

The Birds: Little Birds

written by Guest Contributor | December 11, 2020



Before we were told to avoid air travel, but after the lines at Costco were thirty people deep, the house finches chose our ledge.

Through the window I saw one brindled dun and gray, cream-rimed at her wing's scallops and striped breast, her mate the same but red-capped and cloaked. Tightly-focused hopping on their splinter-fine feet. Heads domed and darting. My hands washed the dishes with acorn-scented soap. My winter ears drank in their susurrating chirps.

We'd lived in the house less than a year. I thought, it's lovely to be doing the dishes with a view of a little side porch with a pitched roof, boards painted gray and white with birds to match, our narrow muddy driveway, and beyond that, a grassy field.

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Before there were cases in more than eight states, but after I mixed up a batch of aloe and vodka hand sanitizer because Purell was sold out, I flew to a conference after Helen said, I'm only gonna say it once. I think you should stay home.

Of course I went anyway. She's the cautious one, I'm the queen of cockamamie schemes. I am the gas and she is the brake. Sometimes I get to bring us someplace far and fast. Sometimes she shuts it all down. Mostly we glide and lurch and rev our way through.

I returned on a Sunday morning red-eye. As always, my absence had sparked Helen's drive for home improvement in ways my presence dulled.

I painted the mailbox, she said, as if she'd merely cloaked the metal thing with spray paint instead of applying her trompe l'oeil talent and toil to it. She transformed the flat-bottomed metal canister into a mini version of our house: white siding, smoke-gray shutters and window boxes, charcoal-shingled roof.

I imagined her standing out beside it last week in the tall ochre nudged by spring green shoots, as intermittent cars drove by too fast, wearing a

baseball hat to thwart the wind's reckless quest to flop her pewter hair over squinting blue eyes, paint brush in one of her sturdy-fingered hands, palette in the other.

"I love it." I hugged her. "I'm sorry you stood out in the cold, though."

"Silly. I unscrewed it from the post and painted it in my studio."

"So handy," I said, and she smiled, sun glinting off her right canine.

I went to bed without showering off the air travel taint. When she got in our bed beside me, our lungs quickened and our blood warmed and fluxed. Our bodies were quick to notch us together, slow and then fast, bringing me the last lengths home.

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Before the toilet paper shelves stand bare, but after the nest's bowl is discernable, I coax russet vegetable stock from freezer scraps as the birds fly back and forth to the ledge with rootlets, string, and grasses dangling in their beaks.

Maybe we should pull the hair out of our brushes and leave it out there for them, I say.

I imagine our copper, chestnut, silver strands glinting in in the weave of the nest.

But I didn't. There was no way to guarantee they'd claim it. The breezes might take the hair clouds away and drop them in the field beyond the driveway, where crows pluck dew drunk worms from soil. The crows might weave our strays into their carrion-cache nests, weave us into their fates. The wind could take it to the bed of a passing pickup truck, or it could land in the healthy, gasping mouth of the elderly hardcore cyclist in yellow who rides by daily, rain or shine.

Or because it was taking three times as long to do half as much, and the other half wasn't getting done, even though we had so much more time.

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Before hugging our friends became unthinkable, but after not hugging our friends seemed cold, I see the flame-edged finch fly back to the nest and his mate. He drops a morsel in her mouth. That morning, Helen had read to me about house finches while pulling her fingers through my hair, loosing wine-dark pleasure in my body.

Red berries and petals tint the male birds' feathers. The more they find and eat, the redder they become. Female birds value the reddest-headed birds, as their proof of food-sourcing prowess is in their plumage.

They build their nest so it's soft and smooth inside, using the finest feathers, grass, and hair.

Helen plays a recording of the courtship call, a high, swooping trochee dance that sounds like the smell released by lemon balm leaves rubbed between my fingertips.

The male bird flies up high and then releases its song as it glides down toward its intended.

He also taps the female's bill, and if she acts like a hungry baby bird, he will give her tasty bits of food.

They mate by placing their cloacas together, and then the sperm passes through that all-purpose vent into the female.

They're so queer, I say. No penis. Banging muffins.

Classy, Helen laughs, tugging on my hair.

My spine arches, sacrum thrums.

But I prefer your vulgarity to this website's term, *cloacal kiss*.

Ugh! Terrible. Almost as bad as *make love*. Skip ahead.

