



NOT ME

by Joseph Newfield

Wendy is her real name, but her nickname is Knees because hers chatter like a bridge club when she over-dances, which is often. She'll get tired, but keep dancing, and her knees begin rattling and get a rubbery look, like when you wiggle a pencil between two fingers.

In the shower this morning she's singing my theme song. I used to just sing it to myself in the morning, but she heard me one time and picked up on it, and now it 's part of our routine. To be truthful about it, I'm not sure she really means what she sings about love, but I take her word for it. It goes like this, sung with the voice rising on "looking" and falling on "me":

I'm so fucking good loo-kiiiiing,
I'm in love with meeeeeee.

That's the whole thing, but it really grows on you .

I'm in bed at 7:42 a. m. humming along with Knees when I hear her stop singing and say to me over the hiss of the shower, "Time to get up!"

I hum along without her.



"Ivan. C'mon, time to get up."

"Sing for me, Knees."

She does.

Fancying myself a croc coming ashore in spring, I emerge from bed and stalk slowly through slivers of bright morning sun. The light runs over my skin like passing blades of grass. Steam fills my nostrils as I glide into the bathroom. Murmuring my song now, she is leaning with her shoulders against the side of the glass cubicle, out of the running shower, eyeing me like a gunslinger.

"I'm glad this is your water bill," she says as I step into the shower.

Water trailing over my face, I put my mouth near her ear and sputter, "I'm in love with meeeee."

* * *

With the birds is where I'm most at home, in their aviary at the zoo, absorbed in their sublime beauty. It's the one place where I blend in, where I'm surrounded by creatures of similar majesty. We admire and respect each other, the birds and I, and though I'm still the center of attention—that much is inescapable no matter where I am—I believe that in the aviary the fascination is nearly mutual.



The birds' voices, too, enrapture me. And this is an especially pleasing time of year for me because spring is when, to their repertoire of calls, the birds add whole songs, sung in hope of attracting another. Singing with the birds as I climb among them fills me with a resonant pleasure. Like ascending smoke I rise on my ladder to fill their feeders, pausing to share a note with a Slack-beaked Tweet, to patiently harmonize with a Sloe-eyed Crooner. Several birds are usually perched on the dowel roosts of the feeders, waiting expectantly as I pour their seed. Though I enjoy all variety of music, the heartfelt melodies of country have always seemed most appropriate to this lonesome displaced jungle, and my favorite such song to share with the birds is a variation of "Georgia on My Mind" called, "Me on My Mind." I just sing the title, but that's enough for the birds as long as I vary the pitch.

Beneath me today, a group of children led by an instructor are passing wide-eyed through the aviary. They pause at the foot of my wheeled ladder and gaze up at me, thirty feet overhead. Their faces are like moons. Being a teacher at heart, I stop singing and, cupping a free hand to my mouth, call down to them, "Hello! Are you learning about birds?"

Their instructor, a young red-haired woman in a dress printed with a colorful pattern, calls back, her high voice almost lost in the birdie symphony, "Yes, we are! What kind are those?"

"Well," I gesture toward a group of round pink birds perched on a near feeder,



“These are Cotton Candy Criers!” She continues to look expectantly up at me, and I consider singing for the group, then realize they could be there all day listening. Instead I add, “They’re in your guide.”

The children gather around the instructor and she kneels, spreading the zoo guide on the dirt floor where everyone can see. I wrote the description of the Cotton Candy Crier in the guide and enjoy the young woman’s distant voice as she reads aloud:

From Peru comes the Cotton Candy Crier. Discovered by the great American naturalist C.T. Adderly in 1923, the Crier derives its name from its physical resemblance to the carnival concession cotton candy, common in Adderly’s native New Jersey. Yet, it is just this tragic similarity to a sugary confection that nearly spelled doom for the pink-plumed vocalist. The Crier’s distinctive piercing shriek announces the bird’s presence to all, and it was an easy target for Depression-era poachers who sought its luxurious fluffy down for exceptionally warm pink boas. Today, however, the Cotton Candy Crier is a protected species, ensuring this remarkable bird cries on for all to enjoy.

The children’s round faces angle upwards as, giggling in low voices, they consider the Cotton Candy Crier. I watch silently as the woman re-folds the guide and then stands and smooths her dress. Her red hair is straight, held back with a turquoise clip. She is counting the children. Satisfied, she looks up and calls, “Thank you!” and with the kids leading the way, continues through my oasis. A couple kids look back above them and wave, calling,

“Byyyye!”

