

The Birds: Co(r)vid Catharsis

written by Guest Contributor | July 1, 2021



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Friday the 13th in March of 2020 was a day of threes. It was the last day that schools and daycares were open before the first lockdown started in France, where I've made my home. That day, I learned that my grandmother had gone into the ICU in Los Angeles County with sepsis. Though I was too busy stocking up on library books and groceries to notice the weather, it was also the last day that it would rain in my region until the end of April.

It's not as if I had fantasized about how my loved ones would die, the way I did in my younger years about my future wedding or the birth of my two children, but living so far from home, I'd developed certain ideas of how it would go. I would drop everything and get on a plane back to the U.S. We would gather the family together and have a service to say goodbye. I would hug my mother and cry with her. I would travel to her childhood home and help her go through my grandmother's belongings.

Instead, over the next month while my grandmother slowly died, I was tethered to my home near Grenoble. To leave the house, we needed an *attestation*, a signed permission slip. For each outing, we had to swear on paper that we were going out for one of the five reasons approved by the government or risk a fine of at least 135 euros. We could go out for exercise within a one-kilometer radius of our address for a maximum of one hour a day. Funerals within France didn't even make the authorized list, much less a send-off that would require crossing a closed border.

However inadvertently, the pandemic had forced us to honor my grandmother's final wishes. She'd said several times during her last years that she didn't want a funeral, didn't even want an obituary. "I just want to disappear," she'd told my mother over the phone.

"Is that what she really wants?" I'd asked when my mom told me the story. "Or is it like when she says, 'don't worry about calling me, I know how busy you are.' And then she is sour and resentful because we don't talk to her as often as she'd like."

"She seemed pretty sincere," Mom replied. "She said, 'Who would even come?'"

My 102-year-old grandmother had lived through the Great Depression and World War II, survived a childhood with an alcoholic father and a bout with cancer to experience the loneliness that comes with extreme old age. She had outlived everyone in her own extended family and most of her friends, and now her oldest son, who died unexpectedly on Christmas Day 2019. I am convinced that beyond the broken hip, the pneumonia, the sepsis, what really killed my grandmother was a broken heart.

In that spring of unthinkable happenings, where fit young paramedics could succumb to the virus and disappear within days and the response of the President of the United States was that we shoot ourselves up with bleach, the passing of a centenarian was not very extraordinary. Still, never could I have imagined that when my grandmother finally died, she would be isolated in a nursing home with deep bedsores, having been triaged out of the hospital care that could have helped her die with dignity. Rationally, I understood that hospitals needed to put their limited resources toward helping the people who had a viable chance at life after this year, but it was excruciating knowing that at the end, my grandmother was in pain, confused, and completely alone.

Normally I respond to emotional stress by getting out into nature, but that spring in France, all the parks were closed. On my occasional walks, I found routes near the perimeters of parks and would peer in over fences and hedges. Although the approved zone near our house didn't encompass any countryside, I was desperate to get my eyes on something wild. I explored the nearby industrial park for the first time and discovered wild irises blooming near the barricaded garbage dump.

In my memories from that spring of processing my feelings, I am always sitting in a ray of sunshine pouring in from the tall window in the kitchen. For the first six weeks of lockdown, it still hadn't rained, and we were in danger of entering into a drought. My baby and preschooler loved having their afternoon snack in the sun, but the weather felt oppressive to me in its cheery contrast to my inner world.

The tears would flow without my permission while I prepared food, always more food. These were exceptional times, but the needs of small children are relentlessly routine. Although I wanted to give myself over to the emotion, as soon as I started crying, the kids would circle around me, their eyes large and round with concern, pudgy hands reaching out to comfort me. My daughter had already integrated the closure of her preschool and the playgrounds, the need for handwashing eight times a day, and constant talk of the mean microbes. How much more could a preschooler be expected to bear?

I would swipe at my eyes, trying to push my feelings away as well. "I'm crying because I'm just still so sad about my grandmother. It's OK, darlings, you don't have to fix it."

Even my empathetic daughter Alina soon tired of my dark moods. "It's no big deal if your grandma bees dead. Don't you have another one?" I wondered if I was just that annoying or if she was distancing herself from this new idea that a grandmother can disappear.

I had also been conscious of containing my grief around my husband because his mother had been diagnosed with a recurrence of breast cancer in mid-February. Because it was her second brush with the disease, her main treatment option was surgery. Her mastectomy was originally scheduled for late March, but once lockdown was announced, it was postponed until conditions improved. There is never a great time to have cancer when a person is over 75, but especially not then. Especially not for treatment in Paris, which was then an epicenter of infection.

All of this was out of our control, so I shifted my focus to how a serious illness in the family would affect our daughter, who adores my mother-in-law. How much should we tell her about Mamie? I called a close friend who lost her own mother when she was young.

"It doesn't sound good, my love. It really doesn't." Ali is British, so even her bleakest assessments are punctuated with terms of endearment.

"I know. I think Béranger knows it too, but he doesn't seem to be able to go there yet."

"He's going to have to prepare himself. You're going to have to prepare them all for the worst."

But how? Without my regular coping mechanisms, I found myself unable to do so much as light a candle for Grammy, much less guide my family. As the world came together online to figure out how to navigate our new isolation, my phone lit up with parenting group texts with recipes for homemade playdough and slime and invitations for every imaginable kind of class over Zoom. But not a word on how to do grief cut off from our families.

I realized I didn't know how to do this, how to grieve without a community or a faith. This was the first time that I had lost someone important since I moved on from my family's religion, stopped believing in heaven and a sense of divine purpose in the events of our lives. Without the warm blanket of meaning and the hope of seeing my dead loved ones again someday, all I was left with was loss.

