

# The Birds: DOVES

written by Toti O'Brien | March 14, 2016



I've never seen a bird mourn.

How would I know, you ask: isn't it something private, intimate... How could I know how a bird feels?

I don't know how a bird feels... I meant I never saw a bird show detectable signs of grief, even slight attitudes or behaviors, as both humans and animals do. I've heard dogs cry for hours when their master is gone. I've seen cats go nuts, pee on carpets, break vases, to call back the absentee. I've seen pets refusing to eat, starving themselves to death, because they were grieving. I've seen chimpanzees reacting madly to the loss of their kin.

It must be mammal, you say. That makes sense, since I've never seen a bird mourn, not even a mourning dove. Actually, least of all mourning doves.

One day, coming home, I saw fern leaves on my porch. They lay between a vase and a pillar, in a corner where they couldn't have flown on their own. They were "put" there, for sure: hyper-vigilant as I am, I didn't miss the incongruity. I immediately checked on the plant growing in my front yard: spare and fragile, I would have hated if someone vandalized it. But it was intact: the leaves came from elsewhere. They were carried... as it happens when birds build their nests.

Could they have fallen from one? I looked up, finding nothing. Then I noticed they weren't leaves, but triangular cuttings. Geometric, precise, organized in overlapping patterns... As I said they were put there, prepared: doubtlessly an architect bustled around, displaying plans and materials. There, of all places: my front door...

I searched frantically online for birds using ferns, while nesting. No one. Squirrels? I didn't believe so: they reigned in the backyard, making dens

with large objects, in a delimited zone, not including the front porch.

I finally cleared the fern cuttings, tossing them on the ground. But they kept coming back in similar fashion, like those jasmine bouquets the mafia scatters around prospected victims. In their purse, on their bed stand, their restaurant table, their car windshield... Day by day, to signify: "You're followed dear, you're never alone. You'll be followed all the way to your grave, and this is a reminder".

I started feeling tense. Then, one day, I lifted my gaze... there it was! In the uncanniest of places: a small ledge so exposed, at reach, that of course I hadn't seen it. Like a thief, leaving clues in full sight, the bird knew we ignore what is evident. Perhaps so.

The nest... it was beautiful in its absurdity. I had rarely seen one so approximately conceived. It looked like the work of an abstract painter, loosely combining shapes on the canvas. Colors, too: brownish twigs, white fluff, bright green leaves, filigreed against the turquoise of the shelf. A nest? Sure! On its way...

Fascinated, I took pictures from inside the window, careful not to be seen, hoping not to scare or disturb the builder. But I didn't succeed, or something else intervened. The next morning all lay scattered on the floor. I felt disappointed, then relieved. Thank God, the bird guessed its location was insecure, and it wisely renounced the project, setting for higher standards.

Not really. Twenty-four hours passed and the gathering resumed. In the same place, the surreal, futuristic nest was rebuilt: the bird had some grit or it truly liked it there. I restrained from documentation. I moved in and out, shyly, on tiptoes. It's weird how cohabitation can change us...

Still, this second try was short lived. The nest was destroyed again. Maybe, seen its grave instability and flimsy nature, it tipped over. I sort of forgot about it.

A week later, I needed harvesting. I went for my handmade picker – a milk bottle nailed on a long stick. It felt heavier than usual, so I looked inside. Well! A nest was stuck at the bottom – in the style of the previous ones, though slightly improved. Or not: the bottle kept it together, that's all.

I didn't know what to do. Those naïve attempts didn't leave me indifferent. Should I let the bird's alacrity inspire me, build another pitcher and give it a chance? Alas, I couldn't summon such patience, such wisdom. I thought harvesting was priority and I removed the nest. After more hesitation, I set it in a niche of my fence, seeming appropriate. But I knew it wouldn't work.

Nests can't be relocated by third parties and still be considered home.

That one went as well. It was last.

Mourning doves are here all the time: they must feel at home. I hear and see them: they swing on electric wires, peck on grass, stroll in my driveway. They stand, leisurely, alone or in couple, till I park no more than a foot from their neck.

They are cute. I like them so much.

Mourning doves are famously sloppy builders. They don't have nesting habits, besides total randomness. The task always takes them by surprise... didn't the appropriate knowledge pile up in their genes, as it does for most animal species?

Apparently not. In the spring, each time, the couple is dumbstruck... "God, and now what?" They aimlessly wander, until they find something: a box, an old shoe... If a tree comes their way, they don't say no, but they choose a small shaky branch, a fork so unbalanced, so low, anyone would dismiss it.

Most nesting attempts fail. By the time they gather bricks and concrete – so to speak – the foundation is gone, the first floor tumbled down. Someone kicked the box, or put on the shoe. They start over with equal naivety. What millennia haven't taught is not learned in a lifetime... especially a dove's lifetime. Or even two doves.

Yes, the couple is solid in such clumsy endeavor. Both of them carry on, till some kind of settling is reached. Often, right on the ground, as if they were quails: that they aren't. Then, they take turns brooding, night and day... They do what they can, but – due to scant logistics – accidents happen.

Doves aren't the greatest breeders. I ask myself how the species has survived.

Mostly, I ask myself how they survived so gaily, nonchalantly, cool.

You say now the "mourning" appellative, traditionally attached to their call, makes sense. Absolutely not. Though their tune has been described as plaintive, doves don't mourn at all. They are happy birds, which would account for their carelessness – that I read as a typical excess of optimism.

"Nesting time again!" she says.

"Do not worry, dear, we'll find something."

"But I heard the rents doubled since last year, and all the good deals are taken."

"Do not worry, love, we'll figure it out a bit later."

And they go for another swing. For another song.