The correspondent did not know all that transpired afterward. When he achieved safe ground he fell, striking the sand with each particular part of his body. It was as if he had dropped from a roof, but the thud was grateful to him.

It seems that instantly the beach was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffee-pots and all the remedies sacred to their minds. The welcome of the land to the men from the sea was warm and generous; but still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land's welcome for it could only be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave.

When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.

1897

Louise Erdrich
b. 1954

Most of Erdrich's fiction treats the lives of Native Americans—characters appear and reappear in her various novels and short stories, creating a rich fictional history of three families living around Argus, North Dakota. Part Chippewa herself, also a Catholic, Erdrich often melds Native American traditions with European traditions in her fiction. In this story, for example, the narrator's adventure parallels the quest motif of chivalric literature.

I'm a Mad Dog Biting Myself for Sympathy

Who I am is just the habit of what I always was, and who I'll be is the result. This comes clear to me at the wrong time. I am standing in a line, almost rehabilitated. Walgreens is the store in downtown Fargo. I have my purchase in my arms, and I am listening to canned carols on the loudspeaker. I plan to buy this huge stuffed parrot with purple wings and a yellow beak. Really, it is a toucan, I get told this later in the tank.

You think you know everything about yourself—how much money it would take, for instance, to make you take it. How you would react when caught. But then you find yourself walking out the door with a stuffed toucan, just to see if shit happens, if do-do occurs. And it does, though no one stops me right at first.

My motive is my girlfriend's Christmas present. And it is strange because I do have the money to pay for a present, though nothing very big or elaborate. I think of Dawn the minute I see the bird, and wish I'd won it for her at a county fair, though we never went to a fair. I see myself throwing a half-dozen softballs and hitting every wooden milk jug, or maybe tossing rings. But those things are weighted or loaded wrong and that's another reason I never could have won this toucan for Dawn, because the whole thing's a cheat in general. So what the hell, I think, and lift the bird.

Outside in the street it is one of my favorite kind of days, right there in the drab middle of winter when the snow is a few hard gray clumps and a dusty grass shows on the boulevards. I like the smell in the air, the dry dirt, the patches of water shrinking and the threat of snow, too, in the gloom of the sky.

The usual rubber-neck turns to look at me. This bird is really huge and furry, with green underneath its floppy wings and fat stuffed orange feet. I don't know why they'd have a strange thing like this in Walgreens. Maybe a big promotion, maybe some kind of come-on for the holiday season. And then the manager yells at me from the door. I am halfway down the street when I hear him.

"Come back here!" Probably pointing at me, too, though there is no reason, as I stick out plenty and still more when I run.

First I put the bird underneath my arm. But it throws off my balance. So I clench it to my chest; that is no better. Thinking back now I should have ditched it, and slipped off through the alleys and disappeared. Of course, I didn’t—otherwise none of all that happened would have happened. I sit the bird on my shoulders and hold the lumpy feet under my chin and then I bear down, like going for the distance or the gold, let my legs churn beneath me. I leap curbs, dodge among old men in long gray coats and babies in strollers, shoot up and over car hoods until I come to the railroad depot and, like it is some sort of destination, though it isn't, I slip in the door and look out the window.
A gathering crowd follows with the manager. There is a policewoman, a few local mall-sitters, passersby. They are stumbling and talking together and making big circles of their arms, to illustrate the toucan, and closing in.

That's when my stroke of luck, good or bad is no telling, occurs. The car drives into the parking lot, a solid plastic luggage rack strapped on its roof. A man and a woman jump out, late for a connection, and they leave the car running in neutral. I walk out of the depot and stand before the car. At that moment, it seems as though events are taking me somewhere. I open up the hinges on the plastic rack, stuff in the bird. No one seems to notice me. Encouraged, I get in. I put my hands on the wheel. I take the car out of neutral and we start to roll, back out of the lot. I change gears, then turn at the crosstoads, and look both ways.

I don't know what you'd do in this situation. I'll ask you. There you are in a car. It isn't yours but for the time being that doesn't matter. You look up the street one way. It's clear. You look down the other, and a clump of people still are arguing and trying to describe you with their hands. Either way, the road will take you straight out of town. The clear way is north, where you don't know anyone. South, what's there?

I let the car idle.

My parents. It's not like I hate them or anything. I just can't see them. I can close my eyes and form my sister's face behind my eyelids, but not my parents' faces. Where their eyes should meet mine, nothing. That's all. I shouldn't show up at the farm, not with the toucan. Much less the car. I think a few seconds longer. The bird on the roof. It is for Dawn. You could say she got me into this, so Dawn should get me out. But she doesn't live in Fargo anymore, she lives south. She lives in Colorado, which complicates everything later for it means crossing state lines and all just to bring her that bird, and then another complexity, although at the time I don't realize, occurs when the woman at the depot, the one who has left the car, appears very suddenly in the rearview mirror.

