

# Pelecanimimus and the Battle for Mosquito Ridge

By Izzy Wasserstein





*Dedicated to the Memory of Oliver Law (1900 – 1937), the first Black American to command white troops and leader of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (Spanish: Brigada Abraham Lincoln). Known for his bravery in action while leading his troops at the battle of Mosquito Ridge. — Bordewieck, Crystal, and Lila Chen, editors. “We Must Stop Them Here”: The Struggle of the Early Antifascists, Crossed Genres, 2019, p. 3.*



Is there a connection between the reemergence of dinosaurs and the many-worlds theory? So my colleagues theorize. I can only say this: history is contingent, and much of it is outside our control. All any of us can do is act responsibly. Which brings me to the battle of Mosquito Ridge. — Arendt, Chaya. “The Re-emergence of Dinosaurs: Three Implications.” World Dinosaur Symposium, Berlin. May 1, 1943. Keynote Address.



July 5, 1937

My Dear Eli:

I hope you will excuse my recent silence. We have been engaged in making a barricade against the Fascists, for they seek to take Madrid. We will not let them. I have been slow to write due to a wound, and because I fear that you may not have forgiven me for my foolish parting words. Perhaps I can find a way to say in writing what I could not say in your embrace.

I have been serving under Commander Oliver Law, in the machine-gun regiment. In late winter, I took a bullet in the palm. By the grace of G-d, it did not grow infected, but my left hand is near useless to me now.

I will need to send you home, Law told me. A man who cannot steady a rifle is of no use to me.

Sir, I will go to Hell before I will abandon this fight, I told him.

Law is as brave a man as I know, the first black among us to be made commander, and a Communist. He no more believes in Hell than I do, but

he only smiled and said, well then, we will find a way to make you useful. Pride ran through me like a river, for I have many times seen Law lead the charge into the teeth of the enemy, and there is no officer I more admire.

We plan an advance against the Fascists, to ease their siege on Madrid, and cut them off from their supply lines. I am still nimble and quiet and sharp-eyed, so now I scout ahead.

I can imagine your words in my head, chiding me for not coming home when I could. Even now, I hear you say, we could be mobilizing workers each morning and in each other's arms each night. There are tens of thousands of volunteers, you told me on our last day together, but I have only you.

When I think of the look in your eyes, I feel as though I've been sliced open. But I believed in this cause then, and now I have seen proof with my own eyes: we must stop the Fascists here, or they will spread across Europe. There are German bombers overhead and Italian arms on the other side of the lines. I long for your arms, my Eli, but I fight to make the world



safe for us, and I have seen soldiers (of all genders) fight on despite worse injuries. I believe we will triumph, and I will return to you. Should we fail, I take comfort in this, that the struggle is worth all.

I do not know when this letter will reach you. I cannot send it now, for fear of revealing too much to the enemy, and knowing that I have expressed my love for you in a way many of my Comrades would loathe. I will keep this letter to myself and, if G-d wills, find a way to get it to you soon.

Yours Always,

Mordechai

July 6, 1937

My Dearest Eli:

We have made good progress. Our initial attack caught the Fascists off-guard, and they have little answer for the Soviet tanks. While the governments of the world look away, it remains to us volunteers, the Spanish Republicans, and our Soviet allies to push back the rising tide of Fascism. We have captured the town of Brunete, and I scout beyond the edges of our lines.

Our brigade is in position beneath the outcropping they call Mosquito Ridge. It rises well above the dusty hills and plains. We are positioned to its north, and to the south of it, Franco's forces await us. I went scouting, hoping to assess what defenses await us should we seek to claim the high ground of the ridge.

That was how I found something remarkable. The weather has turned hot, and there is not so much as a cloud to cool us. This is a dry land, with

little water. I use the arroyos here to move unseen, and sometimes I find trickles of muddy water to quench my thirst. I was filling my canteen in one of these--the fighting well away from me, and the area fairly quiet--when there was a rustle to my left. I thought myself a dead man. The noises were not approaching troops, however, but some creature moving in the brush. A head poked out at me, something like a chicken's, but larger and much longer. Two wide eyes stared at me from perhaps four feet off the ground, in a face of tan feathers with a gray circle right between its eyes. Through the thick tangle of scrub, I could spy its body. It made a sound like a raven's quork and ducked its head back in the shrubs.

I had never seen anything like it!When I inched forward for a better look, it kawed at me with such ferocity that I swiftly backed off. When it didn't re-appear to further antagonize me, I pulled a handful of bread from my pack and ate my small mid-day meal. I had some hope that clouds might appear before I would have to leave the shade of the arroyo wall. No sooner had I begun to eat than the bird-thing poked its head back out and

watched, quorking as it did so. I ate another bite, then tossed a small piece toward it. The creature was clearly hungry, and I had a little I could spare.

