

The Birds: Birds of the Northeast

written by Guest Contributor | July 30, 2018



Featured Image Credit: *The Birds of America*, John James Audobon (1838)

A sparrow in the house, my grandmother says, means someone there is going to die. I am a child, watching from above a plate of Irish soda bread as a terrified bird tries to escape through shut windows. My mother opens them, lets the February air in, and the sparrow flies to safety. It has pooped on the windowsill. This, my grandmother says, is good luck, difficult to reconcile with death, and I wonder if this means my father will die, because I am afraid of him. It is years before I learn that he never wanted children, that he sometimes left me alone in my playpen in the garage. There was a phone in that garage shaped like a football, and this and a white 1984 Ford Thunderbird are the symbols through which my father was represented to me as a child.

You could say I come from a birding family. My mom likes to recall her own mother, leaving seeds and oranges out for the juncos and chickadees in the dead of winter, long before birdseed was sold in stores. She was always good, says my mother, at caring for birds and babies. It was sentience that got in the way, or perhaps the permanence of a creature that could not continue to grow, that could not be frightened into flight with the flick of a palm. My grandma's brother, my great uncle Mim, used to sit outdoors with sunflower seeds in his palm, and the chickadees would come to him, wrap their small talons around the pads of his fingers and cautiously eat the seeds. He came to New York after being exiled from Ireland for involvement with the IRA, and he worked on the cross continental railroad with my Uncle Tom. Touching a bird must have been like building those tracks, a brief encounter with a thing that would go places you never would: the vast sky, California. As a child I thought that perhaps to be a good Irish girl I ought to commune with birds too, like a North Jersey Snow White. I would sit in my front yard on a

patch of grass with seed in my hand, waiting for maybe ten minutes until I gave up hope that any bird would come to me. The thought of a live creature, endowed with the power of flight, playing at earthliness as it ate from my hand, was intoxicating.

The front yard was a small triangle of grass elevated from the driveway and surrounded by an old wooden wall. In winter, the snow in that yard was speckled with trails of tiny footprints, deer and rabbits and the shadows of cowbird feet. My dad hated the snow, its pale, quiet persistence. He would begin shoveling after a flurry and was out every half hour during a blizzard, carving out paths that would be sheeted with ice by morning. My brothers and I built snowmen in that yard each winter, stealing wire nuts from the back of his work truck to use for eyes and a nose. My dad did what he could to exercise his power over the world outside, but he couldn't stop the snow from falling.

When I turned ten my mom bought me a parakeet. It was yellow and green, like a hard candy, and I named it Katie, the most beautiful name I knew. That June, my mom bought one for my younger brother, who was not, in my opinion, old enough to own a parakeet. His bird was cerulean and white, covered in black-pepper striations of darkness. Its name was Tommy. The two birds lived together in a white cage in our kitchen. Whatever visions I had had of Katie sitting on my shoulder and speaking broken bird English were quickly shattered. The birds woke us up every morning at 6:30, calling mournfully for the Australian flocks of budgies I had seen on television, from which their ancestors had perhaps been cruelly removed as chicks. After a few years, my parents gave them back to the pet store. In Edgewater, New Jersey, there is a notorious flock of wild parakeets, living out the dream of flight between power lines and above the turnpike. I like to think this is where they ended up.

Back then our neighbors kept a flock of carrier pigeons. They lived in a red barn, and I fantasized about breaking into the old wooden structure and touching the pigeons, grazing their soft feathers as they ate seed from my hand. Every day the birds flew together in formation, making larger and larger circles above the neighborhood until they finally returned to their roost. There were two white ones, my favorite, though I only ever saw them from far below. I was fascinated at the faithfulness of these birds, who could sail anywhere on a gust of wind, but always chose to return home. Once, my dad found one of the birds dead in our driveway. I remember him mentioning it as he untied his workboots at the end of the day. He accidentally kicked his beer over onto the tile and I laughed hysterically in that bitter way children have, thinking how he would have yelled if I had done the same thing. I never saw the bird but I imagined it still perfect, untouched by vulture's beak, motionless and white as a marshmallow.

One year, an indigo bunting visited our home on its way south for the winter. I had never seen anything like it: bright as a sapphire, eating from the

birdfeeder alongside starlings and sparrows as if it was just another bird. The indigo bunting makes bluebirds look gray. It was a small miracle to see this tiny jewel in my own backyard, shining through March like a blue sun. He was as blue as fresh blood is red. My mom and I stood at the window each morning, watching the bird remove sunflower seeds from their shells with his silvery beak while we drank black tea. My mom always told me that real Irishwomen took their tea boiling, but I always waited twenty minutes before touching it. After two weeks, the indigo bunting moved on. Even my dad was sorry to see him go. We never saw another there, and I wondered if he ever made it to where he was headed, or if he was already lost by the time he made it to my mother's feeder to grace our yard with that impossible blue.