I have just started moving south when I hear a thump from behind. It is so surprising. Just imagine. She is there on the trunk, hanging on as though by magnets. She reaches up and grabs the birches on the roof-top luggage rack, gets a better grip, and sprawls across the back window. She is a little woman. Through the side-view, I see her blue heels in the air, the edge of a black coat. I hear her shrieking in an in-human desperate way that horrifies me so much I floor the gas.

We must go by everyone fast, but the effect is dreamlike, so slow. I see the faces of the clump of people, their mouths falling open, arms stretching and grasping as I turn the corner and the woman rolls over and over like a seal in water. Then she flies off the trunk and howls them before in her rush so they heap on the ground. She is in their arms. They put her down as though she is a live torpedo and keep running after me.

"Scandinavians," I think, because my grandmother's one, "they don't give up the ghost." I just want to yell out, tell them. "OK, so it's stolen. It's gone! It's a cheap stuffed bird anyhow and I will park the car. I promise."

I start talking to myself. "I'll check the oil in Sioux Falls. No sweat." Then the worst thing comes about, and all of a sudden I understand the woman with her eyes rearing back in her skull, her little heels pointed in the air. I understand the faces of the people in the group, their blurring voices, "b...b...baby."

As from the back seat, it wails.

I have my first reaction, disbelief. I have taken the scenic route at a fast clip, but I know the view anyway. I am down near the river and have decided from there I will take 30 and avoid the Interstate, always so well patrolled. I park and turn around in a frantic swirl. I revolve twice in my seat. And I still can't see the baby. I am behind on the new equipment. He sits in something round and firm, shaped like a big football, strapped down the chest and over the waist, held tight by a padded cushion. Above his face there is a little diamond attachment made of plastic, a bunch of keys and plastic balls that dangle out of reach.

I have never seen a child this little before, so small that it is not a child yet. Its face is tiny and dark, almost reddish, or copper, and its fingers, splayed out against its cheeks, are the feet of a sparrow. There is a bottle of milk in a bag beside it. I put the end in its mouth and it sucks. But it will not hold the bottle. I keep putting the end in its hand, and it won't grasp.
“Oh screw it,” I finally say, and gun right out of there. Its cry begins again and I wish I knew how to stop it. I have to slow down to get through some traffic. Sirens rush ahead on their way to the Interstate, passing in a squeal which surprises me. This car, this pack on top, I am so obvious. I think I’ll maybe park at the old King Leo’s, get out, and run. But then I pass it. I think it will be better if I get down south around the South Dakota border, or in the sandhills, where I can hide out in cow shelters. So I do go south. Over me the sky is a falling and bearing down, so I think now maybe snow will fall. A White Christmas like the music in the drugstore. I know how to drive in snow and this car has decent tires, I can feel them. They never lose grip or plane above the road. They just keep rolling, hummning, below me, all four in this unified direction, so dull that after some time it all seems right again.

The baby drops off, stops crying. It shouldn’t have been there, should it. I have to realize the situation. There is no use in thinking back, in saying to myself, well you shouldn’t have stole the damn bird in the first place, because I did do that and then, well as you see, it is like I went along with the arrangement of things as they happened.

Of course, around halfway down there is a smokey waiting, which I knew would happen, but not whether it would be before or behind me. So now my answer comes. The officer’s car turns off a dirt road and starts flashing, starts coming at me from the rear. I take it up to eighty and we move, move, so the frozen water standing in the fields flashes by like scarves and the silver snow whirls out of nowhere, no either side of us, and what rushes up before us is a heat of road and earth.

I am not all that afraid. I never am and that’s my problem. I feel sure they will not use their weapons. I keep driving and then, as we take a turn, as we come to a railroad crossing, I hear the plastic roof rack snap open. I look through the rearview by reflex, and see the bird as it dives out of the sky, big and plump, a purple blur that plunges its yellow beak through the windshield and throws the state police off course so that they skid, roll over once, come back with such force the car righted itself. They sit there in shock.