It lunged forward and ate quickly, then darted back. It was much longer than I had guessed, several yards long, at least, and its forelimbs were long and feathered. Perhaps I should have been afraid? But for all its impressive size, I could see in its gaze that it did not mean me harm.

With another bit of bread held out to it, the creature edged toward me, wary. Its eyes were dark and clever like a raven's, but when it cautiously took the bread from my hand, I saw hundreds of small, sharp teeth. This time, it did not eat the bread, but carried it between its jaws back into the bushes. The brush must go deeper there than I realized, for from inside I heard much squawking and quorking.

I took one more bite of bread and then tossed the rest into the brush. The eager noises I heard were my reward, and reason enough to go hungry for a few hours.

I did not tell anyone at camp about the creatures. Perhaps I keep them secret out of selfishness--a bad trait in an Anarchist--or perhaps I simply worry that my hungry Comrades would see them as food. For now, I keep this secret safe between us.

I lie awake this night, thinking of them and you. Do you remember when we first met? It could not have made as much an impression on you as it did on me. You were speaking passionately, supporting the Hotel Strike, your voice booming over the crowd. I stood enraptured, unable to look away. I was smitten at once, and hopeless, for I could not then imagine that you, handsome, tall, and possessed of such authority, could love me, reed-thin, small-voiced, and a man besides.

Then you met my eyes, and it was as though a vice, cruel and welcome, tightened in my chest.

July 8, 1937

Dearest Eli,

The heat refuses to relent. It rises from the land in shimmering waves, with not a cloud to break it. It parches this dry land drier. Everyone thirsts. My only comfort is that the enemy must be thirsty as well, and more miserable for it, for our cause is just.

Each day I have scouted and refilled my canteen from the trickle of the arroyo stream. The creatures grow increasingly comfortable with me. They know I will bring them some food, bread, or a few bites of meat. They will eat most anything, but meat seems to delight them best. There are six of them, a pack. Or should I say a flock? They do not fly, having no wings, but they are much like birds.

They like me quite well, these strange creatures. Now when I arrive the brave one I first met, who I have taken to calling Gray Spot, pokes his head out and greets me with a chirk-chirk-chirk that I think means he is

pleased. Soon the others join in. They are ragged, and thin. The fighting in the area has grown intense, the heat oppressive, and they hide. They are hungry. Anyone can see there is not enough in this arid land to long sustain beasts of such size.

I cannot help but worry for them. I think of the stray cats you take in and care for as the days turn cold, and so I know that you will not laugh at me, nor at my fear for these strange creatures. I could die at any moment, but these innocents are caught in our war, and each time I am with them I feel the weight of their presence, as though they were drawn to me for a purpose, and I to them.

Does it betray my Anarchism to think such, my beloved? Perhaps it does, but I feel it even so. The world is not as it must be, and certainly it is not as it should be. It is as we make it. Perhaps fate or chance or G-d helps us, if we know how to look. If so, then it may be that they, like you, are here to remind me to be kind as well as righteous.

Or perhaps G-d does not intervene, and it is all only men. If so, men will soon decide much. Little has happened of late, as both sides position

and seek out weaknesses in the other. The weather has slowed everything down, but even if the heat does not break, the tension will. The forces are in place, and supplies run low. Battle will be joined soon, and decisively.

This worries me. Fascist patrols have kept me from getting close enough to the ridge to discover their defenses, but I have now scouted the rest of the area thoroughly. They've extended their line to the east, keeping to the hills beneath the ridge. We have moved our line opposite them, with the plains between us. (My friends the bird-creatures are in an arroyo just on our side of the hills, less than a mile from the Fascist line.)

One thing is certain: whoever holds Mosquito Ridge will claim a dominant position on this portion of the battlefield. I am certain we will soon try to claim it.

What will happen to my new friends once the fighting begins? I wish there was more that I could do for them. Perhaps it is my fate to do what little I can. It is not the first stone that builds a bridge; nonetheless, each stone is necessary. May I be a worthy stone.



July 10, 1937

My Dearest Eli,

Commander Law called me to his tent this afternoon. He hunched over a map of the battlefield, the thick canvas blocking out much of the afternoon light. He beckoned me inside and extended his finger to a point on the map. Mosquito Ridge.

Our orders have come down, he said. We attack the ridge tomorrow.