Our yard was also home to blackbirds. One year, a strange, murderous grackle began attacking the sparrows, leaving their bodies spotted with puncture wounds beneath the dying ash tree. No one knows exactly why some grackles do this. It is like trying to explain cruelty in humans: it just happens, somehow. This was the only time a killer grackle took up residence at our birdfeeder, but it was jarring to see the dead sparrows appear throughout the winter, dotted with blood. I watched as flocks of grackles gathered around the sunflower seed, their wings like puddles of gasoline, eyes yellow as tourmaline, and one among them a murderer.

When I think of my father in those years I see him with his car. He drove his old white Thunderbird until 2006. He hated the noise of those parakeets, never understood why my mother spent money on bags of seed for the wild birds just so he could clean their shit from the lawn chairs, but he loved that Thunderbird. He would wash it on weekends in the summer, wearing ray bans and no shirt, spraying my brothers and me with hosewater that broke into rainbows above the hot asphalt of the driveway. During the week he drove a rust-red Ford Econoline filled with pliers, hammers, boxes of lightbulbs and tangled copper wire. In the hot days of August my brothers and I would sit in the warm darkness of that truck among the electrical supplies, sorting through nuts and bolts while we ate popsicles.

Goldfinches are my mother's favorite birds. At the crack of spring each year, she stood at the window in our kitchen, imploring my brothers and me to come admire the small lemondrop bursting like a ringing bell against the stark frozen ground, patched with snow. That's what my mom calls them, lemondrops. The goldfinches return when the air begins to smell like mud. They are the official state bird of New Jersey, defying the ever-encroaching suburbs to cast sunlight on early spring each year, gathering like dandelions on the thistle feeder.

After my grandpa died, my grandma bought a canary to bring spring into her living room. She called the canary Ray, like sunlight. Before the canary, my grandma had a zebra finch named Poppy. He was tiny, striped gray and brown, with a short rounded beak like a tangerine. My grandma adopted Poppy after her son, Poppy's original owner, committed suicide. Then I thought Poppy must have been in mourning, but now I think that he didn't notice the loss, that one cage was the same as any other.

As the Arctic warms, snowy owls are beginning to move further and further South. In 2007, a snowy owl was spotted on the Hudson in Piermont, New York, half an hour upstate. On a bitter January weekend, my mom, aunt, cousin, brothers, and I took a trip to see the owl. I didn't think a sighting was likely: after all, the trees in New Jersey in spring are filled with migrating warblers, but I rarely spot them. The day was cold and the sky was paper white, as if it would snow. We walked to the river through mud cracking with thin ice, lined on each side by a vast monoculture of phragmites. These reeds are an aggressive, invasive species, and they are everywhere in New Jersey, swallowing the entire Meadowlands in a sea of brown, brush-tipped grass. As we reached the river, we began to look for the owl among the reeds and the ice floes that drifted across the water. Unlike most owls, snowy owls are diurnal, and it was late afternoon when we finally saw him. The owl was perched on a rock that jutted from the water. He was enormous, white as the snow that he had left behind in the Arctic, his wing feathers dotted with black. He was both majestic and adorable, his feathers ensconcing him in fluff. I took a whole disposable camera's worth of pictures, but when they were developed the owl had shrunk into a small white speck against the bitter New York landscape. That's the trouble with trying to record something: it grows smaller in hindsight, hardly distinguishable from the surroundings.

Today, it is not so uncommon to see snowy owls as far south as New Jersey. The geese don't migrate anymore, their angular formations no longer a sign of autumn above the barren Northeastern trees. But every winter, the robin still disappears, replaced by juncoes and chickadees, their feathers vibrant against a dusting of snow. And in March, the robins return in droves, hopping across every patch of grass they can find. My grandpa used to point them out to me from the cracked tennis court when I was a child, their red breasts bright as the crocuses that broke from the frozen soil. My grandma and I listened for their calls from her breezeway, while I sipped Lemon Zinger in an attempt to seem grown up. And now, when spring comes to thaw the late March soil, my mom and I watch as robins dig insects from the garden that once held an ancient ash tree. We drink Irish breakfast tea, fresh from the kettle, scalding our tongues.



Jade Hurter is a poet and educator living in New Orleans. She is the author of the chapbook *Slut Songs* (Hyacinth Girl Press 2017), and her work has appeared in *Passages North*, *New South*, *Tinderbox*, *The Columbia Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches at the University of New Orleans.