All as one they are absorbed by the foliage. I find myself staring, wishing they would stay a little



longer. Maybe I could sing them just one song.

* * *

A person needs two things to succeed in this world: confidence and a true friend. I get my confidence from Maria, whom I'm about to see; and I'm driving my best friend, a 1975 VW Thing. Yellow, with a ragtop that's always down, my Thing is a lusty adventurer with whom I've scaled mountains and traversed deserts. Admiring eyes greet us in every town and remain transfixed until we depart. We're a special pair, my Thing and I, and we know it. Which is important, because, as Maria often reminds me, if you don't know you're special, how is anyone else going to know?

Emerging from the inland, my Thing and I follow the long sweep of Highway 61 as it angles south and assumes a course just in from the coast. It's hot. The sky is like a lid, low and pale and suffocating. July seems to have arrived in May this year. My Thing shares the single lane with a half dozen cars trailing a lumbering motor home that won't move over and a little red car that wants to pass. The car keeps moving out then falling back. On the inland side are artichoke farms broken by occasional lines of sunflowers. It is just past these lines of sunflowers where my Thing and I slow and make a left turn, following a straight road



through the artichokes and then into gentle hills dotted by oak trees.

Knees should thank Maria, too. Without the confidence Maria gave me, I doubt I could have cornered Knees and her quavering limbs at Club Spank last year. Knees and I quickly made our first and only lasting agreement concerning my good looks, found our way to a taxi and her house, and I became a complete man. Though Maria fulfills many of my needs, there are some she just can't fill because she's just *one woman*. And that's where Knees comes in. The two of them complement each other in every way. And I love each of them for their own special qualities. While Maria satisfies my intellectual desires, Knees appeals to me as something of a toy — a role Maria could never play. Not that I'd ask her to do such a thing. I respect each of them far too much to even consider trying to change them. Like two sides of a coin, they're different, but they serve the same purpose.

Since her flag is up when my Thing and I reach Maria's mailbox, I pull over. My shirt unpeels from the seat with a smack as I lean across and grab the mail, and then coast down the dirt driveway and into the carport on the side of Maria's lone house. A huge oak extends over the other end of the house, keeping the bedroom cool on days like this, and to my left as I reach the door, mail in hand, is the small back lawn, cordoned by a neat picket fence. I turn and look at my Thing before going in. Another trip without complaint. Of course, Maria knows nothing of Knees. She just thinks I spend a lot more time with the birds



than I do. And Knees takes care of herself. She knows about Maria, but she doesn't worry. Knees is getting what she needs. We all are. The only challenge, really, is to make sure Maria doesn't find out about Knees. Even though Maria knows me well, she just wouldn't understand about Knees, but there's really no reason to worry: Knees never comes out to the coast; and Maria rarely goes inland. And besides, like I say, we're all getting what we need.

I'm greeted by the scent first of rosemary as I pass through the kitchen and then as I approach Maria's slender shoulders, of lavender. She is sitting at a desk. A green sleeveless blouse exposes her tan shoulders and the curls of her black hair divide her back and then spill over the back of her chair. She's hunched intently over a pile of large open books, like a cryptologist who's just found the Rosetta stone. A stout vase filled with pastel hydrangeas is at the desk's corner.

"What do you know that I don't, Ivan?" she asks without looking up.

"That kids will always love the Cotton Candy Crier best." I reply as I pass by Maria and into the bedroom, pausing at her dresser to drop the mail. My spring cut looks good in her mirror. And I've gotten a little color today.

"My turn," I say as I walk out the door in the bedroom, through the entryway, and back into the family room. "How come I've never seen you wear these?" I'm holding a pair of white lace panties with all



the coverage of a spider's web.

Raising her head, she squints through her reading glasses at the panties and says, "Oh, please, Ivan, they're ridiculous. I'd never wear those."

"Why then," as I dangle them on one finger, "were they neatly placed atop your dresser?"

"If you gave me a minute I'd probably tell you, Sherlock. They're a gag gift from some high school friends. My reunion's coming up. What do you care, anyway? It's not like the mailman left them or something."

"I'm just sorry I've never seen you wear them," I say as I toss the panties back into her room and flop myself on the couch. "That's all."

