

Blackbird

The bird sat where it was dropped, perfectly upright, under the garden bench. It was a like a bird, but not quite a bird – head sunk in and claws hidden. It didn't fly off when I got close; instead, it stayed almost perfectly still. The only thing that moved was its tail, twitching.

The cat that caught it was now bored, and lay rolling lazily on his back in the dry soil of a nearby flowerbed. Earlier, he hissed when I tried to save his prey, carrying it possessively in his mouth as I followed him round and round the small garden. But then the game was over, and he left the bundle, almost tenderly, under the bench.

The call came in the morning. Could I make an appointment this Thursday? Yes. I wrote down the time, where to go.

“Who was that?” my son asked.

I sat down before I answered, *work*.

Later, I looked for the bird on the chart of common garden birds. It took a minute to spot it: female blackbird. Small body, soft, warm brown feathers, and dark, dark eyes.

I found the lump last week. Sometimes it was easy to find, other times I could convince myself I'd imagined it. Five years ago, almost exactly, my mother had both breasts removed. I looked in the mirror, sad. For the next few days, I felt the negative space of where my mother's breasts had been.

In the days after the operation, I helped her take a bath. I poured water onto her tilted head and watched the whipped-up bubbles flatten like seaweed against a rock with the tide. The shape of her skull was too obvious like that, just below the surface. I tried not to look at the smudged scar, stuck like red twisted string across her chest.

Under the bright lights, I sat across a wide desk from the consultant when she gave me the news. The relief was silent; I swallowed it. They would send me for a mammogram as I was there, but she was sure it was nothing. I thought but didn't say, "Sorry." The consultant looked up, smiled.

After I found the blackbird, I left it where it was and shoed the cat inside. When I looked later, it had gone.

That night, I asked at tea about the bird, "Could it have been in shock?"

There was a pause, then my father answered, "Could've been."

I collected the dishes,

"Then where did it go?"

Laura Muetzelfeldt