



SOAR

**A Short Story by
Meredith Anthony**

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She fairly flew through the darkness, down the steep hill to the lake. Her bare feet skimmed over rocks and roots, sliding down loose gravel, slipping over tufts of moss and lichen. Her skimpy dress left her muscular arms bare and rode up her long, powerful legs. She reached the shore and raced out the long wooden dock, fumbling open the small, white Styrofoam box as she ran. Tipping her head back, she gave a full-throated scream that reverberated off the dark water, the sound carrying for miles, although there was no one to hear her.

The speed of her flight, her racing thoughts, the furious beating of her heart, her anger and motion all kept her from noticing the disturbance high above her—the swooping flight path down from the surrounding mountains similar to her own swift motion, the beating of huge wings displacing air in a powerful dive.

The enormous bird screamed, too. Her own scream and his mingling and amplifying and echoing around the bowl of the lake. As she reached the end of the long dock, she reached into the container for the fish. Still screaming, she flung the fish in a powerful, arching path high, high into the moonlight where, at the top of its silvery trajectory, the magnificent bird swooped and met it, snapping it in two as his huge wings braked his flight. He snapped again, and once more, snatching both halves out of the night sky.

The eagle hovered there, for a moment, silent now, still in mid-air, swiveling his majestic head. His large golden eye met her eyes, which were wet with tears, as she stood there, silent now, too, arms still out-flung. The eagle's white throat rippled as he swallowed his meal, her meal, and he dipped his head

as if in acknowledgement. Then he beat once with his great wings and rose away toward the mountain.

An eagle? She had never seen one so close. In her astonishment, she almost forgot her rage. She watched the magnificent bird until he was lost to sight, leaving her standing there, calm, absently licking her fingers, tasting the fish. She hoped he didn't mind the butter it was sautéed in, surely a change in his diet, not to mention that the fish was cooked. She shook her head, getting rid of the ridiculous thoughts, her heart rate slowing back to normal, her tears dry. She turned and walked back to shore and started up the steep hill to her cabin, her home. She paused once, lifting her head as a faint sound reached her, a last parting scream, a wild sound, far up the mountain. She smiled fleetingly.

At her porch, she deposited the Styrofoam container in the garbage can and retrieved her strappy sandals from where she'd flung them. She remembered how, as she stumbled out of the man's car in the parking lot behind the roadhouse, he had held out the Styrofoam container of food and smiled, his voice betraying a sneer, "Don't forget your dinner, honey. You earned it." He had thrust the small, white box into her hands.

At the memory, her tears started again, hot and angry. She was furious with herself, most of all. She had grown up on this lake, in these mountains, powerful and proud, had gone away to school, eager to leave, sure she wanted to make a new home for herself far away. She was happy for a while, but she was drawn back to these hills, this lake, this wild land. When her parents had died she had returned to bury them and she had never left. She took up her

father's business as a guide for summer season tourists and fishermen on the lake and in the trout streams. Her income was modest, her needs few. Now, in late summer, she had begun to dig in for the winter, her days spent cutting wood, harvesting the last root vegetables in the small garden plot eked out of the rocky earth. She caught fish for her protein, baked bread occasionally, just to prove she could.

Satisfied most of the time with solitude and no social life, she responded infrequently to a vague impulse coupled with a diffuse hormonal pull. When it came she drove her jeep to the roadhouse just outside the town to hustle enough pool to pay for dinner, a skill she'd perfected at college. Then she bedded the best-looking of the strangers at the bar, a night of muscular, sweaty pleasure that she warned them would never be repeated. She made the rules. Always. Until tonight.

Tonight, she had been badly mistaken in her choice of partners. The slow-talking, raffish, bad boy who prompted the familiar stirring within her had proved unexpectedly strong and fast. When she realized her mistake in his car and changed her mind, he refused to stop, forcing himself on her, slapping her once, hard enough to make her head swim. He held her by the neck with one hand, closing off her windpipe just enough to ensure her compliance, a skill he had certainly learned in the military. He tore off her underwear, roughly parted her legs, penetrating her quickly and painfully, taking his pleasure. He never let go of her neck until he reached across her to open the door and push her out. She stumbled, pulling her dress down to cover herself, and when he thrust the

container into her hand, she had grabbed it reflexively. He slammed the door and drove off.

As she drove herself home, fast, her vision blurred with angry tears that would not stop coming. She directed her fury first at him, envisioning his slow, painful death that she would enjoy at close range. Soon though, she blamed herself, her bad judgment, her lack of skills to defend herself against his strength. She understood suddenly, why women victims always blamed themselves. Her lip curled in a sneer that matched his own. Victim. She hated that word. Never, she thought savagely, never would she have thought she'd apply it to herself.

