

Ruffled:
A Bird's-Eye View on the Human Condition.

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts
with a
Major in Art
in the
College of Graduate Studies
University of Idaho
by
Sarah Murff

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Authorization to Submit Thesis

This thesis of Sarah Murff, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a Major in Art and titled “Ruffled: A Bird’s Eye View on the Human Condition,” has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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Abstract

“Ruffled” presents a birds-eye view on the human condition presented in conversation through sensitive black and white prints, poems, and avian illustrations. The artworks are inspired by a love and obsession for birds, of which has become a metaphor for memories, growth, freedom, and trust in self. As updrafts are caught off our fellow flock members we are allowed a leisurely reprieve to drift on our memories as we navigate our own flight path through through life. Nature, always a part of my sense of wonder and my sense of self, is where I look when I am lost, I look to the extraordinary. Only a wondering fledgling so startled by my fall from the tree.

The prints of feathers cast from my muses simply and delicately show us the elegance of what it is to simply *be*. Coexisting amongst the ease of the *Signature* feather print series, is *Minuet*, a series of body prints where I have found feathers within myself. Respectively followed by *Birdbrain*, prints from my own being join with feathers at crucial junctures, creating a new entity, capable of graceful if awkward movement although caught in a moment of stillness.

The breath between, a creek, holding *Bare*, mud caught between glass, two feet, same essence.

Companioning all is a small, soft-cover book of poems and illustrations entitled *Ruffled: A Bird's-Eye View on Some Humans*, further impressing my fusion turning the avian ordinary into our human extraordinary.

“In spite of everything I shall rise again:

I will take up my pencil which I have forsaken in my great discouragement, and I will go on with my drawing.”

— Vincent Van Gogh

Acknowledgments

Everybody KETTLE!

Here's to all the birds who graciously allowed me the help of some updrafts to stay aloft during this arduous journey:

Sally, Val, Delphine, Tracey, Susan, Greg, Casey, and my sweet graceful Kula family.

I hope to have provided some wind to uplift your wings as well.
May all of your adventures be wondrous.

Dedication

Flock you guys.

For all the wild things who chose to speak.

And a most peculiar flock:

A gunslinging kingfisher and our rather sly and spotted magpie.

A clever pair of crows rapping while they're mapping.

The most formidable Bluebird Madre who tirelessly tries to keep us together and flying straight.

And the legendary bountied fowl encircled by her buzzard, valiantly helmed and circling on his thermals.

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(The Comings and Goings of a Little Bird.)

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Introduction

Ebb

Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. Birds fly. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. I've walked. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. Words are smithed. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. Flowers bloom. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. I've grown. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. Yarn is spun. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows.

You'll see how I pause. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. Everything I am is there, but I may cut and wander. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows.

All is laid bare. Between the blank pages of a hardbound leather journal where black ink flows. A swan waddles gallantly. Between the pages of hardbound journal where black ink flows.

A story unfolds easily.

Between the pages of a hardbound journal where black ink flows. The small becomes the awe. Between the pages of this leather hardbound journal where black ink flows birds explain it all. Between the pages of this leather hardbound journal where black ink flows my a goofy Newfie named Pollock inspires most all. Between the pages of this leather hardbound journal where black ink flows my flocks updrafts keep me aloft, always. Between the pages of this knowing leather hardbound journal where black ink flows, I've *learned everything*. Be-

tween the pages this knowing leather hardbound journal where black ink flows, I've learned to *savor* and to *ask* and to *breathe*. So much so I took wing.

Between the pages this knowing leather hardbound journal where black ink flows, words are stacked and are forged into existence.

They fly and they are free. Between the pages of this knowing leather hardbound journal where black ink flows time is of no matter wings can spread, to be basked in the sun lazily, languidly, even. Between the pages of this knowing leather hardbound journal where black ink flows a restlessness persists, the need to allow oneself the indulgence in the creative erosion of artistic path making. To wear a trail in the grass we walk in our every day, our marker to effortlessly coincide with our nature. That in which we *love*.

What *inspires* us.

What *becomes* us.

What *puzzles* us.

What then *better*s us.

