

Rock Ptarmigan  
By Mike Freeman

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Sometimes the memories we have aren't the memories we've lived, and sometimes the scent of god lures us into solitude. Its breath, however, its terror, can drive us back into each other, where we wallow in sociability, the citadel of fellowship. Our vision of god is often blissful, meant to salve the peeled-skin horrors of the world. When we sense these horrors have come from that same vision though, we flee, abandoning the unknown universe for the refuge of kinship. I've seen this, at least obliquely, for by way of metaphor nature helps us best understand our condition, and by way of memory appropriation a group of rock ptarmigan has shown me what medicine we truly seek when we seek out one another.

It's said that religion is how we cope with solitude. I'm not sure of much, but I am sure of this. The interior life is the contemplative life, and in contemplation we build up, tear down, and constantly re-model our own private cosmos. No two are identical, and it's within solitude that each accrues its distinctive nuance. Materials, to be sure, are exterior, but the blueprint unfolds within. Take a church service. The sermon, the singing, the homily, the written word, the post-service discussion — all these enter the mind from outside with an aim to influence. They do, of course, have sway, but they don't design. Only imagination does that. Stimulated by influx, our minds harness what flows in to add to or take away from what's already there. We're in great need of comfort when conjuring the supernatural, a sense of relief from living's sharp pangs or the breathless anticipation of dying that mingle with the joy in any life. God in its many forms, settings, and paradigms has always supplied this, the promise that life and its pain mean something, that after death our soul will continue in contented fashion. The solace this provides can scarce be articulated, yet we

crave proper language, and it's in solitude where we shed self-consciousness, free to arrange our thoughts as we please. It's a retreat, however, housing consequences.

I'm fortunate. Loneliness has never bothered me, and solitude is in fact something I enjoy, even for long stretches. Everyone needs to be alone some of the time, but when you're largely unaffected by prolonged or frequent bouts of seclusion it frees up much of what you can do and where you choose to do it. In work, recreation, or leisure, if loneliness seizes you quickly you're somewhat restricted in the jobs you take, the places you live, or the hobbies you pursue. Whereas I feel lucky in this regard I'm nobody's hermit either. Stay alone with your own thoughts too long — whether reading in a city apartment or camped in a wilderness — and eventually both the universe's vastness and plausible indifference will corrupt the snuggest visions you've otherwise created. You'll scurry back to people, anyone, and if religion is how we cope with solitude, the companionship of others, even strangers, is how we cope with religion.

I've seen ptarmigan once from the ground. As part of my job I often fly in single engine planes and see flocks from that vantage. Puffy and white they soar before cliff faces and glaciers, over willow flats and outcrops, each looking like they've returned from the mountain bearing an olive sprig, Jehovah's pact. This isn't what the two looked like one summer along a river flat. Meandering amongst head-high willows I heard a bizarre cluck, chickenish, and looked up to see two salt-and-peppered birds bobbing about the grit. They didn't fly, only looking as dumb as you'd please were you searching out something to eat. After cutting several circles a piece one finally cleared the brush in an awkward burst while the other jumped on a branch, clucking away. I walked within feet. The bird — between quail and grouse-sized, an odd, scarlet tear below each eye — balanced poorly on the wispy shoot, wavering up and down. Finally it flew. Though they're frequently hunted near road systems many ptarmigan probably

live out their lives never seeing a human being, and I may have been this pair's first. Witnessing them it was hard to believe the species has made it as far as it has, but I was alien to them, an unknown. Fortunately, by way of translation, I've seen them since, having pilfered a friend's memory that has them in their native sphere, and it's through this that I now think of something else whenever I think of ptarmigan.

Memory is an organism, a living thing. Think of it that way. Plant or animal, large or small, any form will do. Like us — the living — memory is its own entity but one dependent on nourishment. Mostly our memories live off our own experience, but they're omnivorous too, opportunists, and as such have a predatory bent. Plants root into, wrap around, or otherwise take what minerals they can from competing plants, and animals of every kind ingest whatever will help them through. Memories are no different. We all know the phenomenon. Stories we've heard from others get bound up in our own recall, where they're absorbed in the general flow of personal experience. We may not have lived a specific happening of a grandparent or friend, but the image is clear enough that it functions within our reflection in the same useful way as if we did. We make it our own, and memory subsists off it just the same.