Their eggs are light blue with purple and black dots. The young leave the nest twelve to fourteen days after hatching.

That's hardly any time at all.

I think of Lane. A stinging peal of sadness ropes my throat, and when Helen's hand grazes my breast, I slip away, mumbling I'll be right back. I mean it, but crying in the shower wins out.

Crying at the onset of a sexual advance seems so patently damaged.

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Come live with us, I tell Lane on the phone. I don't like you living five states away right now. You work in a supermarket. So much exposure. You could infect Grandma. I'll pay for it.

I'm eighteen. You can't make me do anything if I don't want to. I wash my hands a lot, I spray down surfaces constantly at work.

That wouldn't prevent my mom from getting infected, I say. You're roommates. You know she's seventy. They say it's airborne.

I think Grandma's going to move to Texas next week with her boyfriend.

She has a boyfriend?

Yeah, Lloyd. He has a mustache and a ranch. She hasn't told you guys because she thinks you're gonna judge her. She thinks she will be safer there.

She will be safer there, I say. Why would we judge her?

But I know the answer. She has a bad track record with men, and my siblings and I rode out some ugly things because of it. We're grown now, so her only ride-along is Alfie, the little dog she denies overfeeding. She adopted the abandoned little chap when he was underweight, his clotted cream fur marred by a green mohawk. Until it grew out, I couldn't look at him without seeing the ghost afterimage of stoned idiots shaving the sides of his worried head, then slathering his pate with Manic Panic.

A ranch in Texas, though. Could a better lure exist for my mother? Visions of being a prophet's tumbleweed queen. She'd pick up the local accent quickly. One of her knacks.

They're already talking marriage, Lane says.

Of course they are, I say. I want you to know you are welcome here. You don't need to work if you're living with us.

I don't want to mooch off you.

I just signed two new clients, I said. But if you insist, there are supermarkets here. Our county has three cases. Yours has almost a hundred.

There was a pause.

Would I know of them? she asked.

The sick people?

No, your new clients.

She tries to play it cool, but she likes that some of the children's books I ghostwrite are for celebrities. She keeps hoping I'll work with a Kardashian.

Doubt it. One used to play a cop on a TV show in the seventies. The other is a British dog show judge.

Oh. I'm good for now. Bye.

There's more to it than this conversation has the tensile strength to hold. I never mean to hurt Lane with my words or lack of them, or lag in saying them, but that's what happens, and then she waits and snaps and hurts me back on purpose. She's so good at it there's a germ of admiration in my pain. One time she said she hoped we'd get in a car accident that killed her so I could spend the rest of my life both mourning her and knowing I was the one behind the wheel. This was after the third time she and her first boyfriend broke up and I declined to let her cry on my shoulder. Stop going back to him, I said. You know there's no cheese at the end of that tunnel. I'm sorry you're sad but I don't want to enable you.

My mother always offered succor, no matter how much being cruel to be kind was called for. In her comfort coiled the message that I should dismiss a man's misbehavior and go back for more.

Lane and I are a bristly mismatch with a glowing core of love that makes us all the more tender to the other's barbs. But only I remember when she slid out of me, slick and teapot warm, and clamped down on my nipple with a force that deafened me to the protests of my sodden, shocked vagina. Our eyes met as her face worked and my mouth made an o-shape of wonder as the midwife massaged my belly, coaxing my placenta to let go. I called my mother crying the next day to say, Now I understand how much you love me.

I put the phone down and join Helen at the window. We gaze at the shuddering nest as an afternoon wind blows hard.

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Before we are told only one person per household should grocery shop, but after the store designates elderly shopping hours, Helen and I walk into the grocery store with our list and coupons, wearing nitrile gloves but not face masks, and wipe down the cart handle with the sanitizing wipes.

I grew up in a procession of houses with my mother and her series of husbands: snake-handling preachers manqué. I never could make sense of how they believed in the Rapture but also kept sheds and cellars packed with food as if the Rapture might leave them behind. I secretly prayed every night, asking God to save the Rapture for another century. I didn't want to wake up one day and find out my mother and Sunday School friends were gone forever. Somehow I knew I wouldn't make the cut.

Now I wish I hadn't been so scornful of the thought of months of peanut butter, burlap bags of dried beans and root vegetables, jars of dull-glowing canned peaches beside pickled dilly beans. Last week, no yeast of any kind but I scored the flour. This week, I'll make bread.