"Don't get your hopes up." She turns her chair all the way to face me on the sofa where I'm beneath an open window with the blinds halfway down. A vague uneasiness runs through me, though I'm not sure why. Still several hours of daylight left. It's finally beginning to cool and Maria says, "So we going on that picnic?"

* * *

If I'm the Eighth Wonder of the World, what we're inside must be the Ninth. It's the Megamart, a



supermarket on the scale of an amusement park and Maria and I are assembling a picnic from what feels like the four corners of the Magic Kingdom. We've divvied our list and are searching on our own with plans to rendezvous in ten minutes. I never thought my excellent sense of direction would serve me in a supermarket, but I'm glad for it today as I wander up and down wide aisles populated by purposeful people picking over burgeoning shelves. I'm pushing an oversized cart, half intent on finding crackers and cheese, the first two items on my list, and half intent on speaking with a young woman ahead of me regarding my good looks. Wheatsworth and Triscuits are next to each other. I'm hungry and they both look good on the box, but I choose the former, then look up and see my prey go left at the end of the aisle. I follow, go left, and she's not down the next aisle. I begin checking down aisle after aisle; I'll run into the cheese eventually this way anyway.

I'm thinking, "Damn, this girl's in danger of missing out if I don't run into her pretty soon," when I round the corner and nearly die of shock right there in the aisle. Knees is standing twenty feet away, comparing cans of tuna. She doesn't see me and I jump back, yanking the cart toward me and spinning to go into the next aisle—Asian specialties. My heart is thumping and I glance around quickly for Maria. Hopefully she's still at the other end of the store. What the *hell* is Knees doing here?

I take a breath and head quickly toward the other end of the store with just the box of Wheatsworth



in my cart, checking aisles to my left for Maria and trying to figure out what Knees is doing out here on the coast shopping. She lives an hour away. I'm almost at the end of the store when I finally spot Maria down at the other end of an aisle, examining a bottle of wine. There must be fifty yards and a dozen carts and people separating us, but I begin hurriedly pressing my way through the maze, the shoppers' eyes rising to meet mine and then following me as I weave my way past. It's strange, but sometimes I just get tired of being stared at all the time. Maybe I should be on the other side of the deli case, in the display. I'm almost close enough to call to Maria when, without looking up, she drops a bottle in her cart's kiddy chair and heads around the end of the aisle to her left. *Damn*. I cannot believe this. I press on, wending my way the rest of the way down the aisle and into the mob at the front of the store.

Into which Maria has yet again disappeared. Frustration is welling in me as I try to navigate though all these idiots staring like cows, blocking me with their carts. I grab the box of crackers and leave the cart with the dolts.

Cautiously, I peer down each aisle before passing it. I gingerly peer around the end of the cereal aisle. Nope. And then the detergents aisle. Nope. And the toothpas- *oh shit*. There they *both* are and they're *talking*. I jump back. *I cannot believe they're talking to each other*. I peer down the aisle for an instant and see Knees chattering away, her legs jostling slightly. Retreating to the next aisle, I stand and



think for a moment, and then, Wheatsworth in hand, step back into the throng. Walking back along the aisles, I feel like a tiger at the zoo, pacing my cage, the aisle ends like bars. Now I'm looking for the cheese aisle, where Maria and I are supposed to meet. I don't look behind me.

The cheese is in the spine of the store—the refrigeration aisle—and I walk down and stand in the chill air, the crackers still dangling at my side. A sensation that I'm on the verge of calamity churns my stomach and I try to calm down. The whole situation seems so impossible that I have to keep reassuring myself that, yes, this is happening. But it's okay. As long as they don't both come and find me, I'm fine. Jesus, I have got to talk with Knees about where she spends her free time.

And then, as I'm standing and surveying the cheese, my arms folded tightly across my chest, I finally get it: Knees is tired of playing backup to Maria. She's making her move and she's gong to ruin my life in the process—shit, *my* life? Everybody's lives. Knees knew Maria and I were planning this picnic—see where honesty gets you? —and now here she is, ten aisles away, crashing the party. I feel like a gimpy gazelle who's just glimpsed a cheetah.

Bending to the jutting bargain bin, I pick up a chunk of mozzarella and begin absently turning the cold lump in my hands. Maybe they're actually just talking. Knees has never acted possessive before—why would she start now? Maybe she really was just looking for some tuna. Maybe, maybe—maybe I should just



get out of here. Get in my Thing and go a long ways anyway. Jesus, I want to climb into the giant fridge in front of me and hide. Let this storm blow over. How can I of all people possibly be in a situation like this?

