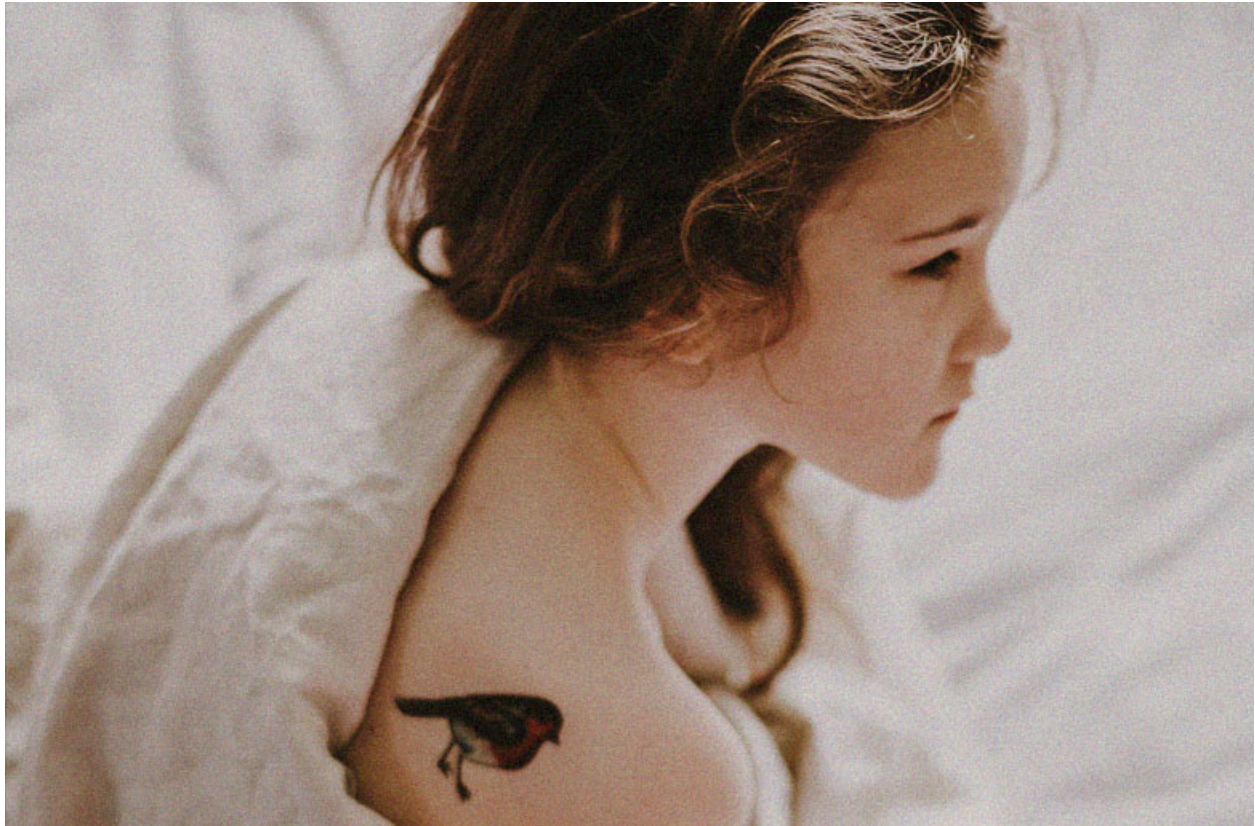


CREATIVE NONFICTION / ESSAY

## THE BIRDS: THE BIRDS

written by Andrea Tate • September 15, 2020



Recently, I asked my mother why I was afraid of birds.

“Maybe it was because you saw the movie *The Birds* when you were too young. Or maybe it was the time we went to a bird show and a large predatory bird sat on your head.”

After a few silent moments of me contemplating these scenarios she casually mentioned that when she gave birth to me a Robin’s nest sat on the window sill of the hospital.

“The baby birds hatched the same time you were born! I bet the chirping was the first thing you heard and it scared you. Yes, I bet you that is where your phobia came from.”

