

5-1-2023

## The God-Fearing Bird Feeder

Mollie McMullan  
*SUNY Geneseo*

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### Recommended Citation

McMullan, Mollie (2023) "The God-Fearing Bird Feeder," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 6.  
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol11/iss2/6>

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# The God-Fearing Bird Feeder

My freshman year of college was the year of the birds. Early October, I discovered that a bird flew into the kitchenette on my floor. It kept on ramming itself into windows and then hopping around on the floor, stunned. I had cornered it against a giant glass pane in the hallway, where I cradled it in my sweatshirt before releasing it out the open window. The most memorable part of this story is not when the bird repeatedly hurled itself into windows, but rather the memes that were created with the picture a girl took of me with the bird and then shared with our floor group chat. My favorite meme read: DINNER TIME, LITTLE ONE. I like this story. This is my preferred ending.

A month later, an identical-looking bird dropped dead in front of me while I was eating lunch in the dining hall. I watched it twitch on the table where an employee was sitting, talking on the phone with a friend. No one noticed but me.

That November, I went home for Thanksgiving break and visited a bird sanctuary, where I was able to feed birds out of my hand. I felt like my reputation as a fucked-up Snow White had been broken, the handcuff that tied me to morbidity snapped. Their little feet perched on the joints of my fingers while they chose the most appetizing sunflower seed from my palm. The pictures my mom took radiate with exhilaration, my mouth wide and shoulders scrunched to my ears in excitement. When I look at them, I can still feel the impossible fullness of my lungs.

The following semester, I texted my best friend about a cardinal that liked to chase me around campus. I recalled a moment a few days prior, where I was talking to a classmate about the cardinal and it suddenly appeared on a blossoming tree next to us. He never spoke to me again, and I like to think that he was scared away by the bird, rather than me. During the conversation with my friend, she texted me, “I had a dream last night that you and I were being followed by a cardinal.” This unnerved me. I hadn’t told her about the terrifying red bird until the day after her dream. She followed up with: “It feels like they are waiting for me.” I spent the rest of the week with my ringer on, waiting for the inevitable call that she was dead.

The voracious cardinal only appears after both my mom’s mom and my dog are dead. I tell my mom about the bird over the phone one day as I’m sitting on the pavement. When I detail waking up that morning feeling as though my dog’s head was resting on my side, she speaks of being haunted by my dog, and about how she and my sister both hear her collar jingling around the house despite knowing that the collar is resting in the same location as her ashes. We’ve exhausted this topic, so we move on to talking about her mom, who I have called Mummu my entire life because it is colloquially Finnish for “grandmother.” She reminds me about how, when Mummu passed, hundreds of birds sat in front of the large basement window and watched. They were gone after her last breath had been expelled. I remember thinking of the time I heard of birds being spirit guides, able to diffuse through the seam of life and death. As I’m talking, a bird swoops down and flies straight toward me, before veering to my left at the last second, as though confirming my suspicions. I’ve felt terrorized by these birds. By the cardinal that stalks me. But maybe they’re visitors from souls I lost entirely too soon. If I had been religious, I would’ve milked that for all it was worth.

One July afternoon, after working with children all day, I received a text from my mom that there was a dead bird right outside her car door, and that she left it so she could pick up my little brother. I figured I would do the dirty work and went to retrieve it. The bird, once beautiful, had been completely flattened against our driveway by the pouring rain. I had to pry it from the cooled tar, and was thankful when it wasn’t stiff from rigor mortis. I remember wondering about what led it to its demise, if it had died in the rain, but understood that its death could not be undone even if I had been able to identify the reason why it lay deflated in the driveway. It was still raining when I cradled it in my hands and placed it in a bassinet of ivy leaves. I went inside, washed my hands, and sobbed for fifteen minutes.

The summer before tenth grade, a neighbor discovered a fallen bird's nest in the road one morning. All the baby birds had died except one and the mother couldn't be found. My neighbor is kind of insufferable, so she decided to abandon her misery with me. She brought the bird over in an empty pizza box, oil stains and all, and left him on my kitchen table. The bird was so cold. So cold. And frail. My mom left me alone with this bird, who I named Wilbur, like the pig from *Charlotte's Web*, because like him, this bird was so small.

I don't like this memory. Don't make me tell you. Please.

I spent four hours alone with this bird, feeding it from a little syringe when its beak would gape open in desperation. I was worried about the bird being cold and took it out onto my deck for some sun. That's when it stopped moving completely. It lay motionless and limp under the gaze of the alarmed June sun whose rays pointed to me accusingly. At that moment, I was reminded of the guilt my mom says she feels when she sees the scar on my lip, despite not causing it. *Mother's guilt*, she calls it. I had to tell my father, who I pledged I would speak to as little as possible. He dug a small hole next to the deck and asked if I wanted to say a few words. What could a German shepherd like me say to the remains of its meal? I said no and left as he piled dirt over the flightless bird.

I think about the time my dog, Lulu, ran around in circles in my backyard with a bird in her mouth. I had to cover my hand with a plastic bag while I pried it from her jaws. Once I had the bird in my hand, I noticed its stiffness. I hoped it was rigor mortis rather than fright.

I run around in the same circle, heels bloody. My dog is gone but death is not. I am still chasing a dead bird.

One summer, my sister and I discovered a dying crow between swords of beachgrass at our uncle's beach house, where we lived at the time because our house had succumbed to flames. I often think of my sister and I standing over the onyx bird, like priests delivering last rites. The crow sleeps, I'm sure of it, incubated under a cloudless sky.

The crow sleeps. The crow sleeps. The crow sleeps. (The sun shrugs a shoulder, an unreliable witness.)

The crow died en route to the vet clinic, wrapped in my sister's starry blue scarf. My mother thinks the fright is what killed the crow. I remember staring out the window on the way home; *I am the dog. I am the dog. I am the dog.*

On a particularly quiet night, I have a dream about a little bird that hops into my hand and stations itself on my shoulder as I go to class. It accompanies me to one of my lectures before I decide it's time for it to go back to its home, wherever that may be. Along a line of trees, the bird turns to me, perched on the arm of a pine tree. I hear *Thanks, Mom!* before it soars into the endless blue sky. Even in my dream, I feel disgruntled. I do not seek motherhood out. It finds me in pizza boxes and driveways and on sand dunes. I beg birds to realize that I have canines, that I am a canine and I destroy and tear and devour and torture and hate and ruin. I am no friend. I am no mother. I am the undertaker.