



A Falconer's Journal

by Mary Ellen Rooney

I can see him still. It's a Sunday in the late 1990's on mission in Kyrgyzstan. The figure on horseback descends a distant foothill in the Tien Shan Mountains. He sits his horse naturally; easily in what by now I know is a wooden saddle atop the colorful Kyrgyz-designed felt blanket. He is wearing a traditional nomad's black and white herders hat. As he nears, I note he carries something on his left arm. It is a huge bird that eventually he releases. My concentration at this instant is so complete that time stops, yet lasts forever. I will be able to call up this image indelibly clear, like a fresh etching, evermore. The moment enters my being connecting with something already there, waiting for just this time to be. In literature, these images are called eidetic. They live deep within a writer's consciousness and are what prompts the artist to tell the same story (like *The Ancient Mariner*) over and over in a thousand different ways.

It is my second assignment in this region and I've come to know the magical Tien Shan Mountains. There's something transcendental in these hills, which probably accounts for their being called "Mountains of Heaven." It's the only location in which I have been consistently able to sing harmony by ear. Over time I have become acquainted with some nomadic families currently residing here and have often been invited to spend Sunday afternoons singing with them. Such voices, such pitch, such hospitality. This place was indeed heaven for me and there are many memories to tell

of the magic I found there.

When touching the mystical, time is anything but linear and the effects of one moment may ripen and surface whenever and wherever. Thus one afternoon around Christmas 2007, during a luncheon with some non-eclectic family members, I turned to my five-year-old grandson, waiting till others were out of earshot, and said: "Derek, you know what I want to do?" He gave me his full attention. "I want to get one of those big birds on my arm and fly him."

"Grandma, that's really cool. I think you should do it," agreed my generous-hearted grandson. "Just don't tell Alphonse, your cat." Soon after our whispered conversation Derek's family departed for New Jersey. Some deep psychic gears had shifted. I had finally slipped out of my armadillo suit (imaginary protective armor for use around people who are on a dissonant wave length). Previously, armadillo suits were de rigeur for various occasions. After that declaration I donated them all to charity and embarked on becoming a licensed falconer, a dream unconsciously carried since I had first viewed that falconer in Central Asia.

This pursuit is convoluted, much like seeking an advanced degree with the added difficulty that one's teachers are so often geographically remote. The acquisition of raptor lore is limitless; husbandry, housing, hunting and field craft being merely introductory courses. One must also climb over a modern-day bureaucracy that views the falconer, practitioner of a 4000-year-old art, akin to the firearm-bearing hunter of today. As with so much bureaucracy illogic flows freely and amusingly therein. For example: since it is the bird that does the hunting, it is the bird that should be attending Hunter's Education Classes. The falconer is actually a facilitator who loves nature and this ancient sport. The 10-hour Hunter's Education course is mandatory before any hunting licenses are issued. I have the credential now and I actually enjoyed the class where I learned about methods new to me such as bow hunting. In a class of 40 licensed hunters-to-be I was the only falconer. Two other women were also there: one from the New York City Fire Department and the other an EMT practitioner.

I've required an outdoor sport for some

time. Having been born and raised next to the Atlantic Ocean created a profound ache in me for vast, virgin and unowned space. Thus imbued one is marked forever and seeks it out. I've known it on the desert, in some mountains and always on the Ocean. I chose falconry as a pathway sport because it could lead me to places that are less and less available in this crowded, noisy twenty-first century. I want a silence to hear the wind and yes, wing beats will do.

Having always existed under a flyway and hoping to remain so always, I like to be among people whose perspective is similar to my own. I find them at the United Nations...especially in the Society of Writers. Certainly those memorialized in this issue of Reflections were rare avianophiles. Sri Chinmoy drew millions and millions of bird forms in his lifetime. His followers have benefited magnificently from the air view his teachings often offered. And Hans Janitschek would certainly have urged me to sally forth and to achieve my dream. Hans lived his own life with loyalty to his soul. For him nothing was out of reach at any age and he had no taste for the conventional. No one ever succeeded in converting Hans into a prosaic bureaucrat. I hear him saying. Falconry indeed. Fly as high as you can!

MARY ELLEN ROONEY is a writer/photographer whose work has appeared in anthologies of women's writings as well as New York Times, Newsday Sunday Magazine, Print Magazine. This piece (originally written for the United Nations Society of Writers' journal "Reflections") is an excerpt from a memoir-in-progress entitled A Falconer's Journal.



2001 Photo Contest Angle Wilson

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