Between the pages of this knowing worn leather hardbound journal where black ink flows don't forget to mark your path so you don't get lost in my woods. Between the pages of this knowing hardbound worn leather journal we adjust.

Molt.

Free ourselves of what we do not need. We ourselves are a natural, cycling beings on migration and ebbing in motion formulaically chaotic in pattern, truly beautiful when deliberately observed. Out of our own context we do not become ourselves. Time however finds us, as do our natural tendencies, and patiences in way of being as we wear down the heels in our shoes as we walk reinforcing patterns and habits. Through fractal bits of ourselves we become whole stitching through granite piecing together precarious rocks balanced just so, and when pressured they will become gems.

Between worn canyon walls birds catch thermals.

It is barbs keeping something as delicate as a feather together as it soars above us. Shadows striking the ground causing us to look upward for our moment at a glimpse into their world.

Fleeting.

Scaring.

Stunning.

Releasing.

Freeing.

Promising.

Between the blank pages of my favorite journal are feathers. They tell me stories and I tell them mine. There are flowers, fur, and moss caches too. Things which strike my fancy, to heal and to soothe. It is how I survive. It is how I see and observe. It is how I write. It is how I draw. It is how I found words and became a poet.

One need not be a Chamber to be Haunted,

One need not be a House.

*Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too.
They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.*

*Just as the bird sings,
Or the butterfly soars,
Because it is his natural characteristic.*

So the Artist works.

Perfect as the wing of a bird may be,

*It will never enable the bird to fly if unsupported
by the air.*

I must've been a bird in some previous time,

*I feel like I'm called to flying —
The convenience and the beauty of it.*

*Facts are,
The air of science.*

*Each day has a story that deserves to be told,
Because we are made of stories.*

*I mean,
Scientists say:
Human beings are made of atoms.*

But,

A little bird told me that we are also made of stories.

I have a bird's-eye

and

A worm's-eye view.

Simultaneously.

It is immensely helpful to understand

What is happening on the shop floor.

*What you are harnessing,
Is yarning an intimate story on a large scale.*

That feeling of soaring is,

Empowering.

Howling With Wolves and Bending The Good Spoons.

Chapter 1

*Short, light, little,
Waddling,
Quick steps from —*

Here to there.

*Bare feet,
Hopping across a cool creek bed.*

*Warm stones,
Beneath painted toes.
Hands in pockets,
Where stars are stowed.*

I must, I must collect, collect.

*Dappled sun,
Splayed across dogs' backs.
Ripples, dancing.
Rocky banks.*

I must, I must take it with me.

It's all I can do to follow along.

*Though —
It's all I can do to walk and walk.*



My name would echo off the kitchen walls and through the house from time to time when I was small. Generally just before dinner. Light softening to a worn and fading blue, mosquitoes buzzing. Someone, somewhere would be cussing our lack of a back screen door to allow for such a wonderful southern night to flow through the house. Smells of a promising meal waft their way off of a stove only adding to the heat of the evening. But it's only too welcoming after a cool shower washing away a long day of adventuring in the hot Texas sun. The tic, tic, tic, ticking of dog paws as they hopefully pant around for leavings of any kind. Their feline siblings arranged for our optimal viewing pleasure, our dinner stealthily eyed in slitted sights. No one is fooled by you puss puss as your purrs reach our ears. Throughout the years, the cast of wildlife coexisting in our little farmhouse pretty much ran the gamut. The excited chittering of birds has contrasted with the flashing of scales. Rodents of many varieties have scurried about as the notion of food comes closer accompanied with adoring eeks and squeaks. Evenings with honeysuckle and grass brought in on the wind accompanied by the whisper of a whinny or the baaing of sheep, reminders of green pastures. It is when we are surrounded by our peace, retreated into ourselves, we forget just how receptive we can be.

A knowing arises in us, in these our moments of solitude. One moment our fat cat is getting a scratch behind the left ear as he likes it. The next, the fine hairs on my neck are standing on end. A heat of terror courses through my body, causing my back to slick with sweat. Through the reverberation of my full given name echoing in my ears, I am helpless to keep my widened eyes from straying to the kitchen drawer.

