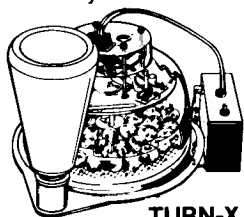
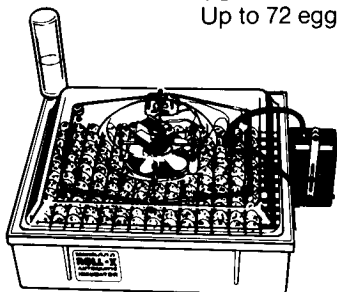


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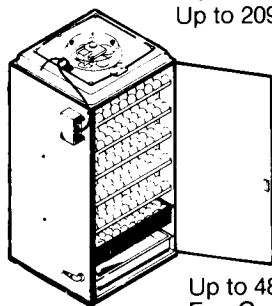
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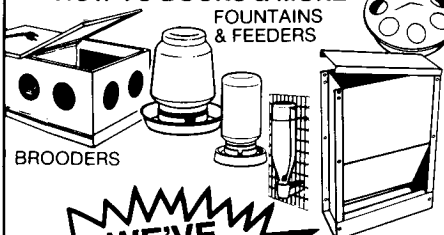
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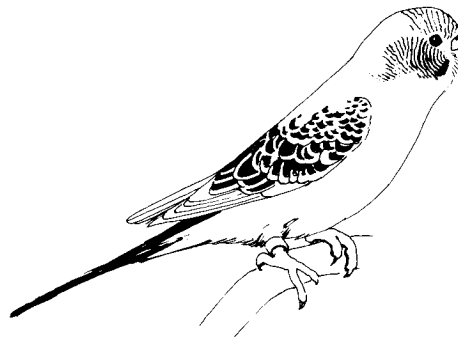
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WE ACCEPT



Full Honors for Henry

by Patricia Montali
Gaithersburg, Maryland

I have always been afraid of birds. It has to do with some infant trauma, my mother says. The only reason it came up was because my sister arrived home one day with a green parakeet named Phillip. She let him out of the cage and with the beating of the wings, my scalp began to crawl and I threw something over my head and ran from the room.

Honestly, I wanted to like birds and I tried all sorts of home therapy. I would hold Phillip on my finger and stroke his feathers. This was nice, but when he flapped onto my shoulder or, worse, my head, I would panic.

I finally decided the easiest thing would be to avoid birds altogether. This was easy to do until I got married, had kids of my own, and was again under pressure from my daughter, who even looks like my sister, to have a bird.

Trying to explain my phobia, I told my family this was a real fear. Sorry but no birds, I said. I guess I must have been talking to the walls, because on my daughter's sixth birthday my husband appeared with a blue parakeet named Henry.

All right, these are the rules, I stated firmly. I am not taking care of him, etc., etc. They nodded solemnly. I left the room when Henry was let out. They would inform me when the coast was clear. I was leery, but it began to work out. I even put my hand in the cage and let Henry sit on my finger. His feet were thin and strong.

He was a young bird and we all marveled as he continually grew new feathers in vibrant colors. They would begin as protruding sticks, then would suddenly burst open and lay back, softly blending with the rest of his plumage.

Henry began to talk. He lived in our big kitchen/family room and heard all

the daily chatter that went on. He spoke in a rapid garble that sounded like it might really mean something if we could get him to slow down.

With the rush to school in the mornings, my daughter often forgot to take Henry's cover off, so I began doing it. Then I made sure his cage was covered last thing at night. During the day, when I came in the door, he gave out a sort of chirp that I began to assume was a greeting for me. It only took him a few days to get used to the bigger cage I eventually bought.

I learned that birds have to bathe, so my daughter took Henry to the bathtub with her or the kitchen tap was turned on gently and the sink plugged. I watched through a crack in the door as Henry did a sort of dance in the spray, and then sat preening and drying himself.

Henry loved to dance. The kids would put a chair for me on the deck where I could see everything through the glass doors. They turned up their rock music and my son would lip-sinc and pound the ottoman while my daughter danced. Henry would hang onto a tendril of her long red hair like a clothes pin ornament as she tossed it back and forth and spun in circles.

But Henry wasn't always nice. Sometimes I would get so mad at him for pecking my daughter's hand, and I would tell him he was a *bad bird*. The kids learned not to let him out when they were eating because he would land on their plates and walk through their food like a storm trooper.

One day I sat watching the television as my daughter changed Henry's water and he *escaped*. I heard the buzz of wings and instantly threw something over my head. Henry flew up to the curtain rods and watched. My daughter

felt terrible. "Mom, it's all right," she called to me as I slinked towards the door with a blanket on my head. "It's only Henry," she said. It's only Henry.

We had Henry more than three years before he got sick. One morning I uncovered his cage and saw his chest pumping in and out rapidly. The veterinarian said it was diabetes — common in birds. The prognosis was not good.

My daughter seemed to pass by his cage more quickly now. She took out all the pictures she had drawn of Henry and drew big red hearts around them. Then she slipped them under a book.

The day Henry got worse, my uncle died. He was to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery the next day. I felt I should go. In the morning I checked Henry as usual. He looked awful. His feathers were sticking straight out. He was having trouble holding onto his perch and fell to the floor of his cage in a heap. I watched as he righted himself and, using his beak and wings, climbed laboriously back up the side of the cage. He was breathing hard. Why didn't he just stay on the bottom and save his strength? I hated to go. I made a platform near his perch before I left.

The chapel at Arlington Cemetery is lovely in its simplicity. Military pall bearers brought in my uncle's closed casket. Prayers began — a mass for the dead. The coffin stood in front of the altar. I was sorry my uncle had died, but as I listened to the priest explain how God had forgiven him all his life-long sins, I couldn't help but think how that must be a great relief to him, wherever he was now.

We sang and knelt and prayed, and suddenly I saw Henry's tiny blue body lying on top of the dark, flag-draped coffin. I smashed a tissue into my eyes and got a few sympathetic nods.

What a great life he had led, said the priest. He was loved by God and would live with Him forever. I could see St. Francis peeling a grape for Henry. Henry would probably chomp his finger if he was too slow. I made an odd sound and stuff came into my nose. His earthly remains would stay there, the priest told us. Death is only part of the process of life.

Smartly stepping soldiers lifted the coffin and carried Henry respectfully outside. They placed him on a gleaming black caisson pulled by six dark horses. A military band played *America* and, along with an honor guard of fifty, led the procession down the quiet, winding lanes of the cemetery. The autumn air was crisp and the leaves formed a canopy over my head. ●

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