Alaska is enormous. Even the state's born-and-raised have a hard time with its size. I've lived here ten years and don't come close to comprehending it. Having spent the entire decade in Southeast Alaska, a place of forested islands and temperate wetlands, I'm a thousand miles from the racks of drying blubber, frozen tundra, and iced-up crab boats of popular imagination. When people ask me what Alaska's like I tell them I don't really know, only explaining rain forest life and the salmon economy where I live. Fortunately, for as vast as the landscape is, Alaska's human community is quite small. About seven hundred thousand live here, mostly clustered in a few large towns with the rest polka-dotted about in villages. Many people move around and travel in-state and

chances are if you meet someone new they'll know someone you know. This is also a good way to familiarize yourself with the multifarious terrain and all the life that lives there. I have a friend, Alaskan by birth, whose lived in much of the state. She lived in my town a few years before moving north again, but I still work with her occasionally. She's a hunter by nature, patient, and spends a great deal of time seeking game. Like many hunters she's also enamored with the natural world, considering seeing a rare animal or an odd event with a common one on par with making a kill, and recently she witnessed something extraordinary. Through her telling of it I see it now too.

Ptarmigan are flock birds, particularly in winter. There's two kinds, rock and willow, though beyond range and a some physical subtleties I'm not sure there's much difference. Both are mottled in summer and white in winter, feeding off the buds of various plants. They have rich red meat and she went out one day after some. Spruce and birch stands leap-frog along the tundra up north, and apparently the best way to find ptarmigan is to work the open areas around such tracts, searching out where willow tips poke through the snow. When we're told a story the narrative is the teller's, but as the words come through our ears imagination reworks the deed and the transfer is complete — the new version is ours. Walk the tundra a while, a couple hours or more. Look for where willows breach the snow, or a springlet allows a few berry sprigs. The land is undulant, and as you crest a rise you see them, as white as they are, seventy yards away budding between drifts. They don't see you, but it will take a little doing to get in shotgun range. You reckon the land then slip back behind the rise, following its contour to the right, where a few spruce will give enough cover to get up on them. The snow is light but deep and you trudge more than walk, your breath billowing before you. The treetops seem in line now with your previous calculation and you peer over the rise, seeing that the clustered spruce will, in fact, be between you and the birds.

It's a hundred yards or so but worth it — they'd have spotted you in the open. The sun doesn't last long in winter and seems to rest dully now on a distant peak. Snow crystals everywhere catch the diminished rays and reflect them feebly across the expanse. Fifty yards. Deep post holes show where a moose came through days before, and off to the right a lone raven cruises the tundra. Twenty yards from the spruce now and a few willow muscle through the snow. You see where an ermine spent some time zig-zagging among them, mousing. At the edge of the grove a trio of chickadees cavort in the limbs. Fussy, upside down, they bobble, picking clenched cones. You're inside now and go to your knees. The snow isn't as deep here and you're fearful of being detected. Holding the gun to your chest you plod forward, the roots below pressing your kneecaps. There's a gap between two limbs pinned down by the snow and you ease through it. You were right, they are in range, but it would be a long shot from here.

There might be a couple dozen of them, plump white birds with pearl black eyes nipping willow buds. They're scattered about in a rough sphere perhaps fifteen yards in diameter and have no idea you're there. You've got a decision to make. You can rise and shoot but they might fly before you're well-aimed and it's too late to chase them down. You could belly crawl to get closer but that's risky too, as they'd probably see you before you gathered for a shot. As you kneel, deciding, something happens. Previously spread out, the birds move quickly into themselves, hopping and fluttering in from their lone forays to bunch tight together, huddling. Now you see why. A falcon, a peregrine, hovers above. Where it came from you don't know but the ptarmigan certainly saw it. The raptor has them pinned now, though as pinched as the flock has become the bigger bird above must be struggling to single out just one. Seconds pass, then a half minute, and you're unsure how this will end.

The tundra is so still, the air so light, that you hear the faint breaths of the peregrine's wings, and though it's forty yards off you see clearly the reddish eye and the elaborate mask plumaging the face. Moments ago you stalked the ptarmigan yourself, but with them bundled nearly into each other's flesh now and death stock-still above the feeling has turned to pathos. One is certain to die, they just don't know which. As the falcon hovers, discerning, you watch the birds. They haven't moved since gathering, but now, so slight, each crouches inward, creating a centered mass of feather and blood, wing and entrail. It looks like common prayer. Then without a signal to you or the other predator the ptarmigan rise in unison, engulfing the falcon. They beat their wings a moment then scatter, leaving the bewildered creature without a path to follow. Far off you see the white birds re-group, then disappear over a rise. The peregrine does nothing. Knocked off balance in mid-air it could only resume its hunt along the frozen plain, empty-handed. You're empty-handed too, in a way, and turn back home, and with the sun nearly gone now you know you'll finish out the day walking beneath stars.