*Yes, sir, I said. I do not like the word sir, but Law is a cunning tactician and always leads from the front, and has earned it.*

The Fascists patrol the area constantly, I told him. I have not been able to get close enough to judge their defenses.

Law nodded, put a hand on my shoulder. I know you've done your best. But now I need more than that. I need to know what we're facing. Can you get closer?

I felt my jaw tighten. I can, sir, if I leave after dark. We both knew the risk, but I saw this was my chance to repay my commander's trust in me, perhaps my one chance to help our cause.

I'm counting on you, Goldman, he said, and we shared the look of men who might not survive the next day.

I am sorry to write it so plainly, my beloved. I know it will cause you pain to see it put down like that. Even if you cannot forgive me for my words, I must be honest. You were put on this earth to make the world better, block by block, through small kindnesses and organizing the masses. Perhaps I was put here for this moment.

Do you remember what you asked me, the night before I left, as we held one another and let the cool night wash over us?

Tell me, you said, why you must do this?

To stop the Fascists, I told you. I was hurting and preferred your anger to your tears, so I added, you will have no trouble replacing me.

It was a cruelty, and defamation besides, for I trust you completely. To admit it would have made leaving harder, so like a coward I chose the easy path over truth. Never again.

If I die tonight, I pray you will forgive me for leaving you, and for the hurt I caused you. No matter my foolish words, know that there is nothing but death that would long keep me from your side.

Now, at last, I know the other half of my answer. If I could go back and rest with my head on your chest, here is what I would say: I fight to be a man worthy of your love.

July 19, 1937

My Dearest Eli,

I have lived to fight on, but in the strangest of circumstances. That night, I made my approach to the ridge, moving through the scrub-grass and keeping as low and silent as I could. It was long, tense work, full of switch-backs and steep ascents as I moved higher up the ridge. My wounded hand made the climb slower than it should have been. Twice enemy patrols nearly stumbled on me, but fortune was with me and, many hours after I had set out, I learned what I needed to know. There were machine-gun nests halfway up the ridge, entrenched and surely fatal for the attack we had been ordered to make.

My only thought then was to get back to Commander Law, to warn him. I hurried down from the hills as quickly as I dared. When at last I again had a view of the plains between the ridge and our Brigade, I saw a terrible sight. In the pre-dawn light, Franco's forces had rearranged them-

selves. They had not moved far, merely from one side of a low range of hills to the other, a distance of just over a mile, but in so doing, they had cut off my route back to camp. There was no going through them. I could have gone around, far to the east, but it would have been a detour of several hours. Too late to warn Law.

I made my way as far as I could, through the scrubgrass and the very arroyo I had spent much time in, these last few days. And I despaired.

I sat with my head in my hands, trying to think, feeling I had failed my commander and my cause, when from behind me I heard a familiar quork-quork. The bird-creatures moved in a uneasy pack down the stream, led by Gray Spot. They advanced to perhaps twenty feet away, then hesitated. Gray Spot, always bold, drew nearer, still quorking, tilting his head to one side. My friends were looking very hungry now, the lines of their ribs visible to me even in the half-light.

In my anxiety the day before, I had not touched any of my evening's rations, so now I tore off a bit of bread and tossed it to him. He did not eat,

but brought it back to the others, and they devoured it. It would do them little good, I feared. They could not long survive here, not while the battle continued, and on every side for miles there were military lines.

I've heard it said that great desperation breeds great insight. Perhaps it is so. I think it more likely that I seized on the only half-chance that presented itself. It was better than being caught, better by far than doing nothing.

I walked back the way I had come, crouching and dropping crumbs behind me, every few feet at first, then with more and more distance between. My friends moved cautiously afterward, always twenty or thirty feet back. They were clever, and at least as desperate as I was. They were less quiet than I, but we were now behind the enemy line, and no one noticed us.

Halfway up the ridge, I ran out of bread and switched to sausage. Not much longer after that I could hear the Fascists nearby, reading for battle. I feared we would be caught, so close to our goal, but the brush and the

steep terrain helped us, as did our approach. They were expecting an attack from the only direction available to the Republican forces, across the plain and up the ridge. I had approached from what they thought was a secure flank.

When I was very close to the nearest machine-gun embankment, I went down on my belly. The skittish creatures stopped, save for Gray Spot, who followed closely behind me. I reached up to him, and he did not flinch away as I rubbed at the soft feathers of his neck. It was my goodbye.

The gunner was already at his post, hunched over his weapon and looking drowsy as the light broke over the desert. Across the plain I saw my Comrades advancing. They were a large force, big enough to not be threatened by the Fascists in the hills to the west. But they had no chance of scaling the steep incline of the ridge under sustained machine-gun fire. In no more than twenty minutes, they would be in range.

