thought he could see sadness on the bird's face, something about the

half-shut eyes, the dipping beak. "Yes, we're birds. But even birds have wives; even birds understand the pain of losing a mate. All three of us are monogamous, not like the cocks, which hop from nest to nest, bedding any hen they can find. We work for our mates, we inspire them, and then we protect them and the chicks for life."

"But it's different!" shouted Harry.

"Is it?" the Horned Lark said. "My wife was a hen of beauty, and she cared for our chicks until they were ready to strike out on their own. When she got sick, we both thought it was just something in the water, something that would pass. But it was the pox, and I watched the growths appear around her beak, inside her mouth, on her skin, making her plumage fall out. The growths eventually made their way down into her lungs. I brought her seeds and insects, hoping the food would help her beat it. And I stood by her side when she took her shuddering last breath. Tell me again, how it's so different."

Harry sank to his knees. The bird spoke with such depth of feeling, such sorrow, that it hooked into Harry's own memories, and he could see Karen, stretched on her bed of pain, gasping for just one more breath, trying to stay alive for just one more minute. Trying to stay alive for him. Harry lowered his head and started sobbing, letting

the despair well up from the dark pit where he'd banished it years ago.

He was so lost in his own pain that he didn't notice the Kestrel until it had nipped his cheek. When he jerked back, the Kestrel was in his face, its wings extended, blotting out the sky.

"How dare you lecture us about pain. My wife was torn apart by a raccoon, in front of my eyes. By the time I got there and drove it off, sinking my talons deep in its flesh, she was already so badly injured that all I could do was circle her, crying out her name, and watching her die."

The Horned Lark wedged itself in between the two, saying, "That's enough, Kestrel, that's enough. It's hardly his fault he doesn't understand. We stopped talking to them so long ago, and they don't have songs to carry the old stories, like we do."

"My wife died, too," said the Robin, quietly. "It was a cat. We used to visit this little farmhouse in Texas. They built a house for us, and we would vacation there, safe under the roof, always plenty of seed to keep us. We didn't know about the cat until it was on us. Why would you people put up a bird house and then let an animal like that lose amongst it?"

Harry tried to look at the Robin, but couldn't meet the bird's eyes. Mixed in with the pain and grief was shame for his species.

The Robin turned, lifting up its right wing. Under the wing was a deep scar that ran the length of his body. "I tried to give her a chance to escape. I fought it, I was willing to die for her, I really was. But it was too strong, too fast, and it took her from me. There was nothing left except a few pinfeathers. At least you got to bury your wife."

The Horned Lark tapped the ground a few times and said, "Now that we've got our credentials out in the open, Harry, let's convene this flock of widowers and talk about the real issue."

"Karen is the real issue. There's no point to any of it without her."

"Point?" said the Lark. "It's hard to say whether there's a point to any of it, regardless of who's here or not. When you spend your days floating on the wind, it all starts to look pointless after awhile. We're not here to tell you the secrets of life, Harry. If we had them, we'd probably have better things to do than comfort a crying monkey."

Harry laughed through his tears. "This is supposed to be comforting? Reminding me about my wife and calling me names?"

"Do you need to be reminded about your wife, Harry?" the Robin said.

The Kestrel, calmed from its earlier rage, said, "We know as well as you, no reminders are necessary. When you lose a wing, you live the rest of your life feeling the absence of it."

"You're right. That's the problem. She's gone, but she'll never be gone. When I wake up alone in bed, she's there, if only by her absence. Every day is a march into hell, pretending that her death ended anything for me."

The Horned Lark blinked twice at Harry and said, "Now you're understanding."

Harry slammed his hand down into the jet-black sand, tossing a handful into the air, where the wind carried it away. "I don't understand anything. All I know is that I made a promise to my wife, a promise not to do anything silly, but it doesn't seem silly anymore. I just want it to all stop. I'm blasted and desiccated. There's nothing left except pain and misery, so why not end it?"

"Coward," hissed the Kestrel. "Did she roll up and give in when death came for her? Of course not. Unlike

you, she understood her role, the role of every living thing on the planet. Stay alive until you can't. It's that simple, monkey man."