Phoebe, I'm worried about the birds, Helen says. The nest.

I nod, distracted, wary of encouraging her. Before we watch a movie, we have to check a website that tells us whether any animal gets hurt or dies. My fingertips but not my eyes discern the marks of childhood dog bites faint around her mouth. Most people would fear dogs after the lunge, the pierce, the blood, a doctor's thread and needle, but that clash of their jaws only made her more sensitive to all creatures' fear and pain.

We buy produce and yeast and coffee and wine and beer. I hesitate at the milk chocolate Cadbury mini eggs (*3 for \$10!*) and then put two bags in our cart, clacking like marbles. My black glove looks odd against the pastel colors. If I eat no more than eight to fourteen a day, they should last for a while. This year the outer candy shell shimmers like my daughter's makeup selfies.

I prefer the speckled ones that look like finch eggs, but these taste and feel the same in my mouth. My teeth grind against the candy coating until the shell gives way and the chocolate shears off against the sides of my teeth. I chew until each egg become a luscious gritty ball of creamy sludge that I massage against the roof of my mouth until it dissolves. I only eat one at a time. I'm not a barbarian.

Before this thing took hold, I didn't keep candy in the house. We'd have dark chocolate, which Helen ate all month long and I only wanted right before and during when my uterus was shedding the red and clotted stuff that only Lane had ever needed. I'd been happy or annoyed or indifferent at the sight of my period, but secretly liked the smell: tomato sauce as its color shades to rust, turned earth run through with slender webs of roots.

I remember being lap-tall in the living room of grownups sitting around, their knees that looked back at me, pressed together or a-sprawl.

My mom would rest her ankle on her opposite knee, and I'd pretend it was a door she'd swing open to let me in. I bent over her sideways leg like a monkey bar, then turned around and raised my arms for her to pick me up. Until menarche I didn't know why her lap sometimes smelled like something both different and familiar: the attar of what formed me, where I came from.

Mine's gone, though, since five months, the tide pull in line with my mother's mother whose body stopped on the early side, her womb stamp on my own. I wish I'd known it was the last time, in November. I think of the way it felt and see old book endpaper marbled purple and black. My last period coiled from me, dragging what felt like ravenous vermin clawing and chewing on their way out, as Helen brought me hot water bottles and Advil, and slow-motion pummeled her paint-spattered knuckles into my lower back.

She'd gone through it years earlier, and back then I wasn't as attentive. Fear can make me distant. I didn't like the thought of her passing through any kind of a one-way gate without me. Back then I was still tweezing rare gray hairs from my head, unwilling to grant that the gate lurked in my future.

Gates kept showing up in the children's books I was writing around that time, one about a duck with the refrain, *You can always come home*.

Finally my agent gently chided me, Enough with the gates. Have you ever heard of trellises? Pergolas? Gazebos?

I wrote the duck story for a TV talk show therapist who was inspired by one episode about runaway teens to teach children that even if they ran away someday, they could turn around and come home. I don't think he realized that sometimes the devil you know is worse than the one you don't.

It was kind of inspired by the story my mother told me about her pet duck who followed her everywhere, but flew away, of course, when the time came.

Oh, I cried for days, she said. I was *hysterical*.

You knew that was coming, though, didn't you? I asked.

That doesn't make it easier. You'll see.

I don't have a duck, I said.

Mom looked at me, and then at first-grader Lane, who was wearing all three of

her dress-up tutus at once, lying on her belly on the floor, giggling as she drew pictures of butts. Mom arched a brow.

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Before I start to exercise each morning to solve the problem of anxiety making me short of breath, but after I become short of breath, I worry that it's a symptom of the disease and not just the anxiety of watching the disease spread.

So I go on walks, or dance along to videos on my television screen. I notice how the teacher's alabaster skin begins to gleam twenty minutes in. I notice how a tall dancer's brown bob collapses into pleasing wet geometries.

I thought Helen and I would have more sex, pent up like this each day, and it's at least sixty-five percent my fault that we haven't. Even a succession of Sunday mornings, their lazy, voluptuous hours a usual backstop to accidental celibacy, had flitted past unanchored by the press of our bodies. The hold of calendar time weakens by the day.

