



# NDQ

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## Living without Birds

I moved to West Texas. Age and illness had erased two generations and left me trustee of the ranch for young cousins living elsewhere. The pickups, tractors, and barns were still rusting, rotting in the sacaton, but all those who'd worked the land were gone.

A barn swallow swirled as I opened and aired out the ranch house. Chip, I called him, acrobat of joy. He brought his woman by and shrieked sideways from the gable that he'd found the place for their nest—those days before I knew to put out mud. One evening when I left the door ajar, Chip and his girl moved into the glass fixture over my bed. I crept under the sheets and we slept together, swallows and I, until dawn when I sent them crashing into windowpanes.

In May, the rains came early and hard. Chip's girl shuddered on the phone line in a squall, feathers mussed, and stared downwind as if her man had been blown there. Then she too was gone. Hearing no songs from the porch the next morning, I checked the high grass for swallows.

Summer brought cactus wrens to the roof to peck at gnats hatched from loose shingles. Quail congregated in August to chat and chuckle. Vultures glided south before a horseback day-worker shot a cow who snapped her leg in a badger hole. And the great horned owl sang each night from the cottonwoods.

The owl would flee with my footsteps, low to the ground under cover of barn or building, as though from fear of guns, then perch on a distant fence post and watch as I climbed the ladder and walked the rim of the stock tank—the great circular rock tank filled by an electric pump that drew water from deep in the ground. For months I approached the tank by swinging wide and slow around the cottonwoods, until one night in the trees the owl held his post. He glanced down, then swiveled his head and stared into the distance, as though he'd accepted me as his subject.



With winter came a phone call from an oilman who wanted to buy the ranch. He would pay enough that my cousins—too young to know much of the past or to be fond of birds—would never want.

After a month of grappling, I gave the go-ahead.

It was January, cold, the sun so low it seemed to be slipping south. I walked through the cottonwoods, climbed the ladder and stood on the rim of the stock tank. Below me, facedown in the water, floated the great horned owl. I hooked a wire under his wing bone and fished him out, this giant winged cat with bluing eyes. The king of headquarters died of old age, plunged mid-flight. Anything but death in water pulled from an underground river.

Chip returned, but just for an afternoon, as though even he knew the story of the place was at its end.