Now, standing on her cabin steps, shivering in the night air, she interrupted her musings. She looked up to the mountain where the eagle made his home, and wondered. She knew eagles lived in the mountains, had even seen them soaring far overhead. She remembered her father, who claimed to be a full-blooded Arapaho, pointing to a speck in the sky, strangely proud of their proximity to eagles and all the wild creatures. Her mother, part Cree, had told her once that every Indian had a totem animal and that she would find hers when she needed it most. Her animal. Her totem. And her Indian name. Grown up, she scoffed at the old stories, the old ways.

She had never given the eagles a thought, had certainly never seen one up close. To her knowledge, they didn't even hunt at night. And yet, tonight, of all nights, he had swept in, off the mountain, soaring, diving, hovering, regarding her with his golden eye, sharing her food, sharing something else.

She pondered. What was it that had passed between them? A kind of communing. She shrugged off the thought. She went down the steps again and retrieved the Styrofoam container. She took it into the cabin. It might come in handy.

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Over the next few days, she left the cabin only to fish. Early each morning she paddled her favorite canvas-covered canoe silently around the lake shore, stopping at time-tested spots where the early sun warmed the water and the gnats and dragon flies skittered over the surface. At dusk each day she returned silently to the shore and unhooked the stringer from the seat she had looped it around. Each of the stringer's dozen steel hooks had a live bass, mostly crappies, stripers, or small mouths, the hook going in through the gill and up and out the mouth. She tossed the stringer on the grass, the fish flapping madly. She grabbed the canoe, hauling it completely out of the water in case a sudden storm raised the level of the lake overnight.

She left her rod and the paddle in the boat, picked up the stringer and walked the length of the dock, dipping the stringer in the water, looping it securely over one of the uprights at the dock's edge. The fish resumed swimming. Now and then one of them broke the surface in an effort to twist off the stringer.

As the twilight deepened around her, she quickly shucked out of her jeans or shorts, her underwear and tee shirt. When she was naked, she dove off the dock into the clear, cold lake.

Like her parents, she rebuilt the dock each spring in the center of a natural gravel bar that kept the water mud-free, with no seaweed or leeches. Small sunfish scattered as she cut cleanly into the water and swam a measured crawl a few yards out from the dock's end. The gravel bar ensured that the depth increased gradually and steadily from the shore, and the dock was built so that an adult could dive comfortably off its end into deep water.

She swam a few loops, her body acclimatizing gradually to the cold water. The lake was spring-fed and never really warmed up, even in mid-summer. Back at the dock, she used her arms to hoist herself up onto the wood. She got to her feet and twisted her hair to wring out most of the water. She stood, tall, majestic, nude, and surveyed the lake, as empty of human life as ever.

Going to the upright, she pulled up the stringer and, holding the first squirming bass firmly, unhooked its mouth, dropping the stringer of remaining fish back into the water. Standing, she let out a full-throated cry, as loud as she could manage, and winding back her muscular arm, pitched the fish like a baseball up, up in an arcing trajectory where it seemed to hover for a moment. Glistening, its silver sides caught the last rays of the setting sun. Then it fell, down, down until it entered the lake with a small splash. She knew the fish would resume swimming, baffled perhaps at its strange captivity, but content to take up its routine again.

She lay down on her back on the dock, looking straight up at the darkening sky above the looming mountain. After a half hour, she retrieved another fish and repeated her actions. The first few nights, she tried to make it

into a kind of Arapaho exercise. The third night, she got the giggles. She thought of the phrase “eagle eye.” She peered into the darkness, chuckling. Suddenly the term “spread eagle” popped into her mind and she let out an enormous laugh. She tried to regain her composure. But the term “bird brain” occurred to her and she whooped, thrashing around on the dark dock. She got a painful splinter in her butt which only made her laugh harder.

She almost missed the rush of wings and the swoop as the air displaced ahead of his headlong flight. She got quietly to her feet and padded to the stringer, pulling it up and unhooking a flapping crappie, pitching it upward like a high fly ball. It was still climbing as she heard the snap.

She lay down again quickly, her heart pounding, as he hovered nearby. He gulped the entire fish, his white throat convulsing with the effort, his heart beating beneath his feathered chest. Silently, he glided over and, with a minimal twitch of the long magnificent wings, perched on the upright. Slowly his wings folded and his head cocked to allow one large golden eye to regard her.

Although his vision was many times keener than her own, and had two fields of focus—front and sideways—to her one, he still had to angle his head to see her as she lay on her back. Still, it gave him a questioning air and she almost spoke aloud. Instead, she spread her arms along the wood and concentrated on slowing her breathing, watching him closely.

