

Season's Piece: The Benediction of Birds

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I remember waking and the fever breaking. Gazing through a picture window from the vantage point of my grandparents' four-poster bed – a bed my five-year-old self climbed into with the aid of a small ladder – I saw quick, bright flashes of color flying in and out of the soft gray morning. I lay there, the lone audience member observing a performance held just for me.

Realizing I was no longer ill, I thought those backyard birds celebrated my newfound health. The birds did not banish the illness, but they were there, keeping me company when the virus released its grip. The birds and I knew, long before my parents and grandparents did, that I was well once more.

Birds kept me company again when I entered first grade. Clutching my small paperback copy of *A Guide to the Most Familiar American Birds* comforted me in that world of antiseptic odors, rigid rules, and uniform rows of desks. The book was more than a field guide to birds; it was a talisman connecting me to home. Here, in the brick fortress of Hillcrest Elementary School, I never knew I had crossed a line until it was too late. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to include snowflakes in my snowman drawing until the teacher complained to my mother that snowflakes weren't part of the assignment. Or that I wasn't allowed to chat with my best friend until I looked up from our conversation and saw the teacher and the entire class silently staring me down, and the teacher saying, "Are you done now?"

From then until now, birds appear, as if on cue, when I need them most. The year my son entered first grade, he spent more time in hospitals and doctor's offices than in classrooms. I remember the day I learned that he needed another eye surgery – his fifth. I hung up the phone, looked out the window, and through tears, caught a glimpse of a cardinal's scarlet flight. For an instant, its beauty dispelled my dread.

Seeking a momentary cushion against grown-up concerns, I head for the woods. I choose my steps, careful not to trip on roots or rocks. The forest invites me to slow down, to notice water trickling from a rock, the call-and-response of a hidden wood thrush, my footfall cushioned by pine needles. Worries slough off, one by one. By hike's end, I am a calmer, stronger version of myself.

Weekdays, I face the sterile light of a computer screen, working with technology that is an antithesis of the natural world. As my editor requests, I transform doctors' words into "Something a grandmother could understand." From my office window, I watch bluebirds, cardinals, and finches splash in the birdbath and wish I were one of them. They are oblivious to my presence, but all these decades later, they still make me feel less alone.

Most days, I'm grateful for the college research papers that prepared me for my career. Other days, I wonder if writing about cancer, dementia, and other ailments affects me in ways I do not yet understand. To protect myself, like that field guide to birds protected me from first grade, I devote weekends to green therapy – digging, raking, pulling weeds, and placing new plants to transform bare soil into a lush landscape. I want to rescue my yard, neglected by previous owners, from sandy soil, anemic grass, and untrimmed trees twisted into tortured shapes. On weekdays, I write about medical problems I cannot fix; weekends, I try to fix my patch of earth. A few hours in, I'm exhausted, sweaty, and filthy, but I have unearthed a part of my soul lost in the weekly swirl of deadlines.

Monday morning, back at my desk, I challenge my brain to describe an intricate surgery in a way a grandmother could understand. I am faithful to the facts, focused on the words, feigning interest in the topic. Midway through, the small, feverish child beckons. I look up from my computer. The birds are still there, keeping me company, reminding me there is life outside my office window.