She knows... And I've been so very had. Certain afternoons are reserved for magic. Those were my days for trouble. Not the big T trouble. No, more toe the line, fly under the radar, trouble. These afternoons of being left to my own devices allowed me to grow into myself.

*Raised by, not wolves.
Surrounded by, not 'stangs.
Flying with, birds and not birds.
I learned to live a feral life.
And in the process I bent all my Mother's good spoons.*



To be fair I did my best to fix them before I washed and returned them. A hammer, a pair of pliers, I was a pretty handy even as a youngster. But, scratch marks and hammer strikes are not forgiving to kitchen silverware. Spared from ballet, home from school, free to roam and run, I would pocket a lucky spoon as I ran through the house on my way out the back. Ready, and now fully equipped for an afternoon of adventuring with a faithful hound at my side down the back steps, to the great backyard, and most likely over some fences.

*Hey diddle, diddle.
The cat and the fiddle.
The cow jumped over the moon;
The little dog laughed
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*



The creek bed underfoot, our giant oak overhead, ditches teeming full of life. Old haunts, yard haunts. Digging. Collecting. Going on a great many grand adventures. Inevitably though, I'd bend the spoon. Every damned time, I would go a little too far, dig just a little too deep, or pry at something a little too hard. Try to fix something not in the mood to be fixed. But, there reflected next to blue where the birds all fly, perhaps a little inverted, maybe a little different, a lot off center, not just how I see it, but possibly how the world does, is another me.



Great Blue Heron.

Sarah Murff
10"x12"

312 East 2nd Street #2 Backyard Mud.

Known as Little Bird.

Sarah Murff
10"x12"

312 East 2nd Street #2 Backyard Mud.

The Box In The Corner We Do Not Speak About.

Chapter 2

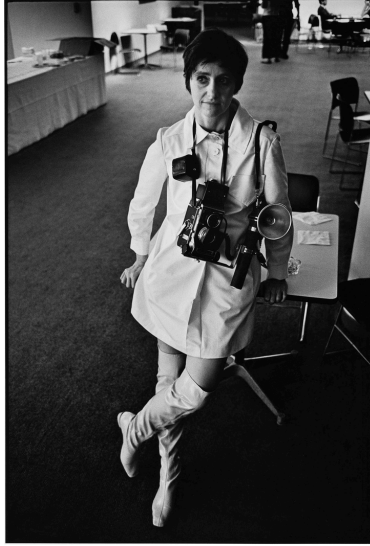
Stephen King remarks, “Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.” In the silence of our artistic exploration, the romantic notion of nonsensically playing out a whimsical daydream appears, rather than logical, meaningful conversations within ourselves and above all pure observations of the world around us. Minute particulars are often times waved away as we trudge on in our inconceivably personable steps, until there is no choice but to fly. As grueling and brutal as it can be to look so far inward, an unfathomable beauty is found.

A peace is found.

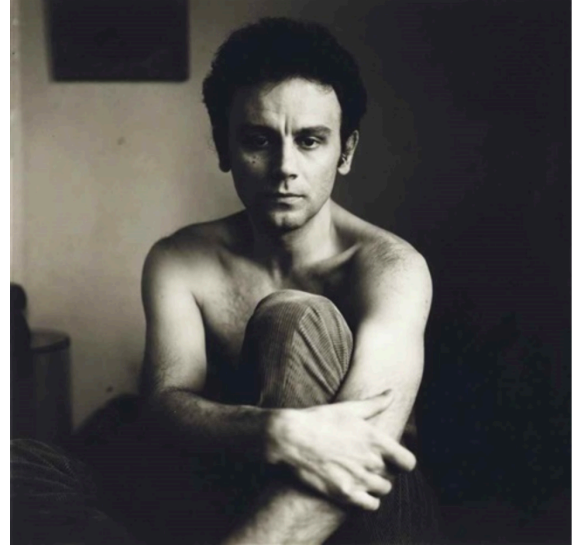
An unwavering confidence to walk so fully into ones skin with complete honesty with the world is found. So we build ourselves stick by stick and twig by twig. We surround ourselves with downey feathers and found comforts. Then, balanced ever so delicately on the strength from the memory of each migrant flight into our world for these pieces which would become us. As Emily Dickenson wrote:

*One need not be a Chamber to be Haunted,
One need not be a House;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material Place.*





Diane Arbus at the *New Documents Show*
at the Museum of Modern Art in 1967



Diane Arbus *Lucas Sumaras*
N.Y.C., 1996, Gelatin Silver Print.