He opened his enormous beak, the edges lethally sharp, almost as if to speak. She waited, breathless, as he coughed and sent a pellet flying to the

dock, landing near her outstretched hand. She turned her head slowly to see what it was, this gift he had brought her.

She stifled a laugh as she saw a wet, tight mass. She could recognize bits of bone, hair, fish scales. She stretched out her fingers to touch it, then closed her fist around the disgusting object. She had the insane desire to speak, to say, "You shouldn't have." She smiled and looked up at him.

With a quick movement he hopped down to the surface of the dock beside her, his head dipping close to her outstretched hand, smelling the odor of the fish she had just flung to him. With a measured slowness, as if trying not to startle her, he walked closer to where she lay. With delicate precision, he raised one taloned foot and placed it on her breast.

She held her breath, gasping only a little at the feel of the fleshy, tactile warmth of his foot, the claws piercing the skin of her chest as he shifted his weight, never breaking eye contact. With enormous care, he balanced on her and drew up his other foot, placing it firmly on her other breast, the talons from his three forward facing toes drawing blood, his backward facing hallux securing his stance, its talon also digging into her flesh. The sensation of his feet on her breasts, like calloused hands, almost undid her.

She knew suddenly, instinctively, that he had a full range of sensation and her nipples stiffened in response. She stifled a soft moan. His head dipped down again and his beak touched her forehead, tracing a gentle line down her nose and over her lips and chin. Again, she was aware of how sensitive this hard appendage was and with what exquisite control he felt and tasted her. When he

raised his head, his balance shifted backward slightly and his tail feathers brushed her lower abdomen where her thighs met.

She shuddered slightly at his touch, her back arching a little to raise her hips to his tail. He, too, arched his chest and his feathers swept her again, intimately. The first spasm rocked her, so intense was the sensation. His golden eyes blinked once, slowly, a membrane sweeping over his enormous eyes.

She gasped a little and her eyes closed, in sleep or loss of consciousness, for a moment, an hour, she wasn't sure. Suddenly he was gone, a powerful bunching of thigh muscles, a sibilant sound of wings extending, the claws retracted from her flesh, the pressure off her breasts. She sat up, extending an arm to the sky, moaning "no," wanting him to stay, wanting him to take her with him.

She heard an answering cry as he looped over the lake once and then away up the mountain in an elegant, gliding flight. She opened her fist and looked at the tight mass of hair and bone he'd given her, things he couldn't digest, stored up in his craw and expelled. Why now? Why for her. She got up, feeling pain where her chest was bleeding. She released the remaining bass from the stringer and watched them swim away. Still clutching his gift like a talisman, she walked up the hill to her cabin.

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She pulled the jeep in fast and set the brake beside the cabin. She got out quickly, already pulling the short, revealing dress over her head, as her feet hit the ground. She kicked out of her heels and scrubbed her face free of lipstick on

the soiled dress before she flung it back into the jeep. She reached in for the small white Styrofoam container, heavier now, and slammed the jeep door.

She fairly flew down the hill to the lake, barefoot, wild. About half way, she screamed once, loud and fierce, calling him. Demanding that he come to her. She was almost at the lake's shore when she heard the rush of wings, felt the air currents change as he soared, swooped.

She raced along the dock beneath him as he glided above her, her hands trembling as she fumbled the Styrofoam box open and reached inside. At the end of the dock she dropped the box and with a powerful throw let the object fly to him. He met it with the now familiar snap. She heard an audible wet tearing as the warm tissue parted. He rose a little, shaking his head, worrying the object, bigger than he was used to, denser. Then the sharp beak prevailed and the two pieces sailed overhead. He snapped each one before it fell, swallowing one, then the other, swooping down, his golden eye on her.

She lay down for him then, and waited. He swooped over her once, away, then looped back, as if having made up his mind. He perched on the dock's upright, folding his huge wings, cocking his head, his eye unblinking. His unspoken question hung silent in the still night air.

She leaned on her elbows, watching him, admiring him, his large feet with their talons gripping the post, his majestic head, his great chest, softly, densely feathered in white, spattered with gore, his beak dripping red in the moonlight. Laughter bubbled up in her. "I gave you my heart," she thought to herself. "Then I gave you his."

It hadn't been difficult to get the bartender, a boy she'd known since childhood, to call her when the man returned to the roadhouse, the bad boy who had stolen her choice, her power. It hadn't been difficult to put on her sluttiest dress and sashay up to the bar and order a drink. It hadn't been difficult to let his lazy eyes rake over her again, to smile and respond to his suggestion that they leave together.

"I knew you'd be back for more, sugar," he'd sneered as he opened his car door for her. "I knew you was a wild one."

