

## STEPHANIE MARTIN

*Black-Crowned Night Heron, 2017*  
Intaglio Etching, 7x7 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## KATHARINE HAAKE

# Breathing through Skin

## Notable Birds and Amphibians of My Life

### 1. A rookery of herons

Late one afternoon we walked out along the edge of a black water swamp and found ourselves in a rookery of herons.

There were other birds too—notably anhingas, dark and stately birds, long and narrow necked, with a furtive grace, but here they stood about stiffly, wings arced at their sides to dry. I want to say coots, but don't really know. There were brown and black birds everywhere, of various sizes, but though my friend had a book, the details of birds—curve of beak, spot of eye, ring of red—are hard to read. Do coots, best known for their practice of pecking the brains of dispensable young, model firm resolve and stoic mother love, or just Mother Nature at her most brutal?

For years I had imagined birds as giant insects, a disagreeable connection I'd picked up from my sister who'd once remarked as much over breakfast. Sometimes it riled me against her, that an offhand comment over coffee in an attic apartment above a flock of blackbirds on the icy roof below should have reduced the grace of birds for years and years to the vague repulsion of beetles.

Now, note the luminosity of beetles, their shimmering neon greens and refulgent golds.

From the rookery, sounds of rustling and clucking, gentle squawking, what might have been brushing of feathers.

The long delicate ruffle that ran down the back of one heron's neck fluttered in the breeze; another displayed a feather crown around his neck and back, an erect and quivering plume he seemed unable to retract. I don't know what this meant or why he hunkered solitarily on a lower branch while other birds coupled around him.

We don't have black water swamps where I live, a desert.

We do, however, have trees where crows flock, thickening the branches into black skeletal frames, just as elsewhere I've seen herons turn whole forests white. Urban parrot flocks sometimes also fill our backyard trees with their noisy greenness.

In the black water swamp, the herons were hard at work on great stick nests, which, while already well established, seemed to require their assiduous attentions. No lolling about for these birds once the hearth was wrought. But the males of this species, like those of many, lacked certain skills, and over and over, I watched the same domestic drama play out. A proud male bird would fly up to