With each vagrant step out into the vastness, we create new caverns for ourselves to go spelunking in and discover new secrets about the things we do and why we do them. Even our trivial matters are not so trivial if we look right through them. In the life of an artist, it becomes an impossible feat to make a piece of art which is not a self portrait. Our knowledge, our experiences, *ourselves* are woven into what it is we create as we come face to face with our demons, our monsters, our darkness. But, through this we too, come face to face with the best parts of us. Diane Arbus wrote, "Photography was a license to go wherever I wanted and to do what I wanted to do." Our art frees us. Shattering our glass walls along the way. She continues, "The camera is a kind of passport that annihilates boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility towards people being photographed." Much like her camera, my fountain pen, ink, and paper give me the privilege to go places I would not get to otherwise. There are places to be traversed in the world

where only the flow of ink can meditatively take you. No one else will ever be able to accompany you there.

However, the sentiment and meaning that can flow behind the freedom of the ebony ink in a pen, is something to be reckoned with. The entire self must be put into a piece. If the self is not considered to be in the artists' work, perhaps they have not surrendered to the art piece until the struggle of radical self recognition can be seen. It is when this struggle is embraced perspectives begin to alter. Canvas is stripped from the wall and thrown on the ground only to be danced upon in moments of desperate inspiration as Jackson Pollock did when he radically changed the game of painting, by letting the paint paint itself after lending his kinetic body language and a formal artist's eye. In moments of instinct, a raw intuitive version of ourselves, we see our vision of the world as we perceive it.

*In moments of silence.
In moments of solitude.*

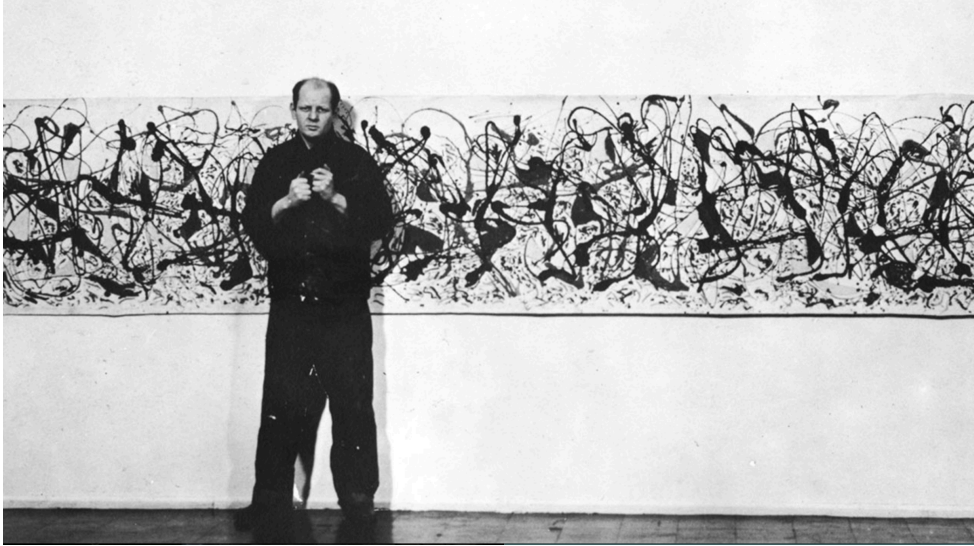
*A whale of a tale,
Splattered with paint.
Meaner than sin and missing a fin.*

*Is where I'll begin,
Through torrents and torrents of unrelenting rain.*

*We might just go,
Down, down, down,
to Davy Jone's Locker.*

*On these soaked feathers,
Just like being flushed,
Down, down, down,
The toilet bowl.*





Jackson Pollock.
*Black and White
Painting III*, 1951

Armed with our cameras, pens, pencils, paints, plasters, metals, clays, and objects we set out to write our visual sentences in form. Drawn in primal moments in awe of our world, we as artists simply *do*.