What do they mean, then, these living fables of ours? We attach meaning to everything. We have to. On one side of course this woman's experience taught me that ptarmigan aren't the dazed knock-about I'd thought them to be, at least when confronted with familiar dangers. They're group birds, social, and together make up a canny creature. But what else? From bar-rooms and churches to family rooms and diners we hear thousands of stories from hundreds of sources, but our imaginations only graft a smattering of these ectopic memories to our own. Furthermore, to maintain resonance our experience in nature must be anthropomorphic. It's impossible not to see the world through ourselves, and nature memories with staying power have in them a sliver of our own workings, the human condition. Mixed with personal experience, then, I have this image of rock ptarmigan, burrowed into one

another. It's through them I can see the hazard of too intense a solitude, as well as the regeneration we gain amongst ourselves.

No god is all friend, though we strive to make them so. No matter the culture, no matter the period, no matter the deity, every god has its wrath. Such fear arguably preserves order, but it does something else. It's symbolic. Humanity as a whole survives by structure, assignment, and hierarchy, and we've fixed these same conditions to our need for supernatural order. Moreover, though colored by relativity, each individual is beset with the same range, from high joy to deep terror to everything between. Most of our lives pass in the middling comfort of everyday living. Oscillation occurs, but we're generally content in the routine of what seems to be a well-ordered paradigm. The wrath of whatever providential vein we've chosen is very much a part of this, even if only the potential of wrath. Pain, death, loss, misery, and anxiety all sit within our desire for structure when explained by the duties of a god, however clear or vague your own vision of it may be. The over-riding happiness of life, or at least the potential for it, largely outstrips the down cycles, and gives most of us the sense that the universe, for all its fearsome ways, has at its core a benign inertia. Historically this is reflected in the overall tilt of goodness within most gods. The lure of this decency often summons us into ourselves, where we seek to know it further, and while such solitary treks are necessary to sharpen our own sense of the universe, they also leave us highly vulnerable.

I've no doubt those ptarmigan were simply eating willow buds. While I believe that each species is possessed of some form of consciousness and struggles as we do to make sense of it, these birds at this time were probably just relaxing, enjoying the open plain. Still, we see ourselves when we look out on the world and work up our connections from there. In the waning sun and the stilled air and the harmony of moment, then, each bird felt secure enough to wander about a bit on its own, and isn't this what we do? In the tranquility



suffusing our securest days don't we stride forth into contemplation, wishing to know this kind god better? It's a force we believe somehow settled us into a metered world, where everything — even the pain — is sensible, but this is often as far as we get, for solitude, the place we orchestrate our private religions, only allows so much. It harbors predators of its own, and within these same inquiries we eventually confront the possibilities of irrationality and annihilation. Worse, there's random suffering, where our coveted structure is maintained but marred now with the deeds of an arbitrary overseer. We look up. We're alone, and this won't do.

This is the curse of solitude, but the blessing of our fellow creatures. Out on your own you probe what you need to probe, but do it too long and the atmosphere — the universe — eventually clogs with either chaos or a capricious god, juggling blindfolded the horror with the joy. Isolation, now, is no venue. No matter your religion, orthodox or free-form, dwell within divine introspection anaerobically and sooner or later you'll sense the hush of hovering wingbeats. Disengage. Get yourself among people. For all the obvious benefits of our social nature this more subtle one may be the greatest. We need to recognize that we're not, in fact, on our own. There's something in the flow of human interaction — everywhere from a dinner table to a city sidewalk to rows of silent pews — that reconstitutes our love of pattern. Speaking isn't necessary. Just mill about a crowded park. See the faces, the bodies — hear the murmur of familiar sounds, the humming voices. You'll revive in the warmth of common blood, your fellow creatures. If this doesn't clarify your faith in unseen things it will at least stabilize your sense of what you do see. You're not alone, and other creatures, nearly identical to you, share the confusion and fear, the predators on the frontiers of thought. Stay. The relief will deepen. Eventually, like a white bird on a white plain, you'll feel you can huddle into these people whenever the terror comes. If need be you can even rise together in a rush, to re-beatify the

menacing air. This may be illusion, it may not stick, but lean on it. It only has to hold until the next time.