

# The Birds: Blackbird, fly

written by Guest Contributor | December 20, 2016



I was around the age of five— my mother remembered the day fondly—

I asked her if we could listen to those bugs again.

The Beatles.

On Vinyl.

Our bare feet sashaying with a *pitter, patter* on wooden floors. The twists, the turns of our arms. Swing, and dancing. Sashaying to the bugs on the antique record player. And we swayed around and about our small modular home. Filled with peace, filled with contentment. Filled with recycled furniture and décor— with memories and an old coffee table my mother found on the streets and stained, herself, with a cherry maple finish. The smell of potpourri from old rose petals she gathered. And I looked up to her and her adoring blue eyes— that tender expression. That expression you can never forget.

My mother, father, and I lived in California until the winter of 2005. I was in the Nutcracker Musical at school, practicing in the evenings after class, prepping for the dress rehearsal. One night after practice, my mother picked me up— not my father like he usually did. She took me to Walmart, her eyes glazed over with emptiness. I asked her what was wrong; she told me that my father wasn't feeling well. I put Chicken Noodle soup into our cart. She said he would like that.

But he pushed it away. Said he wasn't hungry.

Told me to go away—

The lock of the door clicked behind me.

*Click, and click.*

The next morning, his melancholy voice told me “five minutes to six.” He always woke me up for school; I don’t recall ever needing an alarm clock. If not him, on very rare occasions my mother would slow cook bacon so that the enticing aroma would wander in through the crack of my bedroom door. There was no bacon today. Just words resembling an alarm. I shuffled in bed and looked to hallway from my bedroom. He was gone.

The front door closed.

The screen door following behind—

*Click, and click.*

I’m reminded of those last words. I’m reminded of his lilac tinted comatose body that lay on the hospital bed later that evening. The cold hospital sheets that lay on his body. The emptiness in my heart leaving the hospital with my mother followed by a *pitter, patter*, sound of raindrops on the pavement. It hardly ever rained in California.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night,  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly,*

My mother and I moved out of state to Michigan, we had family there. My mother knew she couldn’t care for me on her own. Her sister, Lori, picked us up at the airport and helped us with our luggage. This change would be good for us— a breath of fresh air, perhaps. The first thing I noticed when we stepped outside: cold. The cold, dry air stung my throat when I took in that breath; I quickly learned to breathe through my nose. The second thing I noticed was the beautiful snow.

I picked it up with my little bare hands. Cold.

Michigan was dark and cold.

How could anyone live in Michigan?

The same question haunted me through the hallways of elementary school. Kids asked me if I knew celebrities or saw any when I lived in California. I politely told them no, and quietly replied that I lived in the valley. So you’re a valley girl? No. But you lived in the valley? Yes, that’s the flatlands of California. Why would you move to Michigan? Bluntly, I told them my father passed away a couple days after Thanksgiving from a heart attack. Everyone told me sorry, and didn’t know what to say after that.

What do you say after that?



Brewer's Blackbirds are common year-round residents in much of western North America, often seen striding in open habitats and towns along sidewalk grounds and city parks with short forward jerks of their heads as well as chuckling in flocks atop shrubs, trees, and reeds. They are birds to be seen in the full sun; the males have a glossy, almost liquid combination of black, midnight blue, and metallic green, while females are a staid brown, without the male's bright eye or the female Red-winged Blackbird's streaks. They often adapt well to humans and the developments we bring. In the last century, they spread eastward from western Minnesota, taking advantage of agricultural fields, farmhouses, and towns. Mistakenly, Brewer's Blackbirds are sometimes shot, trapped, or poisoned around agricultural fields in an attempt to protect crops. Although they do eat grains, these species of blackbirds are quick to notice new food sources and have been credited with helping to curb outbreaks of insect pests.