The birth story didn’t sound like a legitimate reason for my fear of birds. That left two other possibilities. Seeing Hitchcock’s frightening film of birds taking over the world seemed more likely the source of my phobia. However, the bird show comes in at a close second. Jesus, what kind of parents allows a bird of prey on their little girl’s

head? I imagined them sitting there laughing as a big-taloned bird shit on my shoulder. When it came to a having a good laugh, my parent's tendency to be overprotective went out the window.

My bird phobia was at its worst in first grade when I'd walk home from St. Augustine's school with my little sister Angela. We had to pass one main street that had a traffic light, and then one more street with a stop sign. This corner was directly in front of our apartment. My sister and I had to stand at the corner and yell for my mother to come down from the second floor to help us cross this street. What a stupid system? Sometimes our mother didn't hear us for several minutes as we stood on the corner yelling "MOMMY. WE ARE HERE!" Luckily, we didn't have double-paned glass windows. Otherwise we would have had to set up camp on the cold curb.

Angela, although a year and a half younger, was my protector on these walks home. I grilled her over and over.

"Is there a bird in my hood?" The entire three block walk I repeated the question.

"Is there a bird in my jacket hood?" I asked.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Check." I insisted.

"Check again." I demanded.

This ritual went on all year until one day I begged the questions once more.

"Angel are you absolutely sure there isn't a bird in my hood?!"

"There IS a bird in your hood!" she yelled.

I let out a blood-curdling scream and ran the rest of the way home without stopping. Of course, I failed to stop and allow my mother to play crosswalk cop, and just ran to my house. My mother heard me scream and met me at the stairs where she began to scream.

"Where is your sister! What's wrong?"

She was unsympathetic about the imaginary bird in my hood and smacked me on the behind for leaving my little sister in the dust.

From that day forward, I started folding my hood inside the neck of my jacket. This was not only uncomfortable, but it also made me realize the birds could now land on my

head. So I walked home with my shoulders hunched and my head hanging low, as if someone were about to hit me.

Years later in high school, I heard a bird moving around in our attic right above my head. I jumped out of bed with my blanket covering me from head to toe. I ran down the hall and burst into my parent's room. They both shot up and gasped.

"THERE IS A HUGE BIRD IN THE ATTIC! YOU HAVE TO GET IT OUT!" I wailed.

"Go the hell back to bed," yelled my father.

"I can't. The bird keeps walking around up there!"

"Is the bird wearing army boots?" my father joked. My mother laughed. I started crying.

Finally, my father got out of bed. He trudged upstairs to the attic yelling at Jesus the entire time.

"Jesus H. Christ...For Christ sakes...God damn it!"

I could hear boxes being pushed around, my father's footsteps, and the fluttering of bird wings. I was shaking, and my skin was covered in goosebumps when my father finally came down the stairs and said, "It's a small sparrow, and I can't get it out. The attic window is open, so I'm sure it will leave in the morning. When it does, I'll go up and shut the damn window. Now go back to sleep."

"NOOO! How can I sleep knowing it's up there?"

"Figure it out," said my father. "I'm going back to bed."

I stayed up all night. I was sure that bird would open the attic door, hop down the stairs, and somehow get through my closed bedroom door and peck my eyes out.

In my mid 20s my husband and I lived in New York City where I avoided the Pigeon-lady in Central Park at all costs. On the weekends, we went out to our tiny cottage in Westhampton. When I say tiny, I mean smaller than our 700 square foot apartment in the city. It was just a little house in the woods a mile from the beach where we could decompress from urban life. One spring morning my husband cracked the window open to let fresh air into the bedroom. He walked the three steps to the kitchen, made coffee and went into town to have breakfast with a friend. I was still enjoying the early morning hours in bed when I heard a bird tweeting outside the window. Not liking how close it sounded, I popped up from bed, whipping my head towards the window. Something flew past. I screamed as if Charles Manson had walked through my door

with an ax. I threw my blanket over my head just like I had when that killer bird was in the attic, and ran out the screen door in my underwear. Standing in the gravel driveway about twenty-feet from the front door, I was shaking uncontrollably. *What do I do? What do I do?* I couldn't go back in the house with a BIRD inside. I'd have to open the screen door and let it out. The problem was, the screen door didn't stay open on its own. I'd have to hold it open, and what if the bird came at me when I was standing by the door? The bird could easily get stuck in my crazy hair and never get out unless someone cut it loose. I couldn't take the chance of that happening.