I keep on going. The pack blows off and I reason that now the car is less obvious. I should have thought about that in the first place, but then the bird would not have hatched out and demolished the police car. Just about this time, however, being as the toucan is gone, I begin to feel perhaps there is no reason to go on traveling this way. I begin to think I will just stop at the nearest farm, leave the car and the baby, and keep hitching south. I begin to think if I show up at Dawn’s, even with nothing, on a Christmas Eve, she will not throw me out. She will have to take me, let me stay there, on the couch. She lives with someone now, a guy ten years older than me, five years older than her. By now he has probably taken her places, shown her restaurants and zoos, gone camping in the wilderness, skied. She will know things and I will still be the same person that I was the year before. And I am glad about the toucan, then, which would have made me look ridiculous. Showing up there like a kid in junior high school with a stuffed animal, when her tastes have broadened. I should have sent her chocolates, a little red and green box. I was wishing I had. And then I look past the road in front of me and realize it is snowing.

It isn’t just like ordinary snow even from the first. It is like that rhyme or story in the second grade, the sky falling and let’s go and tell the king. It comes down. I think to myself, well, let it come down. And I keep driving. I know you’ll say it, you’ll wonder, you’ll think what about the child in back of him, that baby, only three weeks old, little Mason Joseph Andrews? Because he does have a name and all, but what could I know of that?

I talk to it. I am good at driving in the snow but I need to talk while I’m driving. I’ll tell this now, it doesn’t matter. I say, “You little bastard you, what are you doing here?” It is my state of mind. I put the window open. Snow whites out the windshield and I can’t see the road in front of us. I watch the margin, try to follow the yellow line which is obscured by a twisting blanket. I am good at this though I need my concentration, which vanishes when he bawled. My ears are full. He roars and I hear the sound as wind, as sounds that came out of its mother. I hit the plastic egg and feel the straps give, feel the car give on the road. I swerve into another car’s ruts, weave along the dotted yellow, and then under me is snow and still I keep going at a steady pace although the ground feels all hollow and uncertain. The tracks narrow into one, and then widen, so I suddenly realize this: I have followed a snowmobile trail and now I
am somewhere off the road. Immediately, just like in a cartoon, like Dumbo flying and he realizes that he isn't supposed to be up in the air, I panic and get stuck.

So now I am in awful shape, out there in a field, in a storm that could go on for three more minutes or three more days. I sit there thinking until the baby gets discouraged and falls asleep. And get this. It is a white car. Harder to see than ever. And not a bit of this did I ever think or plan for. I can't remember what they say in the papets every fall, the advice about what to do when a blizzard hits. Whether to stay on the road, with the cat, or set out walking for help. There is the baby. It is helpless, but does not seem so helpless. I know now that I should have left the car run, the heater, but at the time I don't think. Except I do rip that dangle of toys off its seat and tie it on the aerial when I go out, and I do leave its blankets in there, never take any. I just wrap my arms around my chest and start walking south.

By not stopping for a minute I live through the storm, though I am easy to catch after it lets up, and I freeze an ear. All right, you know that baby wasn't hurt anyway. You heard. Cold, yes, but it lived. They ask me in court why I didn't take it along with me, bundled in my jacket, and I say, well it lived, didn't it? Proving I did right. But I know better sometimes, now that I've spent time alone here in Mandan, more time running than I knew I had available.

I think about that boy. He'll grow up, but already I am more to him than his own father because I taught him what I know about the cold. It sinks in, there to stay, doesn't it? And people. They will leave you, no matter what you say there's no return. There's just the emptiness all around, and you in it, like singing up from the bottom of a well, like nothing else, until you harm yourself, until you are a mad dog just biting yourself for sympathy, because there is no relenting, and there is no hand that falls, and there is no woman to come home to take you in her arms.

I know I taught that boy something in those hours I was walking south. I know I'll always be inside him, cold and black, about the size of a coin, maybe, something he touches against and skids. And he'll say, what is this, and the thing is he won't know it is a piece of thin ice I have put there, the same as I have in me.

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William Faulkner

1897-1962

"A Rose for Emily" was Faulkner's first published story. It combines two real-life events from Faulkner's home in Mississippi. One story was of a local woman who refused to release her dead son's body to the undertaker, and the other was of a romance between a Southern belle and a Northerner who came South to pave streets. Nearly all critics think Emily symbolizes the decay of the old order, the dissolution of the Southern aristocracy. Faulkner himself disavowed symbolic readings and described the story as the tragedy of "a young girl that just wanted to be loved and to love and to have a husband and a family" but was "kept down by her father, a selfish man, who didn't want her to leave home because he wanted a housekeeper." According to Faulkner, her impulses drove her to do things that she knew were wrong. Note that the narrator in this story is first person plural, which is uncommon.

A Rose for Emily

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined caretaker and cook—had seen in at least ten years. It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scroll-dotted balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But when the cotton and cotton gins had uncroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gas-lit lamps—an eye-sore among eye-sores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the tanked and anonymous graves.