Gunfire would give away my position, and my wounded hand made my rifle all but useless, so I slid my knife between my teeth and edged

forward. Gray Spot didn't move, but knelt low, watching me with those strange, keen eyes. I had perhaps fifty yards between me and my target, half of that in the open, with no cover. All I could do was move silently and hope.

By the time I was out of cover of the scrub, the morning was fully bright. If he turned around, I would be caught out in the open, the alarm raised and all lost.

I inched forward, quiet as I could. I wished to break into a run and have it all decided at once. But I held my nerve.

Ten yards. Five. At last I was so close I could smell his sweat. I pulled myself to a crouch. He yawned, and turned--

I drew my knife across his throat. His eyes went wide and he clutched at himself as he died, his blood seeping across the rocky ridge.

In truth I did not feel any pity for this boy I had killed, this Fascist, though he was younger than I am. I felt only the weight of chance and obligation that had let me take his life before he could take mine.



I had no plan for what came next, no way to drive my friends forward, but Gray Spot needed no convincing. He came to the body at once, lowered his head and made noise like a pig in the undergrowth. He drank at the blood, then began to feed. It did not take the others long to join him. I could not easily stomach the sight of the creatures' meal, though I did not begrudge them. I moved clear of their way, further up the trail.

My instincts were fortunate, for their noise brought a pair of curious soldiers down from the nearest machine-gun nest, one an officer. They came around a bend and stopped, blinking at what they were seeing. I feared gunfire would send my friends running, so I leaped from the bushes, knife in good hand, and flung myself at them.

My blade caught the officer in the shoulder, and we tumbled to the ground. We rolled over one another, me trying to get a another strike with my blade, him reaching for his own. I was dimly aware of shouting, of the other man reaching for a weapon.

I do not know whether I believe in miracles, but I do not know what else to call what happened next. There were shouts from beyond me, the echo of a machine-gun, and then: kaw-kaw-kaw from behind me. The officer plunged his knife into my side--then screamed as Gray Spot's teeth tore at his neck. His companion gave a kind of choking cry, only to disappear beneath the other bird-things.

It was horrible to see. The two men did not survive long. Perhaps fifteen seconds had passed. There were shouts from along the ridge, and from below. No longer afraid of the noise, I pulled free my pistol and saw, below me, Law leading the charge up the ridge, into the line of fire.

I rushed forward, around the curve in the ridge and toward the next machine-gun nest, firing as soon as the enemy was visible to me. I was dimly aware that my friends followed. Had I given them a taste for blood, or were they responding when a friend was threatened, as any good freedom fighter would do? All I know is that together we rushed into the next nest, and the next, and the next. All along the lines were shocked and pan-

icked Fascists. One crew managed to point their machine-gun at us, but Gray Spot leaped high and came down upon them, all claws and teeth. Fascists fled, pale and screaming, down the ridge towards my Comrades.

At some point, I collapsed to the ground, bleeding from my side wound. I had also re-opened the wound on my hand in the desperate fighting, and blood coated my bandages. As my vision faded, I saw the bird-creatures leaning over me, and I wondered if they would consume me, too.

When I woke, Commander Law was looking down at me. I had been dead to the world for several hours. Long enough, it seemed, for us to secure the ridge and for Law, having seen some of what had happened, to somehow convince my friends to let him and a medic near me.

Those things, he said, whatever they are, are quite protective of you, son.

I smiled. Maybe they just hate Fascists as much as we do, Sir.

Law smiled too.

The battle continues, my beloved, though I am now in Madrid recovering. I will rejoin my comrades as soon as the doctors will allow it. I do not

take well to sitting idle, but it has at least allowed me time to finish this letter, and there is a nurse here who understands the circumspection our love demands. She will see this reaches you.

There is much to be done before the war is won. But the news from the front is good, and the day is coming when I will beat my swords to ploughshares, or at any rate trade my gun for a pen.

Yours Always,  
Mordechai

Postscript: I have here a letter from Commander Law. It seems my friends will not give him a moment's peace. He says one of the Spanish officers, a geologist, has solved the riddle of them.

You must return soon, Law tells me. These dinosaurs of yours must also be Anarchists, for they are barely controlled, and eager for the blood of Fascists.

END









STRANGERS

IN A

TANGLED WILDERNESS

[www.tangledwilderness.org](http://www.tangledwilderness.org)

[www.patreon.com/strangersinatangledwilderness](https://www.patreon.com/strangersinatangledwilderness)