The conservation status of this blackbird species is widespread and abundant. During the 20th century, the breeding range in summers expanded north to include most of southern and central Canada, the Great Plains, and eastward into the Great Lakes region. Outside of breeding season, Brewer's Blackbirds form mixed flocks with other species of blackbirds, including grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, cowbirds, and starlings. Brewer's Blackbirds are monogamous and sometimes nest in small, loose colonies. They usually nest in trees, but may nest on the ground, in shrubs, or in tall grass. The female builds a bulky, open cup-nest of twigs, grass, weeds, and needles, lined with grass, rootlets, and hair. Mud or manure often holds the base together. Paired birds stop associating with each other after the nesting season ends, but typically reunite the next year if both birds return after winter.

As years passed, more questions arose, and my answers got more complex. My mother was suffering from bipolar disorder and manic depression. I didn't realize how bad it was until I saw the blue and white Hawaiian duffel bag my father bought for me at a Flea Market packed and placed at the doorstep of my friend's house. Topped with a letter in inked blue cursive—smudged with tears—signed with "I'll see you again someday OXOXO".

*Hugs and tisses, hugs and tisses.*

I was in late elementary school to early junior high at that time. I took the school bus to my friend's house on the weekdays because my mother didn't want me to be home alone while she was at work. She did a brief pedophile scan for our apartment complex on the internet. Found out that one lived in a building across the parking lot from us, she was absolutely appalled by the thought

that there could be a creep watching her little girl from his windows. So, she bought a pair of binoculars and we would sit behind our parakeet's birdcage stand, non-conspicuously watching him watch TV from our window to conclude he wasn't watching us.

I knew she was sad before seeing the ink puddles and tear stains. I would lie beside her in late afternoons, fitting my small body against hers and next to a nest full of pillows. I held her. I listened closely to her shallow breaths and matched them with my own.

I showed my friend the letter, she told me not to worry. How could anyone in their right mind not worry? She called her mom, who called my aunt, who both came rushing to my mother's apartment to find her shaking uncontrollably from an overdose.

My mother was delirious for days in the hospital; mumbling and jumbling utter nonsense. The only clear phrase she was able to make out was, *Get the phone and feed Tweety*. After a successful recovery from her overdose, my aunt and uncle got her checked in to a high end rehabilitation clinic. They told me it would make her better. She got counseling. Expressed her feelings through poems she wrote. Gave me a teddy bear sitting on the inside of a little white box, with roses, she hand-painted herself. She loved teddy bears. She had a collection containing nearly twenty of them placed on the windowsill of her bedroom. She gained an ounce of sanity each day— completed the program. Released, rehabilitated, and received a money wire of \$2000 dollars from friends in California. Asked me if I would ever want to go back, I declined. I remember hearing her shallow breathing against the phone when I gave her my final answer. We said nothing, and sat on the phone in silence. She made it there in record time, didn't sleep the whole way there. When my aunt and uncle took guardianship of me, I learned she went back to California to get back to her drug connections. Apparently her and my dad had been addicted to methamphetamine for years. They did it right under my nose and I had no idea.

However, there was a time I was cooking ramen noodles and looked in the cabinets for extra spices. Found a Ziploc bag with white powder resembling laundry detergent. Asked my mother what it was. She said nothing, with a hiss, snatched the bag and retreated to her bedroom. That was during the time we lived in California.

Filled with peace.

Filled with contentment.

Filled in a Ziploc bag containing crystal meth.

In Michigan, in a vacant bedroom filled with teddy bears with their button eyes and opaque stares, in my mind where I began to create a vexing void.

The filter I had on the world was either black or white—there was no color. There was good, or there was bad. I saw everything in a black lens. I thought about death—I thought about it a lot. I thought about how cruel life was. It was hard to believe there were people out there who had it worse. My mindset was selfish, entirely, to think that I had the worse life imaginable.

But it wasn't bad.

It could have been worse.

I had memories. Crazy good memories of a hippie mother who danced with me to the Beatles, taught me how to grow wild flowers, caught lizards with me, braided my hair, and read Harry Potter to me every night. Who signed her letters with 'OXOXO' and said 'tisses' instead of 'kisses' just because it sounded cute. Who took me trick or treating every year and unloaded the pillow cases full of candy in the car so we could scheme for more on our next round. Who stopped on the side of the road every time she saw old furniture or antiques to restore so she could turn around and sell them at the Flea Market. The mother who looked at me fondly and gave me lip-sticked kisses on my forehead when she tucked me in at night.

