



Peter Watts, *Dark Pond*, 1996, oil on canvas, 42 x 36 inches

Gratitude

In memory of Peter Watts (1945–2021) and Vivian Bower (1941–2021), painters who each cherished the landscape of Cape Cod

MY HUSBAND, GARY, and I live in Manhattan, dominated almost entirely by *Homo sapiens* and the two main species they own, dogs and cats. Likewise, the flora and fauna is controlled predominantly by humans.

When we come every summer to our house on Slough Pond in the Cape Cod National Seashore, my sense of creation expands along with the abundance of species that inhabit the territory along with us. Bees, birds, butterflies, damselflies, spiders, and mosquitos greet us. On the pond, sunfish, bass, turtles, and frogs abound. Ospreys, kingfishers, and cormorants dive for fish. Eventually we'll spot foxes, raccoons, snakes, rabbits, coyotes, deer, wild turkeys, and maybe a skunk. At the ocean, seals swim by, bluefish flash, sometimes we glimpse the spout of a whale, gulls and terns wheel, minnows escaping pursuers land ashore, sandpipers mince swiftly along the water's edge, and the beach is strewn with the detritus of the ocean's inhabitants.

These creatures make me feel relieved of the burden of being human, for we are only one among them.

Twice in our forty summers, we've had specific interactions with wildlife. A lone loon, out of its habitat and without its partner, appeared on the pond one summer. It never flew. It swam in large swaths on the pond. After a few days, everyone knew it must be injured. My visiting son-in-law tried swimming close to it to see what was the matter, but the loon dove deep and out of reach at each attempt. We called the Audubon Society, and one of their members came and tried to reach it by canoe, but the same thing happened. Both, though, ascertained something had impaired one of the loon's legs. The Audubon people said it would die, because it wouldn't be able to feed itself sufficiently without being able to fly.

Weeks went by. Often it came near us when we went in swimming, circling at a safe distance, as if enjoying the company of fellow creatures. Sometimes it would seem to disappear and we'd suspect

it had died, only to find it was simply out of sight on the other side of the pond. All our friends who came by our house to swim, and all those we knew who lived around the pond, began looking for the loon, discussing the loon, and felt the loon's lonely circling and confinement and impotence, its hampered woundedness. The way it lay on the water, even, made your heart break. A large, settled, lovely gray-feathered bird, so distinguished from the gull, the cormorant, the osprey, sweeter and softer and more hen-like.

One day, guests of German friends who summer in Wellfleet also, a German artist and her Italian husband, parked at our house and walked through the woods to enter the pond at the small sandy beach a ways down the shore from our own stairs and dock. After their swim, they appeared in our yard, distress on their faces, and in broken English told us that the loon came unusually close to them as they were swimming, and when they got out of the water and were toweling off, it came by the shore, and before their eyes and very near them, died.

ANOTHER TIME, we were enjoying lunch with two visiting friends when a woman we didn't know came up our stairs from the pond and said, in a thick Russian accent, "A bird is caught on the tree. It has bright blue eyes." We questioned her. It was black. Tangled in fishing line. On the fallen oak that sprawled over into the water near the sandy beach. She had been swimming around the pond when she passed it.

We all swam and waded down to it. It was a cormorant, enmeshed in fishing line, and caught on the oak's branches and leaves. I'd never known cormorants had blue eyes. Now I understood why she kept repeating "bright blue eyes." They were fierce. An extraordinary blue, a turquoise-lapis piercing blue. It was freaked out. Its beak was pointed, eyes shrieking, struggling. It could kill. My husband, Gary—an artist with a knack for using tools and figuring out how to do such physical, spatial things—went back up to the house with us, located old towels, rope, and wire cutters. We came back down and the rest of us stood at a safe distance, watching, while he engaged the game Russian woman to hold the cormorant's legs, then threw the towels over it and tied them on to keep the bird's beak bound and to prevent it from the greater agitation of seeing, and proceeded to cut the fishing wire that wrapped around its feet and body. Then he yanked the towels off and quickly stepped back. The cormorant's wild fierce eyes drilled, he jabbed his head and beak at Gary once, twice, then he turned and dove into the water, ducking under and coming up, getting his dry feathers wet, ducking and coming up, swimming away to his glorious freedom, his cormorant life.

— Suzanne McConnell



Vivian Bower, *At Peace #3*, 2020, oil on polypropylene, 20 x 26 inches