

The Birds: Nesting in the Pandemic

written by Guest Contributor | July 15, 2020



I knew it was time to leave Brooklyn when it was so quiet I heard them. Loud, on a 6:00 p.m. walk with the dog around the park. Not pigeon coos—but sparrow chirps, raucous and deafening. I almost needed to cover my ears. I'd never heard them before with all the (old) traffic. We were now the coronavirus epicenter and people were running away, hiding or dying. A siren rose and fell. Then, nothing but throaty warbles echoing off brick.

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There are 450 species of birds in Upstate New York, along the Atlantic Flyway, an air route used to migrate home. When I first arrived, there was snow on the roof of my childhood house though it was April. The incessant gray spring ice reminded me why I'd once flown south to begin with. Now it was twenty years later. I used to joke if the earth cracked I'd go back to the woods and hide. I wondered if it was finally happening.

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My 71-year-old mother hung a metal tin of orts, leftover colorful thread, next to the birdfeeder for their use in nesting. Neon threads packed with pastel. *I must have gotten good food this year*, she said, watching the birds flock. She waited for them to move toward the pigment.

First there was the vermilion flycatcher. Then the blue jay. Once in a while a bright yellow one zipped in like a supermodel. I sat with my mother at her living room window watching the colors streak. My mother is a painter. She records the land around her: rocks, water, trees. Close ups, molted, flecked. We watched the winged ones work like we were watching HGTV.

On my 16th night there, my aunt died, my mother's sister. She was found in her basement passed out. The shock of her gone, a line cut. Bright threads disappeared. We watched a squirrel shimmy the feeder pole, hogging all the food. *When my mother died, a bird kept tapping at the window*, Mom said. We waited for another sign.

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Each morning I put on my mask and drove to the end of the road for take-out coffee. It was stupid—I could make a cup at home—but I missed the city and wanted to feel like I was commuting. On a drive back there was a traffic jam—unusual for this rural road. Three cars up I saw the problem—a family of ducks crossing, pond to yard. Two big ones—I imagined a mother and father—marching their line of fuzzy duck heads in front of a tractor, protecting. Their tenderness struck me, opened in me a wave of grief.

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Day 30 in isolation. My mother posted a handmade sign on the back door: *Be Careful!* on an index card. Under it she'd drawn a picture of a bird. Being my mother, the image was skilled—I knew where to look.

Nestled between the wreath and the door frame was a small nest. There were threads of yellow and lavender among the branches. The matriarch sat there, facing the door. I carefully opened it. She lit off. *Here, come look*, Mom said, waving me in. We shut the door carefully. She pulled out a step stool and I climbed to look through the window and into the nest.

There, three small perfect eggs—dusty blue and spotted—little worlds.

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I hadn't known I'd be here this long. I wished I'd packed better, hoped I cleared out all the food from the city fridge. I'd left a bag of dirty laundry. Day 60. On TV I watched images of George Floyd lose air, echoing Eric Garner: "I can't breathe." I watched images of a cop car in my neighborhood burst into fireballs. *Brooklyn is Burning*, a friend texted. *Don't come back*. But it was only one car, as voices sang in protest. I wanted to be there, marching. I checked the running tally of Trump tweets under the stupid flat-stamped replica of a mountain bluebird.

The next morning on my way out for coffee I saw a small broken egg on the ground. Someone must have slammed the door and it fell and broke. Was it me? We ruined everything.

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A study in 2019 titled "Decline of the North American avifauna" outlined a staggering net loss of 3 billion birds. The losses were not restricted to rare or threatened species but, also, to the once common kind. The implications were massive: ecosystem disruption, an urgent need to address threats to other wildlife. More broadly, the birds were a sign that our environment was at risk of collapsing. The loss of avian abundance was a call. Without action, we were goners.

I tried to imagine what 3 billion would sound like, but you can't hear an absence.

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My mother sat at the kitchen table, undoing her threads from the metal tin.

*I read online they're dangerous to the chicks. I feel so bad.
It's okay.
Oh, I forgot to tell you. It was green. She said.
What was.
The bird at the window. You just missed it.*

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Each day I waited I waited, too, for the one to fly back to her nest on the door.
Her pummeled egg flattened on the ground.

The mother bird never returned. Her two remaining eggs went cold, unhatched.
Who can blame her? Giving up on a smashed world.



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