I learned to forgive and never forget— forty-something missed long distance calls later. Those were the voice mails that killed me. I heard that regret aching in her voice over the answering machine. There were times she spoke slanderously over the speaker phone just to get my aunt's attention. Just to be heard. Sometimes she said nothing at all. She became homeless, afraid. Apologized for her words and proceeded to ask us for money— asked for the social security check I received from my dad's passing. She expressed her bipolar and manic moods for months, conspiring grandiose plan of actions to convince me to move back to California— no— I knew my life would be better in Michigan.

My aunt and uncle took guardianship of me sometime during the year of 2008. They had no idea where to start. Where do you start with a teenage girl that has a lot of emotional baggage? A good start was switching over to Hudsonville schools. I made friends there, not a lot, but people who understood what it was like to hurt— it was definitely a start. I learned how to become stronger emotionally with the love and support of my friends and family. I grew a strong friendship with a half Indian girl, we watched horror movies together, had horror movie marathons. Strangely, seeing death and fear on repeat made me less afraid of the concept. I began to embrace the fact I lost my father, the fact my mother was suffering from drug addiction alongside mental illness. Being friends with this girl made me realize I was

not alone— her mother was addicted to pain killers and narcotics— left her in Michigan with her father and moved to Florida. This friend and I really understood where the other was coming from.



Cultural, spiritual, and symbolic representations of blackbirds obscurely suggest human transformation and the ability to remain grounded in the earth energies while walking a spiritual path. Blackbirds spend much of their time on the ground. Its locomotion includes walking, climbing and hopping forward and backwards. They forage for food in open spaces although cover is always nearby. When foraging in leaf litter under trees they sound like people walking.

When resting the blackbird is frequently seen stretching, legs extended back, wings in full extension, tail spread, and the head tilted to one side as if listening. The Blackbirds flights are low, short and undulating but fast and direct over open country. When blackbird flies into your life, awareness is heightened and change on a cellular level begins; connection with nature and the forces of creation increase. They move with determination and focus which can teach us how to acknowledge our potential and use it to its fullest.

Birds veiled in black do not give up their secrets easily— they love to watch us marvel over their messages. Blackbirds demand our commitment to learning their wisdom, and do not reveal their meanings unless they are convinced we've devoted ourselves completely to the path of understanding both dark and light sides of energy. This concept correlates to [lunar themes](#) too; the symbolic meaning of blackbirds is eternally linked to the "dark vs light" phases of the moon. Nocturnal awareness— illumined lunar understanding which requires a different use of the senses.

Senses which can only be utilized when transformative devotion is made.

A commitment to higher knowing.

An acceptance of the void.

This is a fundamental concept of [alchemy](#): Transition and Transformation. The bird is symbolic of higher ideals, and a higher path of knowing; the color black is symbolic of pure potential. Between the two, there is no limit to human transformation.



As we transitioned into our high school years, my self-esteem had started to improve drastically. I fully accepted the concept of death. I realized that the occurrences which had happened in my childhood made me a stronger person. I had been through a lot, and I really was doing great— until dating came in and out of my life. The *pitter, patter* of rain on heart-panes. Heartbreak. The feeling of that vexing void. The failed attempts of piecing together my self-esteem and learning how to love myself. I saw a counselor at school and joined a girls group. This group was led by a social worker named Tiffany in her early 30's. She took us to coffee shops, the beach, parks, and together we all did arts and crafts. Together we learned how to heal ourselves.

During my junior year of high school, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was sometime in July, my family and I stopped at a beach. It was muggy out that day. I knew something was wrong when she called and asked to put my aunt on the phone. I didn't hear the conversation, but I had a peculiar intuition.

Cancer.

Sickness.

Disease.