Every couple has their own choreography, defined by the knots and roots that pen them in, as well as their brazenest expanses. Without sex being on my terms alone, Helen lets me lead, a kindness that keeps the memory bats from flying leathery and furred inside me, the way they rouse when I'm startled by a touch that reminds me of someone my mother loved who took what he shouldn't have and far too early.

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Lane texts me a meme that someone made with a picture of the Moody Moo Cow, with an *lmao*. The cow is eating edibles (instead of cud, photoshopped), with the slogan *In These Uncertain Times*.

I ghostwrote *The Moody Moo Cow* when Lane was six, for a movie star who aimed to raise awareness about mood disorders. She'd bring my books to school to show her friends, so proud of me, and they'd joyfully point out that someone else's name was on the cover. It took Lane a while to understand why my name was never there—that part of what my clients paid me for was my invisibility.

What story would you write for your own self, Mama? she'd ask. I never had an answer, or seemed to have the time to make one just for her. Instead, I'd give each character a glimmer of her, which she loved for years until she fiercely disliked it.

I think she's coming back around, though, because she wrote,

It's kind of a garbage meme, but I still love that cow.

Ghostwriting children's books should leave no trace, just like good parenting. Badly parented kids often look that way—shambling, sidelong, skittish—their whole lives. Back in my teens, I constructed a counteractive outside shell, and I'm afraid being home for so long, as comfortable in our privacy as I am in my stretchy pants, will turn my shell into something slack

and patchy.

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Before I cut our worn-out linen sheets into squares to use instead of paper towels, but after I order two new sets of sheets online, forsythia branches sprawl like sunbeams outside my home office window. A scatter of grackles routs sustenance from the grass.

At four o'clock we drink as if it's five. We keep cans of beer out of the laptop camera sightlines during client meetings. Helen paints longer some days and not as much others. She whacks together her own shipping crates instead of using the usual guy whose family is running fevers, but pays him just the same. I make sweet potato peanut stew using the homemade vegetable stock as a base. After we eat, Helen does the dishes and we sit down in the living room to watch TV.

In better but still dire times, we avoided *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which a brutal, misogynistic theocracy overthrows our government, executes queer men, and forces queer women to get raped and impregnated by high-ranking lieutenants.

But it's scarier than our life right now, and that feels comforting. It also feels satisfying to yell at the main character when she gives up chances to escape, or makes unwise decisions and gets shackled and whipped by the barrel-shaped matron who is in charge of the concubines. After watching for a while, I develop Stockholm syndrome regarding the matron, because when she is not cattle-prodding her charges for the slightest offense, she seems so disarmingly solicitous.

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Before my mother sends us pictures of the only fashion boutique in her new town (a trailer adorned with junkyard-gleaned windchimes) but after she leaves with Lloyd, Lane tells me she's enjoy living alone for the first time in her life. And yet.

If Dad gets it or gets sick for any reason, Lane says, I couldn't go to him. I could at least drive to you.

If I got it, or you got it, and we were hospitalized, even if we traveled to each other, we wouldn't be allowed in the hospital room. Dying people are saying goodbye to their family members over FaceTime.

I see her eyes drift away from mine on my phone screen.

I know, she says.

Just know that you can come live with us, I say. Right now. Rent-free. I'd pay for your move. You wouldn't have to work. There are only three diagnosed cases in the whole county.

I'm making hazard pay and overtime, she says. And I could get sick pay. I've

saved a thousand dollars and I'm saving more each week. If I got sick, I could get paid while I was sick.

Healthy people your age are dying from this.

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She's so stubborn, Helen says.

I just keep offering because I really want her to feel welcome.

That might be deepening her resolve to stick it out.

When I talk to her, my stubbornness is talking to the stubbornness I imbued her with at conception, albumen to my egg.

Lane was five weeks old when the planes hit the towers a mile away from our apartment. I fled with her in my arms, scarves over our noses and mouths, to my mother's house by the ocean, fearful of the city's death-kiln air inside Lane's petal lungs.

One of the smaller, bird-heart-pulsing reasons I had been sad: If I hadn't been a mother at the time, I would have jumped on my yellow Schwinn bicycle and pedaled down to the site to offer help.

Helen says maybe the pandemic is birthing Lane into a life marked by its subtractions. She is sculpting the stories she'll someday tell by the choices she makes and doesn't make.