It hadn't been difficult at all to pull the sharpened fish knife out of her handbag and gut him with it as he reached for her, slipping the blade accurately between the ribs, piercing his heart with one sure motion. She had enjoyed watching him bleed, his blood pumping out, his consciousness, full of horror, receding. She appreciated the warmth of the blood that gushed over her, combating the chill of the evening air.

She rotated her wrist, severing ribs and tissue, then reached in the wound and pulled the heart free. With one hand, she reached into her handbag and retrieved the small, white Styrofoam box and placed the heart inside. She took the boxed heart to her own jeep and drove away.

Now, facing the eagle, she realized her hands and body were still streaked with blood and she felt the need to wash it off before touching him. Slowly, she rose and walked to the edge of the dock, her eyes never leaving him. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and ruffled his wings a little but remained perched on the upright. He ducked his head a little and she raised her arms

overhead and dove, cutting into the water cleanly, feeling the matted gore wash away from her breasts, her belly, her hands. She surfaced a few yards out and turned on her back to watch him.

His head had swiveled and she looked up the hill to where lights and sirens were converging. She thought she'd have more time. She kept to a back stroke so she could watch him as he unfurled his wings and rose, his thigh muscles bunching as he pushed off. He glided and looped around her as she swam, fast, a few yards out into the lake. She floated then, on her back, and he swooped and hovered above her, landing so gently on her breasts that he barely rippled the water. She smiled gratefully even as the talons sank in where the flesh of her chest hadn't had time to heal. He cocked his head so that one golden eye regarded her, although his second center of focus remained fixed on the men on the hill.

The sirens stopped but the lights on the hill still flashed red and green and white. Raised voices carried to them over the water and the policemen cursed and shouted at each other. Bobbing lights marked their halting progress down the hill, out onto the darkened dock. The lights searched the water, finding them.

He had furled his wings but now he unfolded them again and for a terrible moment she thought he might leave her. She uttered a strangled, involuntary cry and he ducked his head as if in answer. He stayed, his wings spread out to their full majesty, maybe seven feet, maybe eight or nine. His body rose slightly on his feet and the dense down on his chest bristled like her hair on the back of the neck when she was startled. But he stayed.

The police had reached the end of the dock and their lights now converged on her and the raptor as they floated out on the lake. Some of the men were already in the water, swearing at the cold, splashing toward them. Others had found her canoe and were paddling ineptly, rocking dangerously, out from shore.

She saw a man on the dock raise a rifle, call for the lights to remain steady, but another man's arm pushed the rifle barrel down.

"No way, Sam. That's an eagle out there with her. They're protected sixteen ways from Sunday. Don't matter what she done, you can't risk killing that bird."

She looked up at the great eagle, begging now with her eyes, and he fluttered his huge wings inward, wrapping them softly around her. His head swiveled and his beak scratched at the base of his tail. What was he doing, she wondered. The most important moment in her life and he's scratching for nits.

But when he turned his head back to her his beak was dripping. With painstaking gentleness, beginning at her hairline, he drizzled a steady stream of gamy, but not unpleasant smelling oil over her head, chest and shoulders. She realized that he had dipped into some gland and was coating her, insulating her for the cold flight to come. He was going to take her home. She was ready. She reached her arms up under his wings to hold his body, his mighty heart beating against her own. He ducked his head a little and she nodded back. His thigh muscles bunched and strained and his wings beat and lifted.

The boats and men and lights were bobbing nearer now.

“What the hell?” she heard someone say. Another let fly a string of colorful curses.

In the water, quite cold now, she realized that she wasn't going anywhere. He strained upward, his muscles pulling to their limit, but they did not rise.

The minute her arms moved to hold him she realized the truth. Although his wings were powerful and capable of filling the sky and the imagination, his body beneath the feathers probably weighed less than fifteen pounds. She was a grown woman. Neither his will nor his wings nor his muscles nor his heart could compensate for that terrible, unalterable differential.

She let go her hold and shook her head in sorrow. He bunched again as if to leave her, but she screamed now, wild, desperate. She couldn't let them take her, cage her. She put her soul into the scream and he opened his beak and screamed his answer.

He looked at her one more time, his golden eyes blinking slowly once, as she eagerly nodded her assent. Then he reared his head back and drove his lethally sharp beak with all his strength into her skull between her eyes.

When the huge bird beat his wings and took flight, the men fell silent, gaping. Later, many would swear that two eagles rose from the lake and flew, close together, back up the mountain. That two birds screamed their wild cry as they disappeared into the darkness.

When they retrieved her broken corpse from the lake and laid it on the dock, the men stood silent in a circle around her. One of the men idly picked up the bloody white Styrofoam box from the dock and muttered something.

“What say, Sam?”

“Her name, sir.” He scratched his head and looked at the box, puzzled. “It just come to me. I musta heard it somewhere. Her tribe name. I know it. Soars With Eagles.”

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