In the absence of a family ritual, I turned to my garden. Every time a friend or family member called to offer their condolences, I was hurrying to wipe dirt off my hands to take the phone. My fingernails were permanently black and my skin cracked from so many washings. I could have worn gloves for those days, but I needed to feel the earth on my skin, to crush the weeds between my fingers and feel their juices.

My husband joined me in my silent ritual, me nose to earth, him up on a ladder cutting limbs off shrubs and trees. Since the garbage dumps were all closed, we filled massive compost bags with the yard waste and piled them up in the garage. There they decomposed, giving off heat and a pleasantish green smell that made the garage balmy. In late April, it finally started to rain, which added to the vegetal humidity in our entrance way.

It was during one of these afternoons in the garden that I found the dead

crow. At first, I thought it was a garbage bag. As I got closer and registered the sheen of feathers, I cried out but quickly tried to hide my reaction. I grabbed a shovel and laid it over the bird. "Keep the kids back there," I called to my husband as I went to the garage to get some bags.

I told myself that this was to shield the children, who had never seen anything dead before, but when I returned, I was the one unable to look at the crow full on. Instead, I glanced at one part of its body at a time and then shifted my gaze away. Black claws, raspberry bush. Black beak, camelia. I took a deep breath and lifted the shovel. One blue eye fixed open.

"What's that?" My daughter had appeared behind me. I threw a plastic bag over the bird but it just as quickly blew away. The wind was picking up. I stepped in front of my daughter and slowly zipped up her jacket while I silently searched my husband's eyes. Should we let her see it? He shrugged. Compared to daily life these days, maybe seeing a dead animal wasn't all that traumatic.

I stepped aside. "It's a dead bird, honey. You can look, but don't touch it."

"What kinda bird is it?" My daughter pushed in front of me to get a better look.

"I don't know. I thought it was a crow, but it might be a raven." I tried to get the shovel underneath the bird, but it was bigger than I'd registered at first. Its heft made me queasy, but I was determined to be the one to deal with this death. The crow kept slipping off the shovel and flopping back to the ground when I tried to pick it up.

I finally gave up and looked to my husband for help. "Can you hold the bag open for me?" I managed to push the bird along the ground into the plastic bag, which covered everything but its legs. "Now what? Should we bury it?"

"Maybe not." He grimaced as he looked at the legs sticking out. "Won't the cats dig it back up?" Our yard was frequently visited by homeless cats who dug up the vegetable patch and scaled trees to poop on our balcony and windowsills. I shuddered at the mental image of the poor crow disinterred and distributed around the garden by our feral frenemies.

"So, what? We just throw it away?" It felt wrong to me, but I barely had the emotional stamina look at an animal corpse intact right now, much less dig a hole while the kids circled and asked endless questions. Garbage bin, it was.

With my husband's help, we got the bird into a paper grocery bag. I went to staple it closed but stopped myself. Should we say a few words? "Do you want to say goodbye to the bird, Alina?"

My daughter peered into the bag at the plastic-covered mound. "I want to see its head!"

"No honey, we need to get inside. It's going to rain soon." I stapled the bag closed and dropped it in the garbage bin, where it landed with a thunk.

"I want to see!" Alina whined.

I lifted my daughter up for one last look inside the container. "Bye, crow. I hope you had a nice life. Hope you didn't suffer." My throat tightened as I released the yellow plastic lid.

"The crow!" My daughter started to cry.

"Go to papa, love." I turned to my husband and passed Alina to him. "Can you take the kids? I just did more ritual for a fucking crow than anyone has done for my grandmother."

I went into my bedroom, not bothering to turn on the light. Darkness suited my mood. I did want air, though. I was struggling to breathe normally. From past experience, I knew the early signs of a panic attack and that focusing on my senses would help me regain a sense of calm. I opened the small window just over the foot of our bed and took in the scene that I had clung to every day of the past 6 weeks when I hadn't been able to leave the house, where I'd noted every sensory element possible to help me feel more alive.

The wind picked up further and blew water into the room. I closed the window and started to cry at the sound of the raindrops hitting the glass. I leaned against the wall in a narrow spot between the bed and the desk where my husband now worked from home.

The rhythm of the water on glass took me back to my childhood in the Pacific Northwest when I would sit in the car on rainy days while my mother ran errands, entertaining myself by inventing songs to the drumbeat of the drops on the station wagon roof. It finally felt safe to let go, to let tears run down my cheeks in tandem with the rivulets coursing down the window behind me. With the tears came a rush of guilt, the feeling that I hadn't done all I could for the family at the end.

I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head and pulled the strings as tight as they would go around my face as I started to shake. I fought the impulse to mentally run back through every twist and turn of my grandmother's slow suffering that year, every convoluted conflictual decision around her care.

Regardless of what we all wanted, this limbo is what my grandmother had received. *It isn't right*, I raged as the tremors took me over. *It isn't right that after 100 years on this Earth, a person could just be gone, without any acknowledgement.*

This embodied response was surprisingly effective compared to my past repressed weeping spells—I was spent afterwards but centered. It reminded me of the way our cat used to shake after getting into a fight. Maybe in the last 6 weeks without any social interactions, I had reverted to an animal state.

Several days later, the city picked up our garbage and there was no longer anything to see when my daughter went looking for the crow. The month after that, our lockdown was gradually lifted and we were able to take our rotting

yard waste to the local dump. But one year later, with southern California still facing strict pandemic restrictions, my grandmother's ashes remained in an envelope in her house.

On the first anniversary of my grandmother's death, I continue to search for ways to make meaning during this liminal time. A photo retrospective, this essay. None have been as cathartic as my encounter with the crow. The part of me that lingers from my religious upbringing, the part that still believes in signs, would like to think that the bird came to me as a gift. I wish I could have done better by it, by all of them.

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