My pain as she emerges is—just as when she crowned—as searing as it is beside the point.

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Before my cousin Meryl in New York is admitted into the hospital but after she tests positive, Helen and I decide to go on a hike in a state park an hour away. She bustles around the house in a black tank top and denim shorts, gathering water bottles and backpacks.

My god, you look good right now. I wish we could do it, I say.

I press myself against her plush chest. My hips butterfly-wing against hers.

Her eyes iridesce.

Yeah?

Helen's lips play against mine. Sun spills across our bed.

If we do it, Helen says, we will not hike.

I nod. We can always do it, in theory, but we cannot always hike at a state park an hour away.

Tomorrow's Sunday, I say. Our bodies unlock. I get dressed. We hike. And it is good. Lichen-dappled rock cliffs drip on either side of us. Our feet press into fragrant decaying leaves and needles. Too many people, though, and not enough observing social distance. Sometimes it's sloppiness, other times the path is only four feet wide, so what can you do with a cliff on one side and a crevasse on the other?

The state parks close a week later.

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Before we try to have sex on Sunday morning, but after it's unlikely, I wake to Helen clicking her way through dozens of tweets about death and impending death. The president wants everything open for business by Easter because it's 'a beautiful time of year,' dog-whistling all the evangelicals who believe death is not just reversible but a pearly-gate portal. Even the husk of my evangelical childhood self rustles at the notion. I pull my phone off the bedside table, shake it awake. My eyes skitter, my finger scrolls, gathering sadness as if it's pleasure. I want to curl up in a ball, forget I have a vulnerable body.

We hold each other. I stroke her arm, the skin over her shoulder blades. I wait for my thoughts to feel like something besides a motorcycle racing around the inside of my cranium. I wait for my body to flicker, a comforting proof that I am still more alive than dead, more free than bound.

It's okay, Helen says, and I believe her.

I think I equate the idea of fucking like rabbits during apocalyptic times as a sign of vigor and youth, to replenish the population.

We're not that kind of young, Phee. And grinding it out on principle won't make us younger. Not to mention, we can't knock each other up.

If it *were* possible, we would have had so many babies!

My head rises with her chest as she laughs. She scratches my scalp like she would a dog.

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In the days after the towers fell, I felt bad for feeling grateful that no one I knew had died. It took me this long to realize it wasn't that simple. It was as if, *whoosh*, the edge of a bridge I was breezily crossing cracked off and left me stunned and teetering, wind rushing up where seconds before steel and concrete subdued it. I wasn't the person I was before, who would have laughed at the thought of bridges shearing off, and of writing children's books with other people's names on the covers. I didn't love the feeling of traversing bridges on foot, but I believed that my fear was irrational, that all I had to do to have the stable life I'd craved was to grow up and make reasonable choices. Instead I was left wondering, is a sense of security ever not false?

The bridge still worked. It was more like a rope bridge, swaying and way too exposed, connective tissue exposed to the sun. I crossed it and didn't look back.

And then time slowly, merciful lulled me. Until now.

There was this post-9/11 urban myth, likely based on at least one true story. That a husband once met his mistress at her apartment instead of going to work in the morning. In the midst of their raunchy verboten fucking, his phone rang. He let it go to voicemail, but it kept ringing. Finally he picked it up.

His wife screamed in tears, You're alive! Where are you?

Of course I'm alive, he said. I'm at the office.

She said, You sick fuck, the Towers just fell.

Sort of a tangent, but it nods to collateral damage that nobody would choose. Epic change prefigures and triggers change that would not otherwise occur, sometimes quick, like moving from a city apartment to a suburban living room, other times the kind that spirals for years, harmonizing along with the quotidian before surfacing like a sea serpent, obvious only in retrospect.

Still, by the time this time is over, I wonder what new parts of me might follow the guardrail under the water. Pandemic time is a time of subtraction.

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The wind blows the nest down. No eggs inside to break. It is building time, not laying time. Helen gently places the nest back on the ledge.

The birds come and peck at it, wary, smelling her smell. Maybe if our hair was woven into the nest, the touch of her hands wouldn't throw them off. We would smell like home.

On Instagram, Lane posts about going to work, a little video in which she mimes shooting herself in the head. Her makeup is perfect.