I opened the car door and sat on an old wooden fence for a while. I watched as some blackbirds playing in a puddle.

*Pitter, patter.*

*When I was a little girl, I saw a destitute blackbird on sidewalk streets. He peered up with his glassy black eyes and took two hops toward me, pecked at non-existent crumbs on the ground, and turned his head in bewilderment. He had one leg he balanced well on, though he was rather clumsy when scattering beneath people's feet. My father told me not to help the blackbird because it was sick with disease.*

My aunt and I visited her in California shortly after we found out. I remembered seeing the dried golden grass from the airplane window—

I felt at home again.

My mother welcomed us into a small home her and her boyfriend were renting together. They met when they were homeless, helped each other get back on

their feet. His name was Roger, and I found him to be a kind soul. He fought in Nam. He was Cherokee. He had a marijuana plant named Matilda. He was taking good care of my mother, and I thanked him for that.

Old wooden floorboards.

Filled with recycled furniture and décor.

No antique record player.

But there were those bugs—

She gave me a John Lennon Discography set. In a mint condition tin printed with pop art of John Lennon's face. Red, Orange, Blue, Green— Color. Four CD's— I immediately recognized 'Imagine'. This was a song we always listened to together when we drove around looking at Christmas lights.

Filled with peace, filled with contentment.

*All your life,  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise.  
Blackbird singing in the dead of night,*

I visited her in California for a second time with my aunt, months later— last minute notice. My aunt received a call from the hospital she was in, she had pneumonia, her organs were slowly shutting down, and chemotherapy wasn't enough. She had cirrhosis of the liver caused from Hepatitis C.

I knew this would be the last time I saw her.

She lay on the hospital bed. Skinny. Tubes sticking into her arms. Needles pricking into veins. I cringed. I sat beside her and ran my fingers through her wavy blond hair. She looked up to me with those adoring blue eyes, breathing through an oxygen mask. She couldn't talk, but I understood what she was saying. With a bit of strength, she lifted her arms, kept them a few inches in the air for a few seconds, and slammed them back down to the hospital bed. Raised her eyebrows with sass— *get me the hell out of here.*

I laughed, and knew she was too. Her facial features rose with expression.

During that few day visit, I refused to cry in front of her. I wanted her to cherish her last few moments she had with me and her sister, to be filled with joy rather than remorse. Leaving her intensive care unit in the hospital was the hardest thing I ever had to do. The door shut behind me—

*Click, and click.*

And I was gone.

Walking down the tiled hospital hallways. *Pitter, patter.*

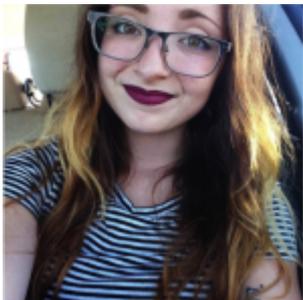
The strangest feeling was that seeing her in so much pain made me want her to pass on. It wasn't fair that she had to suffer. Nobody should have to suffer like that— I wouldn't suffer in sadness either. I knew she and my father would want me to look forward. Since I was young, I still had a lifetime of experiences to look forward to. The worst was over.



Blackbird calls to us from the gateway between two worlds, urging us to follow a spiritual path or to become more self-aware; pointing out the ways in which we can discover more about our hidden motivations and potential. There are times in life when it is important to concentrate on the outer world and your responsibilities in that world, but there are also times when you must attend to the haunting song of your soul. In heeding the blackbirds' song, you will discover healing and new depths in your soul.



*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see,  
All your life,  
You were waiting for this moment to be free.*



**Gracey Mussina** is a coffee, cat, and cognition enthusiast on the quest to become a word wizard, an environmental crusader, and to unearth what it means to be human. Fueled by abstractions, oddities, and her current fascination of honeybees, she hopes to publish her lyrical (or collection of experimental essays escaped from the lab) works-in-progress on developing environmental ethics. Eager to spark the imagination and possibilities in young writers, she assists with the coordination of workshops for Writers Under Thirty at the Great Lakes Commonwealth of Letters in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

