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Craig Bernardini

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The Egret at Morningside

CRAIG BERNARDINI

A white egret lives at the artificial pond in Morningside Park. It wades in the shallows by the concrete bank, lifting its dainty feet just above the water's surface with each step, and jutting its head. A breeze occasionally ruffles its plumage.

If you have never watched an egret before, it will take a moment before you realize that, for all its cautious steps and marble pauses, as if to have its fairness and fragility apostrophized, it is actually hunting. Only then will it occur to you that its head resembles the blade of a knife, that its neck is really a coiled whip, and that its body is as much designed for striking as an adder's. Just then its head juts forward—dips—hardly a sound—; an instant later, it stands again with a minnow wriggling in its beak, which it holds there, once again, as if to be admired. The beak dribbles, the fish shimmers, and as the bird tosses back its head, the head is revealed as a mere extension of the gullet. There is a slight ripple in its throat. Then the neck recoils, and the egret freezes again.

Were I a minnow, I think, all I would know of the egret was its shadow on the canopy of my world; and I don't know if I would be able to tell that shadow from, say, the shadow of a willow swaying at the water's edge, or of a passing cloud. I have read that egrets stir pond bottoms with their feet, so I might flee from presumed danger into the presumed safety of its shadow—only to be torn from my world by the great white heaven-piercing god, dangle a moment in the void, and disappear.

What unsettles me is not the thought of the god beyond, yet somehow contiguous with, my universe, but rather the idea that there is some yet-greater being beyond *it*, for whom the egret is but a diversion. That the egret lives in its shadow, like the fish does in the egret's. That there is a beyond that beyond incarnate, something beyond whatever the fish could imagine to be casting the egret's shadow. God, I think, is that yet-greater being that stands over the horizon of the shadow of what I cannot even imagine. And if the fish can only sense the shadow on the water without any true idea of the substance behind, and God is that being admiring the cold beauty of an impassive Fate embodied by the white bird, then why my strange, momentary sympathy for the fish, whose mind is so far beneath mine as to be as inconceivable to me as I am to it?