

The Birds: Everything I Know About Hummingbirds

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She arrives like an epiphany, an emerald-green flash outside my kitchen window, tiny and frenetic, with feathers that shine like soap bubbles. Not much bigger than a dragonfly or a pollen-laden bumblebee, she hovers over the sweetness of a small red-and-yellow feeder, her body in a perpetual state of fast forward, wings blurring like a memory, a haze of past-meets-present.

Instantly, I think of my father, of what a kick he would get from seeing a black-chinned hummingbird this close up. Visible are the gradations of color on her back, her long and slender onyx bill, and feet tucked tightly into her tail feathers. Sometimes, if I hold the feeder in the palm of my hand, she will feast just a few centimeters from my fingers, on high alert but unafraid. I can feel the flutter of her beating wings, the hum of her kinetic energy.

My dad would have loved it.

Once, when my brother and I were kids, he drove us an hour north to Rangeley, Maine, a small hunting town on the Appalachian Trail. He parked at the edge of the woods, cupped both hands around his mouth and mimicked the hollow, horn-like call of a cow moose in heat. We sat in the backseat, skeptical, restless, distracted by the mosquitoes landing on our bare arms and legs. But a few minutes later, the pine trees rustled. Our faces lifted. And there he was, a giant rutting bull lumbering out from the bush, nostrils flaring, ears twitching.

At my kitchen window, the hummingbird looks left and right, searching for predators, for signs of trouble. Hummingbirds are territorial and aggressive, especially the males. They puff themselves up and fight to defend their food supply. Seeing no enemies, she hovers closer, then looks through the glass directly at me. I make myself small and still, only my chest rising and falling with inhalation, my unspoken effort to convince her to stay.

Also when I was a kid, our father tormented us with endless rules and commands. Mostly his rules were for me, since I was the oldest. He came home from work tired and cranky, ready to dole out punishments for the smallest infractions. Unfolded laundry. An unwashed dish. A light left shining with nobody in the room. I could never get anything right. He cursed and yelled, then grounded me, restricting my movement to the front porch or the end of our dirt driveway. It was the worst punishment I could imagine.

I went to bed at night hating him, wishing he would disappear – not necessarily die, just go away. I wanted to be free of him, of his strict control and his bad moods. I wanted him to come home happy, speak to us in a softer voice, maybe even ask how our day went. But he didn't know how. No one had ever done that for him - my father, a man who could talk to moose but not his own children.

As a teen, I could barely sit in the same room with him. Too afraid he would start yelling or nagging about college applications, I retreated to the burrow of my bedroom. But even then, he barged in without knocking, to tell me to fold the laundry or wash the dishes or go help mom with dinner. Later, when it was finally time to go to college, I left home and never went back.

Over the years, wild animals were one of the few topics he and I could discuss. We talked about birds,

mostly. Coyotes and cottontail rabbits too. I liked telling him about the plants and flowers growing in my garden. Basil, green peppers, cherry tomatoes in the middle of October, thanks to the mild California climate. Thousands of miles away in western Maine, he found it all quite amusing, the notion that I could make myself a fresh salad while he and my mother warmed themselves with homemade beef stew.

Dad died of congestive heart failure on a Friday night in late June, halfway between strawberry and tomato seasons. In the months before his death, when he could do little more than look out his window and watch the birds, I bought him a feeder. Antique copper with a circular perch. The company shipped it to his house with a big bag of birdseed. Sometimes he could talk on the phone and sometimes he couldn't, but my mother told me he gazed out at the birds every afternoon. Bright-red cardinals were his favorite. Orange-breasted orioles too.

I was on a plane speeding up the Eastern seaboard when he passed. I didn't make it home in time to say goodbye. When we touched down in Portland, Maine, I had a poem in my pocket. Something by Mary Oliver about trees and cattails. Something I know he would have liked.

Now it's November, his birthday month. This year, he would have turned 68. Without realizing what I was doing, I bought myself the same feeder I'd bought him. I hung it in my back yard, next to the gardenia, over by the pomegranate tree.

At this moment, I'm home recovering from kidney surgery, and there's little more I can do than stand at the kitchen window, wash a few dishes and look out at the birds. The commotion at the feeder reminds me of my father. Of all the times he yelled, all the bartering I did with God to make him go away. All the times he probably wanted to tell me he loved me but couldn't find the words. I think of our conversations about animals, about the bobcat I saw one morning after dropping my daughter off at school. About the deer I found devouring the neighbor's rose bushes like an all-you-can-eat buffet. About the stray cat he found hiding in his basement, which he brought inside and named Phoebe.

Now there are black phoebes at my bird feeder. White-crowned sparrows. Towhees and finches, mockingbirds and mourning doves. As they quarrel over sunflower seed and millet, I can't help but think I'm seeing the same things he saw in his final days. There are no cardinals or orioles in my yard. My condition, unlike his, is not fatal. But watching the birds makes me feel closer to him somehow, during the month I remember him the most.

The hummingbird perches on the edge of the feeder, her wiry feet slipping sideways over the plastic. Her head tips forward. Her pea-green shoulders shine. Those wings beat on as she drinks and drinks. Sometimes we use whatever language we can find to say what needs to be said. The words are too big, but the birds are just right.

If my dad were still alive, I'd call him on the phone. I'd tell him my tomato plants are blooming once again. Seven pale orbs on a single vine. I'd tell him everything I know about the black-chinned hummingbird, how her heart makes up 2.5 percent of her body weight. How that makes hers the largest heart in the animal kingdom, relatively speaking. How she can fly forward and backward, even upside down for a bit if she wants. Somehow he would know that what I really mean is I miss you, I love you, I'm sorry.



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