We act.

We become.

These fleeting moments of inspiration are observed and savored again and again. As Susan Sontag remarked, “[Photographs] may be more memorable than moving images, because they are neat slices of time, not a flow.” Like a feather dropped from a passing bird, these memories serve to remind as signatures for us to gaze upon like gifts pressed into us so viscerally through delicate images staying with us emotionally more heavily than objects, feelings, and ideas. We are as makers fated to dwell on paths, moments, and memories as ourselves become interwoven into these pieces of us we are only to molt and drop in time.

So we go deeper.

Plucking.

Pulling at the downey feathers peeking out from our soft pillows under our heads as we try to sleep, unaware we are slowly taking our own comfort away.



Cowlick.
18"x22"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.



Pollock.
18"x22"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.



Pickle.
18"x22"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.



Minuet.
18"x22"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.



Fence.
18"x22"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.



Spark.
18"x22"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.

*Free, Free, Free, But How The Hell Do I Stay Up Here?!
The Way Things Go And The Way Things Do Not.*

Chapter 3

After years and years of picking at a lock it gives.



The door falls open.

No floor beneath.

Just wind.

But suddenly, it is just enough.

Buoyant and stable.

The unexpectedness of gravity

Snaps open a pair of wings.

Waiting, willing, and very able.

Aloft.

*Once the initial panic subsides,
Time slows, a primal need is sated.*

A rhythm found.

Like falling asleep.

We have in us our own sense of flight. When the questions slowly stop, our minds quiet, and we allow ourselves to be. A delicate balance between a state of grace and strength before opening our eyes once more to realize the wonderful realizations we fleetingly had about ourselves were but a dream. Ink is scratched across the page, dancing until a moment is found. Each move, a shift in the leaves, a breaking of twigs, a scrape in the mud, a change in the wind.

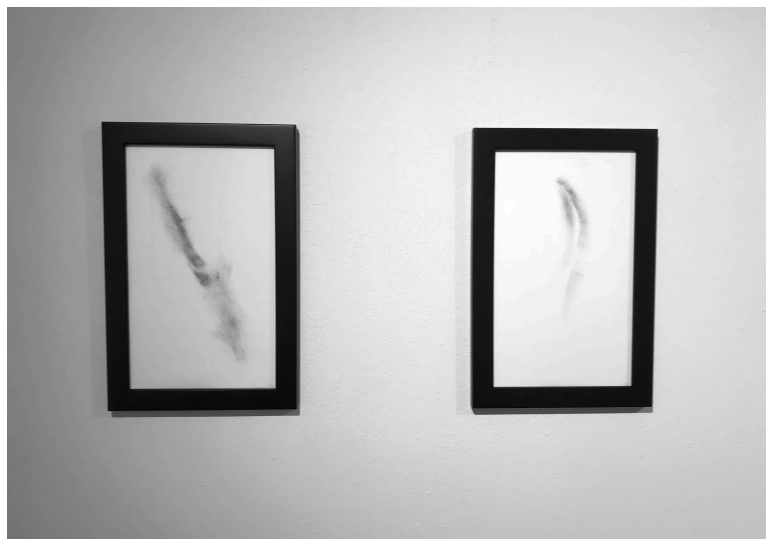
A trust is formed.

To trust is the struggle.

To trust in the struggle is the to trust yourself and you are your truth.

Andy Goldsworthy noted, “We often forget that we are nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So when we say that we have lost our connection to nature, we’ve lost our connection to ourselves.” Never would I have thought it would be so hard to trust myself. I find my trust through nature, through birds, through flight, all the way to my very feather tips.

Minuet: A Body Feather Print Series.



Sway.
10 1/2"x16"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.

Bend.
10 1/2"x16"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.



Balance.
9"x28 1/2"
312 East 2nd Street #2 Backyard Mud on
BFK Reeves.



Flock you.
5 1/2"x7 1/2"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.

Mine.
5 1/2"x7 1/2"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.