About a minute passes and I'm almost in the mozzarella bin, leaning into it as if I can't read the lunch meat when I hear Maria's voice. She's approaching from the right and I slowly turn to face her. She's by herself.

"Ivan! All you've gotten is a box of crackers? What have you been doing all this time?"

I stare at Maria for a moment, watching over her shoulder apprehensively. Still no Knees. Relief slowly builds and I smile and say, "Yeah, I'm sorry, some jerk stole my cart. Let's just use yours."

"Okay. Let's get the rest of the food and get out of this place. I'm starved."

For some reason she adopts a Count Chocula accent and adds, "I vant to vatch the sahn pour into the sea."

"Yeah, okay, I'm hungry too. What else do we need? You've bought the whole store."

"Let's just pick out some cheese and that'll be enough."

Maria's next to me beside the bin now, and I'm feeling so much better that I'm on the verge of hugging her when she says, "I just met the nicest person. A girl named Wendy. I was trying to decide on ribbed versus smooth, and she was doing just the same thing. She said she actually likes the ribs better, so



that's what I got. Maybe we'll run into each other again—at least I hope so. You'd really like her, Ivan — she's very funny. Just our type."

Now I have no idea what's going on. Is she trying to make me admit it? I'm about to give in and say, "Okay, you win. I'm fucking her," when I look closely at Maria's expression. She actually appears more interested in the cheese than my reaction. Hesitantly, I reply, "But she's left the store, huh?"

"Well, she was headed for the express lane with just a couple things, so I imagine she's gone by now. It's no big deal. I just thought you might get a kick out of her." She straightens and looks at me for a moment and then, her mouth spreading in a grin, presses a cool package of Brie against my cheek and says, "Let's go."

"As long as you're sure there's nobody else you want to talk to here."

"Just you. Let's go Ivanhoe."

She walks past me as I'm pushing the cart and she's still grinning — as if she's just thought of something really funny, but can't repeat it.

* * *



High atop my ladder I'm singing to a Sloe-eyed Crooner.

"I've got meeeee on my mind," I sing, but the deep green bird's slanted eyes look disbelieving.

And the bird's right. Two days after my picnic with Maria I still can't get my thoughts back on track.

Back on me and off of Maria and Knees and the Megamart. Why do I feel like I've been left hanging? Been told a great joke, but denied the punch line. Am I really doing anything so terribly wrong? I love two women. So what if only one of them knows? Aren't we all happy? People seem so bent on following what they're told is right. Doesn't anybody ever think about what's really right for them?

The Crooner's heavy lids close for a moment and then open and return my stare. I look past it to a pair of Tweets and beyond them to a group of Criers. Dumping the remainder of the seed bag's contents in the feeder, I leave the sack on a branch, descend to the dirt floor, and in a moment am in my Thing, gunning past traffic on Highway 61.

The little red convertible that's in Maria's carport sends a shock through my body, tells me I'm about to receive the punch line I've been dreading. Knee's car is unmistakable. Last month she sideswiped a pillar in a parking garage and carved a crease into the back fender. Now the crease is reflecting the hot noontime sun at me like a big smile. I park my Thing beneath the oak at the other end of the house, get



out, and crunch through the gravel and up the wood steps to Maria's front door. With one hand I rap the knocker while trying the knob with the other.

There's no answer, but the door's unlocked and I go inside and close it quietly behind me. The house is too warm and the blinds are closed, giving the room a tense, dusky feel. I listen for voices, but hear only a slight shudder from the air rustling the blinds. In the dim light I can see the Maria's books piled on her desk. I stand and let my eyes adjust for a moment and then walk over to the desk. Dangling from the chair by one strap, is a black bra.

Leaning closer, I recognize the bra as one of Knees', and, at the same instant, I hear Knees' high laugh coming from around the corner. Maria's voice follows, "C'mon back, Ivan, I think you know the way." For a moment I try and contemplate what I'll find. Two of them? Ten? Naked? Playing chess? Trading recipes? I proceed around the corner and to the bedroom door, slightly ajar. With one foot I shove the door open and am greeted by the sight of Maria sitting at the head of the bed, naked. She is facing me, her long arms folded around bent legs. Her naked body is as familiar and personal to me as my Thing, and the sight of her as this moment, her confidence, sends my heart careening.

