

December 5, 2022

### What Does the Green Bird See?

Dedicated to Nick Elizalde: The greatest honor of my life was to be your mother. The second greatest honor of my life was to hold you as you died. May we all be blessed to see the world and our role in it, as you did. Rest in power.

What does the green bird see?

Does his life flash before his eyes as he struggles to draw his final breaths?

Does he see the beautiful comic books he draws? The dinosaur and Marvel figurines that line his bureau? The trashcan full of Clorox wipes that kept his beloved sneakers in immaculate condition? His long, relaxing showers every night? The stuffed wolves on his bed, adoption gifts, saving them from extinction.

Does he see his lifetime of activism? The way that animals loved him.

Does he see his award for Volunteer of the Year for his work at the polls on Election Day, for best cleaner upper at preschool, camper of the week at the YMCA?

Does he see his trip to Greece and Turkey this summer?

Does he see Saul? His agricultural high school where he felt at home? Where he made friends quickly? Where he felt seen? Where the students do amazing things each day? Does he see people buy the products made on their farm?

Does he see the tears he shed watching the Uvalde coverage? The Spanish song that he and his mother listened to on TikTok, written for the murdered children?

Does he see his already reserved 15th birthday dinner at Dave and Busters on October 8th? The lifeguard course that he was going to take as soon as he turned 15?

Does he see what a peaceful, nonviolent, innocent boy he was? How funny he was? A light to those around him.

Does he hear the shots? Almost 70 of them. Does he see his mother run up the hill to try to save him? Does he see her fear as she realizes that he is not bleeding? Does he feel his mother lift his clothes to see where the bullet struck him? Does he see that God spared him the tarnish of blood, save for a tiny drop at the entry point? Does he see her as she finds that drop of blood on her hijab hours later?

Does he see his mother, alone on the floor at Einstein as they told her that the bullet struck his heart directly and there was nothing that could've been done? DOA in his football uniform. Does he see the trauma surgeon get on the floor with her? Does he know that his mother already knew that he was dead? That she felt him take his last breath in the back of a cop car on the same road that they drove home on every night? Does he see that she died too but just not enough? That her entire identity collapsed in a split second?

Does he see the 1200 people standing in line to offer condolences, in the rainy dark, multiple school buses from Saul and Roxborough, a whole football team in uniform?

Does he feel the physical pain on the inside of his mother's arms - the ache of not being able to hold her only child? Does he feel her wish to die, just so that she can see him? Does he know that she tried to switch places with him but she didn't run fast enough?

Does he see his mother walk into his room every night? Instead of tucking him in, she begs God to let her see him in her dreams. Does he see that she will not allow the shooters to take her faith?

Does he see the juvenile assassins, ready for war? Not knowing that the real war is the battle for their souls. Does he see inside their broken minds? Does he see the wicked cocktail that creates them: drill music, social media, and hopelessness?

Does he see 2 out of 6 of his killers have yet to be apprehended? Their families sheltering these murderers, as if his own life is worthless? A devaluation of human life born from a devaluation of self. Does he see how they must not fear the Day of Judgement?

Does he see the scores of kids afraid to go to school? The incessant active shooter drills, the clear backpacks, the identification kits, the single entry buildings? Does he see the PTSD that ravages his mother and so many others? His family's incessant tears and anger, the same as countless others. Does he see that he and the other murdered school kids died quickly but we all die slowly each day, ignoring the solution? Blood on our hands from our unwillingness to act. Does he see the scrolling past because.....it's just another shooting?

Does he wonder why this country has enough money for weapons and wars and other nefarious pursuits but not enough to care for its most vulnerable? Does he see its crisis of conscience? Its penchant for violence? Why the answer is always more guns? Why the 2nd Amendment is more important than his right to live? To be safe? To play football? To be at school? To be a child?

No.

He sees paradise. Images we cannot imagine. "Gardens beneath which rivers flow." He sees the glory of what living a righteous life for 14 years earned him. The tremendous honor of being chosen as a shaheed: a martyr. Relinquished from this world. Like the first song that he ever sang aloud when he was 2: Pearl Jam's "Release." "I'll ride the wave where it takes me. Release me."

It is we who see this terror. We who normalize this nightmare. This catastrophic failure of American society. The shame and fear, too much to reckon with until it's your own child, struck down at school. It is we who send the ubiquitous thoughts and prayers and then turn away. Comforting ourselves that it is someone else's child, finding false solace in the belief that it will not happen to us. But it's gone from possibility to probability. It is we who are trapped in this world, "a prison for believers and a paradise for non-believers." We are trapped in this hellish existence until we become a green bird ourselves...free, flying high without limitations, pain, or fear. Leaving behind others to become the next victim.