



Final Migration

By Catherine (Clemens) Sevenau

My sister Liz knew everything about everything, and what she didn't know—she made up. Her library was lined with books from architecture, antique lamps, and art nouveau to tomes on history, the human body, and Henry VIII. She also had every field-guide on flora, fauna, and all things feathered.

Liz was an avid birder and the aristocratic and ancient crane was her favorite. A “craniac,” she could tell you everything about their habits and habitats and their migration patterns and courting rituals. She even recognized their mating calls. The birds inspired her; as they wove their nests, their work became a part of her days. A life-size bronze crane stood sentry at her front door. A delicately feathered watercolor flew on her plaster wall. Cranes perched on her shelves, danced on her Japanese robe, and winged across her glass lampshade.

Every fall, thousands of greater sandhill cranes streak across the Pacific Flyway, migrating in families to feed and roost in the safety of Central Valley wetlands near the Sacramento River. They are one of the world's largest birds, the males standing a stately five-feet with a seven-foot wingspan. They are long-legged,

long-necked and bustle-bodied, sporting ash gray plumage with black chiseled bills, sleek white cheeks and a bald red crown. Their trumpet can be heard for miles. Between feeding and roosting, they dance a peculiar avian ballet: one crane starts out slowly, then a second, the tempo picks up, and soon the whole flock is hopping and bowing—wing flourishing and stick tossing in wild, rap-like abandon. My sister loved their elaborate floorshow, cackling her delight.

In February, Liz was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. In September, she had experimental surgery at UC Davis Cancer Clinic in Sacramento. Two weeks later she came to stay with me. Pneumonia set in and I took her back to the hospital. Three days later, she died.

Just after she took her final breath in that cool early morning, her husband Tony stepped outside to call the family. Dialing his cell phone, he heard an overhead cacophony of long drawn-out bugling and clanging so loud he was unable to converse. Looking up, his irritation turned to slack-jawed wonder. A feathered cortege of two hundred greater sandhills passed directly over his wife's top floor hospital room in single and V-line formations—first one string, then another behind the first, then another behind them, then another, and another, necks extended, legs and tails outstretched, the slow rhythmic beating of their wings vibrating the crisp October sky, incessantly declaring GAROOO-A-A, GAROOO-A-A.

As is their nature, the whole flock trumpets most raucously when concerned or alarmed. As was her nature, Liz was probably disturbing their flight pattern on her way out. Or maybe she was joining them on their migratory trek. Or perchance, the winged ones knew she was ready and arrived to escort their friend in style—blessing my sixty-four year old sister with an exquisite tribute and a final accompaniment.