She says, "You're home early," and, nodding toward the bathroom, adds, "Oh, and remember Wendy? From the market" She says the two of you have met before." Knees appears from the bathroom,



naked also, save for the white panties I recognize from a couple of days ago. Knees smiles faintly at me and then walks to the bed, her hips rolling, lazy as a lioness after a kill. She sits and turns to lean back against the headboard next to Maria. The two of them look at me like this happens every day, me walking in on my two girlfriends together naked.

Anger boils inside me. "Why? Jesus Christ, why? You've both got me already. How can you want more?"

They look at each other and laugh. Knees replies, "Ivan, who do our think you are? *What* do you think you are? What makes you think that you can have both of us, but we can't?"

I pause, and then speaking slowly, respond. "Maria makes me think that. You've always said, Maria, that I should go out and get whatever I wanted. That I should expect to get what I want." I'm standing in the doorway, my face growing hot as I continue, hands gesturing in emphasis. "And now look at this shit. I don't get it. We were all happy, right? Why do you two need to ruin it? *Look* at you two. Jesus."

Maria, her voice calm, chin resting on her knees, says, "Ivan, sit down."

I hesitate and then go and sit on the edge of a wooden chair by the dresser, "There, I'm sitting. Now what?"

Maria continues, "Ivan, you made the decision to come over today. I can hardly believe you didn't



know what you were going to find.”

I try to think of what I was expecting to find. I don’t know. Not this. I’ve never tried to change either of them, never tried to do anything but make them happy.

“That whole shit at the Megamart,” I continue. “You two did the whole thing on purpose?” More silence. Sparrows twitter outside the window. “So all along. All along, you two have been doing this to me. . .”

Knees says, “If that’s how you look at it, dear, and I’m sure it is. Why don’t you lighten up and get in bed with us?”

The question doesn’t register. “You knew about Maria and me,” I say to Knees. “Why didn’t you tell me about Maria and you?”

“Because you wouldn’t understand, Ivan. Obviously, you still don’t understand. You’re *never* going to understand.”

I stand and walk to the foot of the bed and look at each of them. Then, futility seeping into my bones, I pace back to the chair. I pull in out to the foot of the bed and climb atop it. Standing, I sing, “I’m in looove with me!”

They look amused and Maria says, “You *are* funny, Ivan. We do love you for that. You should just get



in bed with us.”

Still atop the chair I reply, “I got meeee on my mind!” I like this place, up on the chair.

“I’m in love with meeeee.” I repeat. And then suddenly without thinking I sing, “I love yoooooou. I love both. Of. You.” I do a little jump. “What’s so wrong with that?”

They’re smiling.

“I love me and you and you and me.” I have no idea what’s come over me. I keep singing and hopping atop the chair, “And every-body is hap-py.”

They’re nodding, but I realize what I’m singing isn’t true. I don’t know what to do. I’m not happy. I pleadingly sing down at them, “I don’t feeeeeel like I have anything now.”

“No, Ivan,” Knees says. “You have everything.”

“I don’t think sooooo.” My voice is like a balloon deflating. “I think I have noo-thiiiiing.”

I crouch down and climb off the chair.

The room is silent as I slowly turn and walk out of the stifling bedroom, across the dark front room and turn the knob at the front door, flooding the room with bright sunlight.

My Thing, as always, is there. I climb in and start the engine and its noisy rattling whir is like a hug. For two or three minutes I sit there under the oak tree, listening to my Thing before I put it in gear and turn up



the driveway. The front door of the house is still open, gaping, as I pass Maria's mailbox.

* * *

One thing I never forget is how important it is, when mixing seed for the birds, to pay close attention to the millet. Some birds can have it, some can't. When I mix the feed I split the feed room into halves, mixing the feed with millet on only one half. It's hard to overstate the importance of this distinction.

Sacks in the cupboards over the table contain a variety of seeds and grains: the millet, sunflower, hemp, and wildflower, to name a few. Also in the cupboards are assorted larvae and insects: mealworms, beetles, grasshoppers. The insects are delivered live twice a week and are kept in tall round jars with handwritten labels, then doled out and released in the aviary. For a moment today I pause and watch the thick-bodied bugs squirm within the glass cylinders. Their futility, all that frantic, edgy, uncertainty, bothers me, makes my scalp itch. For the bird hatchlings, I grind small portions of the seed mixtures with a mortar and pestle, aware today of the dull grating sound, like cud in a ruminant's mouth. The two of them on that bed, carefree as ducks on a pond.