Harry sat there on the sand, crying, unable to respond.

"Enough," said the Lark. "Harry, we didn't come to cause you more pain. We came to show you something. We'll show it to you, and then we'll leave. What you do after that is your business."

"This way," the Robin said, as he hopped away from Harry, farther into the vast black plain.

The Kestrel looked at him, snorted, and began hopping after the Robin, letting his wings lift him off the ground and gliding gently back to the sandy plain, like an astronaut on the moon.

The Horned Lark, inches from Harry's knee, looked up and said, "C'mon, Harry. It's not far, and it's not like you have something more interesting to do."

Harry stared at the bird, seeing his companions drift away in his peripheral vision. Finally, he lumbered to his feet, brushing the sand off his pants, and started slowly following the Robin as the Lark walked beside him.

Harry and the birds walked for nearly fifteen minutes, trudging through the black sand that seemed to go on

forever. He saw again the devastation that had been wrought on this plain, when fire and lava had killed everything, turned a beautiful landscape into the surface of the moon. He remembered, from one of the pamphlets, that the astronauts had come here to train. Of all the places of desolation on the Earth, they had come to this valley, burned away long before man knew of its existence, because it was the most dead, the most like the dead world they were going to visit.

When Harry and the Lark caught up with the other two birds, they were standing still. The Lark broke away from Harry and joined them. The three of them were surrounding a flower. It was small and yellow, and it seemed to be growing directly out of the black sand. Harry stared at it for nearly a full minute before anyone spoke.

"How did it get here?" Harry said.

The Robin leaned down, as if smelling the flower. "It's lovely, isn't it? Surrounded by death, it clings to life."

"The wind brought it here," the Horned Lark said.

"Well, that's close enough to true, anyway. The wind carried topsoil from far away, and it dropped that topsoil here. Maybe the wind brought the seed, or one of us shat

it out as we flew. Either way, the soil and the seed met, and life sprung up again."

Harry stared. This was his second day at the monument, and it was the first flower he'd seen on these dark plains of ash and burned stone. It was so out of place, a delicate yellow flower in a land of darkness.

"It will be dead soon," Harry said.

"Probably," the Kestrel replied, "but not until the world kills it. Not until an animal uproots it, or the soil stops feeding it. It won't go without a struggle,"

"And maybe," the Robin said, "just maybe, another bit of topsoil will land near it, and another flower will grow. You've been to this place, but you never really looked around you. At the edges of this scar, you'll see the green slowly creeping back in."

"But this place has been dead for thousands of years."

"No, this place has never really been dead," The Horned Lark said. "Even after fire raged out of the ground and burned everything it could find, there were plants and animals doing their best to survive."

Harry sat on the ground, studying the flower. It looked parched, like it wouldn't survive the fall, and certainly not the crushing winter that was on its way. He was tired and confused, frightened and sad. He wanted

Karen back, and he wasn't interested in a world without her.

"This is supposed to mean something to me? A flower that grows in a wasteland? I'm not a flower and I'm not a bird. I'm a man, and I can't keep living with her ghost, she wasn't my wing, she was my heart, and a man can't live without a heart."

Time stretched out like taffy as they stared at each other and no one spoke. Finally, the Horned Lark walked forward and ripped a single petal of the flower from its stem. The other birds started moving; their beaks opened, ready to rend the defenseless flower.

Harry exploded, waving his arms in every direction, pushing the birds back, away from the flower. He couldn't stand to see it die, couldn't let them kill it to make a point. The birds scattered, lifting from the ground into the air. In a flash, they were all gone but the Lark, who was circling Harry, more than twenty feet high, riding the winds around him like a carousel.

From above, Harry heard the Lark say, "Life is, Harry. That's all. So long as there's life, there's always the possibility of growth. It's the fundamental lesson of nature, Harry."

Harry watched the Lark rise in the air, gliding on the currents, until he disappeared in the blue. He started walking back to his scope. He had a jug of water, and the flower needed help to stay alive.