

ERICA ROBERTS

SAD SONG OF BLACKBIRDS

There is a strange thread of blackbirds in my life dating back to a time when I was too young to know their song or separate it from that of other birds heralding the daybreak.

The farmhouse in Yorkshire where I was born had a front door which opened onto a walled garden. Two privets, thick, round and green, stood at either side of the path leading away from the door and from the top step I could see a mother bird sitting on her nest. When she flew off I hitched up my long black stockings, parted the branches and, stretching as high as I could, tried to see the eggs. I was just too small so I put my hand into the feathered bed and took out an egg. It was smooth and warm and blue. I marvelled at it in the bright spring sun, glowed with the possession of it. Suddenly, the egg was on the ground, shell fragmented, an unattractive yellow mess on my shoes.

Like a murderess I did not linger at the scene but left quickly, ran inside carrying the awful weight of my guilt, stealthily closed the door and hid under the bed.

For many days the blackbird attacked the window above the front door, left messes on the doormat. It knew; I knew it knew and would not let me forget. My father paused in the middle of the Sunday carving and listened for a moment to the crazed pecking.

“Who” he said sadly “has been messing about with that nest? Nobody spoke. “Who broke the egg?” I said nothing but sat there silently in my chair, cringing, a cold knot in my stomach, a yellow stain on my mind. Father undoubtedly guessed the culprit but did not pursue it. He just made sure somebody felt guilty. In the end the bird gave up and let her eggs get cold.

All my life I have carried that memory. It haunted me as I lay on the bed for an afternoon rest during pregnancy, a blackbird pecking at the window every day for a week and I was filled with a wretched apprehension.

The baby died the day after she was born. I sent her a posy made up of buds from the loencis crab apple tree, which someone had sent me. They were sweet pink buds, round as a baby’s cheeks. Later I planted an loencis in our garden and when I see it covered with blossom in spring, it softens, year by year a patch of sadness.

We have a garden full of blackbirds. Sometimes the thrushes come and fat ponderous doves, “just looking” they say to the real proprietors.

And we, because we are lazy gardeners, let the ivy grow prolific, great banks of green jasmine, thickets of virginia creeper and banksia roses. We breed snails and slaters and fat worms and fill up the bird baths. It has been a luxury hotel for birds since the dog died. There are possums too, which don't disturb blackbirds but do disturb us.

My husband is convinced that every possum in the district comes to our garden. They congregate on the roof, in the plum tree and under it and hold their parties and symposiums there every night. He has lost patience with the quantity of their droppings, the wet patches on the garden table. He is not against possums, just wishes they were in somebody else's garden so to that end we have a possum trap. The idea is to catch the possums and release them in the park.

The trap was set with a piece of apple in it. On the first night we caught, not a possum, but a male blackbird who just sat there calmly relieving himself and was grateful for his release. But yesterday the mother was caught and she beat her poor wings against the cage, fluttering in an agony of fear and confusion. When I let her out she seemed to fly off without any sense of where she was going, streaked away into the great wide limbo of a world where there are no confinements, only freedom of the wind and rain and sun.

The tragedy came when a baby bird, wondering no doubt, what had happened to his food supply, either fell or hopped out of the nest and into the swimming pool. My husband fished it out and put it back in the nest. There was another bird in there, a baby, and the damp one didn't look altogether comfortable about settling in. Tucked up in an agony of fright it sat on the edge of the nest, uncomforted. The male bird belled his anger from branch to wall to branch, in a continuing search for his mate. All day the baby sat there hunched up like a lost bewildered child.

"You've really upset things now" I said to my husband. He said he wouldn't set the trap there again but would put it on the roof.

The other blackbirds in my life came flooding back. I grieved all day and then towards evening one of the babies hopped round the pool. The male bird stopped his carrying on and looked for some food for it, pecking away at small shells and putting the food in the open beak. I began to feel more cheerful and hoped it would all end happily. The baby got into the ivy to hide itself. The mother came back and fed it too. Darkness fell and I thought perhaps all was well; I went to bed and slept.

Next morning, alas our garden was quiet. Birds sang in other gardens but not ours. Two little birds floated side by side in the pool, their over-large legs hanging down beneath them, small brown wings like frilled fans spread out on the still water. All I could do was bury them tenderly under the blossoming loencis.