Birdbrain: A Balancing Act and Print Series



Ebb.
15"x21"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.

And Flow.
15"x21"
Black ink on BFK Reeves.

The F'n F Word.

Chapter 4

When I am lost, I look to my extraordinary. If observed with intention and an artistic obsession, anything becomes extraordinary. As Mary Oliver wrote,

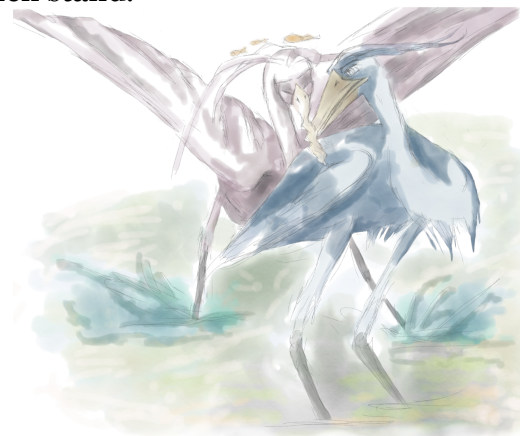
*You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves,
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine...*

Nature has always been a part of my sense of wonder and a part of my sense of self. Even though I was raised by some not wolves from our houses and backyards I understand the truest of loyalties and the most quiet, devoted of lives. I ran with the horses of the ranches and pasturelands I know the unbridled freedom they forgo in whispered caveats with us for trust, patience, and honesty. It has been the feather heads who seem to soar above all others. Gracefully demure and raw in their strength they elegantly add a decadence to the sky as they break these laws in which they are not bound. There is a tremendous grounding in the freedom to be found in taking wing as you wade into the water. Only to fall, then stand.

Fall then stand.

Fall then stand.

Fall then stand.



Then fall again and hang around on your ass for a while to regroup. It is in these moments of stillness, pausing, when something catches my eye. Then I'm off walking in a moment of clarity again. A wondering fledging so startled by the fall from a tree. There is an evolution of perspective gained from the freedom of movement and aesthetic. Soft and downey thoughts falling from the dark become light, airy illustrations of what drive us ever upward catching fleeting thoughts and words as they go absorbing small hints of us. As we catch updrafts off our fellow flock members we are allowed a leisurely reprieve to drift on our own memories as we navigate our own flight path. From the comfort of our flock we gain insight into ourselves and hone our skill set. Even from the comfort of the discomfort.

As artists we are fortunate in our lives to be comfortably nestled amongst a full arsenal of coping mechanisms, allowing us to clean our mind and space of the torturous clutter and fulfill it with those things which root us to our being.

The rest will fall away.

Birds encompass a torrential downpour of visceral epiphanies, comfort, memories, and visual decadence throughout my day to day life. So varied in their behaviors, facets, voices, hues and struggles in life one would be hard pressed not to cozy up to some variation of some sort after a time of savory observation.

Then we go on to find in ourselves this part of ourselves.

We cultivate it.

Through this nurturing of ourselves we accept it, unknowingly.

We all stand on the edge of our nest.

And jump.

Again and again.

Into the world.

To bring back —

Our twigs,

Sticks,

Branches,

Rocks,

Cloth,

Baggage.

*Spare yourself
The agony.*

And walk first.



After thunderstorms,

*Grounds alive.
Blinking.
Singing.*

Kept close at heart,

*Skyward.
Falling.
Falling.
Caught.
Given.*

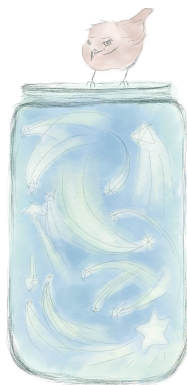
Late night,

*On the wind.
Dancing.
Swept away.*

*Behind eyelids,
Shining.*

*Because you are,
Because I am.*

The stuff of stars.



With fleeting impressions short as they are.

We get only the passing shadow as a Red-Tail soars above us. On a lucky day we may get to observe the severe delicacy of a Mallards Feather as we wear down the tread on our favorite pair of boots.

We must pause, though.

Let the mud soak through our barbed feathers.

Wade in.