How was work? I text. *I saw your little video* ☐

Work was fine. The video was just cute lol

Not to me. But I let that be true without trying to make her see.

You are cute

Thank you ☐ ☐

Why tears?

I just appreciate the compliment

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Twenty-one days after my first date with Helen, before we said I love you but after we were in love, Easter came. It just happened to be Easter. Lane was with her father for the weekend. His girlfriend was going all out with candy and stuffed animals and a backyard egg hunt.

I pressed steaming polenta into ramekins with the back of a spoon, capped them with grated cheese, cracked an egg over each, sprinkled them with leeks, and baked them. She wrapped her arms around me from behind, her chambray robe covering my robe's floral print. We wore short and flirty robes then, still too shy to walk around less covered.

While the layers cleaved and bubbled, we drank Bellinis on each other's laps. After we ate, we went back to bed. We had so long to go before satiety. Our mouths quashed the fears of the vast unknowns within me to her and her to me. Our climaxes softened the sadness of coming this far without this us.

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My favorite part of watching hours of TV with Helen is not the shows and movies. It's how she slakes my skin-hunger as she strokes and rubs my hair, face, shoulders, back, arms. All day long the plague eats away at my outlines, and each night her fingers re-draw me. Fear makes me distant and she calls me home.

It may be greedy right now to want more. I imagine the comfort of her touches flowing through me and into all the people sheltering alone.

She gets up and comes back with my bag of chocolate eggs. I notice my ribcage stiffen as she pops them into her mouth like potato chips. Anything I say will make me sound like a petty scold.

Is she going to eat the whole bag? Not counting, but it's like knowing what time it is without looking at a clock. She's had at least twenty. When I want my eight to fourteen a day, will there be any left? Easter has come and gone. We may not be able to buy any more until next spring. If there are still supermarkets, and Cadbury's still in business. I'm not being crazy. I'm being crazy.

I can feel an argument massing in the words we are not saying. I'm deathly quiet. She's oblivious. How could she be so oblivious when she knows what a special treat they are for me? I hear her teeth crack through the shell, slide through the chocolate.

I'm a little worried you're going to give yourself a stomachache, I finally say.

Yeah, I'm a glutton, okay? How can you even bear to be in the same room with me?

No, you're not. I know they're really good. But you know how much I enjoy them.

This is the kind of stupid argument we have when we're not having sex! Helen

yells, and then stomps upstairs.

I turn off the TV, angry at both of us and craving escape. I want to drive with the windows down and music loud. I want to go have a beer somewhere, or six. But instead I'll sleep on the couch instead, sad and seething. And then as dawn approaches, just sad.

* * *

The birds come back to the nest.

So does the wind.

The social isolation is getting to me, Lane says.

You can always come here, I say, because I believe in the magic of a certain thing said an unknown number of times, and I never want her to wonder if she's wanted.

You can always come home, Duckie love, Lane says, and all at once I feel her small and tucked against me, vibrating with silent hope that I'll read one more.

My eyes well. I hope she knows my silence is not distant.

People are so mean, she says. At the store. We were out of everything but those hand-formed burger patties with corn kernels and shredded cheese in them and this woman demanded to speak to the manager. He said we're doing our best under the circumstances. The truck doesn't come until Thursday.

Remember, I ask, when the weirdest thing you encountered at work was the guy who came in once a week and spent eighty dollars on filet mignon for his dog?

Yeah, she laughs. What a dumbass.

I put on bra yesterday for the first time in weeks. My nipples felt so tender after a while, I just took it off.

You're turning into a hippie. Oh, how's Meryl doing?

She seems okay. She's been posting videos on Facebook. In the first one, she was wearing a mouthpiece ventilator. In the second one, her whole head was inside what looked like a clear plastic bag. But she was feeling encouraged, because she got into a trial and is on an experimental drug. Please keep her and Joe and the kids in your thoughts.

Okay, she says. That's scary.

Yeah.

What I don't say: As I watched her shout to be heard over the ventilator racket, undereye circles gray as storm clouds, my lungs clamped down tight and didn't release until I took a hoarded Valium at two in the morning.

And lately when I try to pray—a childhood practice that resurfaces when things are dire—it feels like I’m the lone person in a dark and empty auditorium, in a creaky velvet seat screwed to the tilting floor.

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One of the three people who tested sick in our county died, Helen says.