I decided to see if there was a rope in the tool shed. Inside the shed was a bike, lawnmower, a pile of men's work clothes, boots, garden tools in various stages of rust, and a shelf with several small items including a ball of twine. I brought the twine back to the front of the house but was afraid to get too close to the door because there was a strong chance the bird would fly at me and scratch my face off. I slowly walked up to the front door and quickly tied one end of the twine around the screen door handle. I then ran down the steps and pulled the door open while ducking my head. And then, nothing. A few minutes passed by, and still nothing. Time for another plan. How long could I stand outside in 50-degree weather in my underwear? This was too much for me to handle. I needed help. I needed support. I needed a bird catcher.

I could only imagine what the people in Westhampton thought when I biked down Main Street in clothes I found in the tool shed: a large pair of men's overalls, a yellow rain slicker, and oversized work boots on a beautiful spring day. My husband came out of the cafe as I pulled up, and I thanked God for sparing the humiliation of having to go inside.

"What the hell?" he said.

"There is an emergency at home. A bird flew in the house!"

He started laughing. I started crying.

"Come on. Let's get you into the car," he said, as he threw my bike in the trunk.

When we got back to the cottage, I stayed in the car. Five minutes later he came back out of the house and reported that there was no bird.

"Are you sure? Did you look everywhere?"

"I looked in every room."

"Did you look under things? Did you look behind the throw pillows on the couch? It could be hiding."

“Honey, birds do not hide—they fly.”

“Where is it then? Check again.”

“Are you sure a bird came in the house? Maybe you dreamt it. Maybe something else flew in through the window.”

I asked him to check the floor for a big leaf. He looked. Nothing.

“Okay, I’m coming in. You’re positive?”

“There is no bird!” he said, exasperated.

When I returned to the house, I walked on tip-toe and was suspicious at every turn. I decided to re-enact what I did that morning when I jumped out of bed after seeing the bird fly past my face. I got back in bed, laid down, sat up, and quickly snapped my head towards the window. My mass of curls flew in front of my face. I got out of bed, walked to the kitchen where Ray was drinking another cup of coffee and said, “Phew. It was only my hair.”

After the flying hair crisis in the Hamptons, I decided to go into therapy to face my fear. My therapist weighed about 100 pounds, had long gray hair, and always yelled at me. I complained once that I couldn’t lose weight. She yelled, “MODERATION! You don’t have to eat an entire banana!!! Just eat half!!!” She also recommended that I purchase a ceramic bird, and put it across the room on the bedroom window sill. Each day, I was to bring the bird closer and closer to me. As soon as the bird progressed to my dresser, I got creeped out and had my husband throw it in the Goodwill box.

Over the years, my phobia thwarted all outdoor events. I couldn’t walk through an outdoor lobby of parrots at a restaurant in Miami. I was frozen in fear at the entrance wondering how the hell I was going to ever move my body again. We got take-out instead. I ran away from a lobster dinner in Maui because a bird landed on our table. I couldn’t sleep that night because I kept imagining this tiny sparrow’s yellow beak picking up a bread crumb near my champagne glass. I screamed and left a university cocktail party in Marina Del Rey, because a seagull stole a piece of sushi off my plate. No one even noticed the trauma I had just gone through, so I went back to my hotel room to finish off a bottle of wine in a bird-free zone. I had to scan every outdoor event for the potential of a fly by. It was exhausting. But then my yoga teacher said something that could be useful in my quest to rid my fear of birds.

She said, “Relax your entire body, except for the area you are stretching. Think of how you can use this technique in life. Just because one thing is irritating you, you can release the rest of yourself. Stress does not have to affect your entire being.” I tried to

ignore my knee pain as I squatted into eagle pose because yoga teacher's advice made sense. However, when a bird gets close to me, my entire body goes into fight or flight mode. I couldn't imagine that I would ever be able to relax in the presence of anything feathered, from a hummingbird to an ostrich. How would I ever overcome this phobia? It ruled my life. Yet, there had to be a solution.

Exposure therapy, I learned, was the best treatment for Ornithophobia. But exposure therapy had failed me in the past, so I researched further. Another resource explained, Phobias are a conditioned response, so they can be unconditioned. After all, you are not BORN being afraid of birds.



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*featured photo by Annie Spratt*