The last cupboard on the left contains all the vitamin powders, cuttlebones, salt licks, and so on,



that, if the birds were free they wouldn't need. Instead of freedom, though, the birds have vitamins and they have me.

I've just finished mixing the seeds for Monday and am wheeling bulging burlap sacks into the aviary when I nearly run the cart into another elementary school class. Their elderly teacher smiles broadly as I brush my hands off on my jeans and introduce myself. Ms. Henderson's hair is almost white and she's wearing a pink blouse with little colored birds stitched on it. Tan polyester slacks constrict her thighs and a pair of binoculars hangs around her neck. Her students, maybe fourth or fifth grade, are all smiles and wide eyes and Ms. Henderson tells me how much they're enjoying the aviary, but says there's one bird that they can't find in the guide. I don't want to bother with kids today, but looking at their expectant faces, I realize I can't say no and ask her where they saw the bird. She leads me to a corner of the aviary where a black bird shaped like a football on end is roosting quietly on a low branch. The bird's bulbous beak resembles lips, full like Maria's.

I tell the group, "Yeah, this one's on loan."

"Look at his lips!" a girl says.

"Those aren't lips," I correct, "that's his beak. But you're right, it is a he. You can tell because the males are smaller. This is a Fat-lipped Finch. We have a female in here someplace, too." They look around



to see if they can spot the other Finch. I look too, absently expecting Knees to appear from around a corner, visiting like she used to. "Even though we call him fat-lipped, he doesn't really have lips. It's just his beak. There are no birds with lips."

"Where does this species come from?" Ms. Henderson asks.

"South America. Ecuador. He's related to Darwin's Finches out on the Galapagos Islands." The kids' faces, their honest curiosity, draw me in. This whole class, all these staring faces, they all need me. "Have you kids studied Darwin's Finches?"

"They won't study that for a few more years," Ms. Henderson answers.

I slowly approach the Finch and nudge his chest with my finger. He climbs on my finger and I put him on Ms. Henderson's shoulder. He peers calmly at the kids. "You know why we can get so close to this one today without him flying away? Because it's spring. The Fat-lipped Finch is a very strange bird. When it's spring, all the other birds get together and start families, but these Finches are the opposite. When it's spring the males and females can't stand each other. Spring's the one time, though, that they don't mind people." I take a knee so that Ms. Henderson will kneel next to me. She does and the kids draw in around us and the bird on her shoulder. "Don't touch him, but you can look close."

"Why don't they like each other?"



“Nobody knows. But they’re endangered because they seldom reproduce. That’s why we have this one here. We’re trying to figure out when they actually mate.”

“How?” Two or three of them ask.

I’m not sure what exactly they’re asking, but before I can answer, the teacher steps in and says, “Okay, that’s enough of Mr. McCallister’s time, class. We need to go see some other animals along with the birds. Are you ready to see the giraffes?”

“Yeaahh!”

I take the finch off her shoulder and, standing, replace him on his roost. I look at the kids and without thinking say, “Come back again.”

She gathers them and they all say thank you and head toward the exit as I watch them.

Returning to the cart, I hoist to my shoulder a sack with a red stripe — with millet — and climb a ladder to the first feed station.

All the millet eaters are the singers, and I notice that today it’s nearly silent in the aviary. No sound from the Crooners, or Tweets, or criers. A male Crooner is waiting at the first feed station. “Okay, just a minute, Sloe-eye,” I say to him as I pour his meal into the feeder. The feeder spills over, but he doesn’t eat. I nod at the feeders, “There it is. What more do you need?” But he continues to eye me expectantly. Again I



notice how quiet he is, and then I suddenly realize it's been at least a week since I've sung anything. Days since I've heard any of the birds in song. That I've had everything but me on my mind.

“You know me better than I do, don't you, Sloe-eye?” I say to the bird. With a cough I clear my throat, and then burst into “I've Got Me on My Mind.” My voice, as always, is true, and soon the Crooner begins his characteristic melodious moan, closing his heavy eyelids and moving his long beak to and fro as he sings. Other Crooners chime in. Shrieks from Cotton candy Criers fill the air, and soon we're all joined by the high, nasal, warbling of Slack-beaked Tweets. And I'm unaware of anything but us.