Gusts rattle the windowpanes like my bare feet do when they thump the floor in the living room as I dance to breathe. The brown bird sits still in the nest. Sometimes I see her body working. Her red-marked mate alights to feed her. The nest skitters and does not fall.

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It is close to bedtime on Sunday night.

I’m worried about the wind blowing the nest down again, Helen says.

I look up at her from my laptop screen, worried she is tying her equanimity to forces outside our control.

You’re getting obsessed, I say.

I thought you loved my heart, Phoebe, she says.

What?

She’s soft and still.

I thought you loved my heart that cares about animals.

I jump up and kiss her lips. They are being kissed, not kissing back.

I do love your heart!

She shrugs. Should I give up?

No, I say, while wondering if I’m inciting a greater down-the-line sadness. You could put up, like, a little shim, a little rim to...

I press my hands against the air as if I am testing the strength of the side of a box.

I used up all my wood on the Russo crate, she says. Maybe cardboard.

We have enough of that in the basement from when we moved here last July. The house was empty for a while. There is still one big tree on the other side of the house with some broken beer bottle glass and an empty chip bag at its base, stuck under a rock. The landlords did a very good job with rakes and mowers, hoes and mulch, erasing the long misuse of this yard when residents weren’t here to halo it with protection. I keep meaning to clean it up that smattering of debris, but for now it reminds me of entropy’s ever-poised arrows.

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First Meryl stopped posting videos on Facebook. Then she stopped sharing posts. Then she stopped liking our hopeful posts on her wall. Her husband said she's been on the vent for three weeks. She's hit a plateau, is how he put it.

* * *

Before we start disinfecting our mail but after we watch the video about how to disinfect our groceries, Helen cuts a rectangle of cardboard, pulls the ladder out of the shed, climbs up a few rungs and wedges the cardboard between the slope of the porch roof and the ledge. I eye her legs, bare and strong in her shorts. She duct-tapes the panel to the eave and the ledge. The birds return.

We run out of my favorite kind of toilet paper and I break into the non-favorite brand I ordered at Costco before they ran out. I put back half of what I pulled off the roll and fold the remaining sheets into a rectangle.

Red.

I cry out.

What is it, Phoebe?

I got my period!

I show her the toilet paper, proud as a preteen.

Don't worry. That happens. Remember when mine came back eleven months after I thought I was done, that one last time? I'm sorry.

I'm not worried, I exult. It's like someone I thought was dead and gone just surprised me with a visit.

* * *

After before, but before after. There aren't enough ventilators and then eighty percent of patients on ventilators die but then no, it's actually twenty percent. I get excited about and then sick of baking bread, and cooking soup.

I find dandelion greens and wild chives outside and add novelty to my cooking by foraging. Symbols of subsistence, but as symbols go, they're tasty.

The cardboard will fall down when the rain foils the duct tape seal. Helen will climb up on the ladder again with a hammer and nails.

Home crafters are getting face masks to doctors and nurses more quickly than the government. Central Park's tent hospital is run by a group that requires volunteers to sign a statement that defines marriage as between "one genetic male and one genetic female" and affirming gay people deserve "everlasting

punishment in hell." I imagine a volunteer declining to call a woman's wife, a man's husband, when it's time for their FaceTime goodbye. *Use this time to repent instead, and Heaven's gates will part for you.*

I hope they are my mother's kind of Christian: the ones who come to our weddings, fix their faces enough until it's over, bitch in private, grow to love our wives despite themselves.

The ones who let us shush them when they start to say, *Love the sinner, hate the sin.*

* * *

Helen motions to me. I join her at the kitchen sink. The mother bird is perched on the edge of her nest, rhythmically kiss-feeding three tiny beaks.

Oh!

Shh, she says, and squeezes my waist.

A few days later, I see gray tufts, then a tiny spindle foot paddle the air. The baby bird must be rubbing its spine against the cradle of woven home.

I walk to Helen's painted mailbox, so lovely people often slow down to admire it as they drive by. A grocery circular, a hefty shipping materials catalog, and a postcard. From Lane.

I wanna check out the apartment scene in your town, she wrote. I was afraid if I brought it up on the phone you'd get mad because, no offense, I don't want to live with you. : /

I wait until I get inside the house to dance.

* * *

What story would you write for your own self, Mama?

I think I would write about the birds.



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