In these, our moments of silence we find our own feathers.

Bent.

Broken.

A little twisted.

Curated in their own peculiar manner, curiously freeing, and stronger for relying on a self sustained structured growth.

Also,

they are so well worn into our ways they could belong to no one else.

Our turkey feathers, cowlicks, pressed into us from sleeping on one side of the pillow for our restless nights. We wear into our ways. Creating patterns.

In our speech.

In our sight.

Empowering the trust of our *eye* is the very essence of drawing.

Gestural dancing is a way of life for the eyes, tinkerer hands need make connections, together we draw on comforts and new knowledge to be. Minuets of marks create a

murmuration feathered moments, fractured ideas, raw instincts, and fleeting images splattered in ink opening to a multitude of pathways.

A step is taken.

Wings snap open.

The ground gives way.

And I am

Rid

Of it.

I have moved.

Because there is no other way of being.

Than that of a bird —

Find strength in delicacy.

Love a lifetime and over oceans,

Albatross.





Ruffled: A Bird's-Eye View On Some Humans.

Soft cover poetry book printed with blurb, words and pictures
by: Sarah Murff.

And Flow.

*Paths are broken,
But they come back.*

*You're there with me,
Then you're not.*

*I feel you behind me,
Then out front.*

*Sometimes thorns grab me,
Then you protect me.*

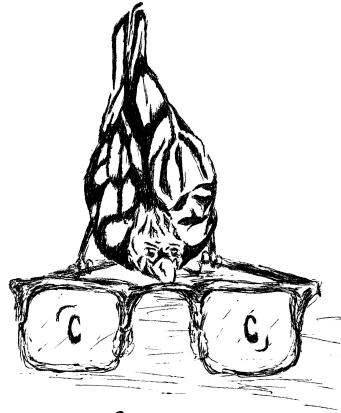
*When I trip you catch me,
With that laugh.*

*When you're not with me,
I'm not worried,
It's just a chat.*

*We'll walk abreast,
And I'll get all the news.*

Oh, I do love game trails.





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The wondrous works from the minds of:

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 Roald Dahl
 Edgar Degas
 Clint Eastwood
 Richard Eyre
 Eduardo Galeano
 Alberto Giacometti
 Alma Gluck
 Rachel Keller
 Stephen King
 A.A. Milne
 Claude Monet
 Carl Sagan
 Shel Silverstein
 Ivan Pavlov
 Pablo Picasso
 Bill Watterson
 E. O. Wilson
 Vincent van Gogh
 Yevgeny Yevtushenko



Image List:*(in order of appearance)**Puddle Jumper.*

Ink on BFK Reeves

My Magpie.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Eastern 'Blue' Bird.

Ink on BFK Reeves

Bare: A Mud Painting Series.

Great Blue Heron.

312 East 2nd Street #2 Backyard Mud

Known as Little Bird.

312 East 2nd Street #2 Backyard Mud

Ballet Shoes.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

*Diane Arbus*At the New Documents Show,
Museum of Modern Art in 1967*Lucas Sumaras*

Dian Arbus

N.Y.C,1996, Gelatin Silver Print

Boots.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Black and White Painting III

Jackson Pollock, 1951

Signature Series: A Feather Print Series.

Pickle.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Cowlick.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Minuet.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Dos.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Pollock.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Spark.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Fence.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Kingfisher Gunslinger.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Minuet: A Body Feather Print Series.

Sway.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Bend.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Balance.

312 East 2nd Street #2 Backyard Mud

Flock you.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Mine.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Birdbrain: A Balancing Act and Print Series.

Ebb.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

And Flow.

Black ink on BFK Reeves

Baby Duck Syndrome.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Walk.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Jar of Stars.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Trumpet.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Ruffed: A Bird's-Eye View on Some Humans.
A soft cover poetry book

Goose Fart.

Ink on BFK Reeves

Peep.

Ink on paper

BirdBrain.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch

Duck Butts.

Ink on paper

Sunday Cuppa.

iPad, Adobe Photoshop Sketch



“I figure if a girl wants to be a legend,
she should go ahead and be one.”

-Calamity Jane

End. 