

The Featherweight

A bird with one gnarled leg and foot came to visit my bird feeder every morning last February. I was getting up around five in the morning, then, to meet an April deadline for my first book. I was getting up early enough to watch him every morning from my desk.

The later birds, the ones who came after the sun was fully risen, arrived in numbers of three, four, five, ten, and fought for their spots at the feeder. Some of them did it mid-air, swooping around and at each other, and some of them clung to the screen of my window by their bird feet, waiting for a spot. Always they pecked each other around the brass circle ring of the feeder, always there was some level of fight.

The gnarled bird made sure to get there early so that he had the feeder to himself. So he could take food slowly, with his one injured leg dangling, doing what he needed to get his breakfast.

I think of him first when I think about last February.

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There was a car accident that month, but before that, in November, there had been a fatal hit and run on Thanksgiving. A man was riding his electric bike to Thanksgiving dinner when someone hit him with their car and his body had flown off the bike and onto the edges of abandoned land. Whoever hit him left him there for dead.

I had been at my own Thanksgiving dinner, one hosted outdoors because of the pandemic. We'd been sitting around the beginning of a fire when a line of police vehicles went roaring by down the main road in town. All of us gathered noticed and someone had commented: *That's a lot of cops.*

When I drove home a half hour later, as I got closer and closer to the left for the dirt road I live on, I saw the police vehicles were parked where I usually turn. Then I saw the road flares and the tape and a body on the ground. My house was a few hundred feet back from where he had landed, the last house other than my landlady's before a mile-long stretch of uninhabited BLM land.

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When I first came to see the desert house—to see how much space and land I could get for the listed amount of less than one thousand dollars a month in rent—it was July and all the days

were 100 degrees or hotter. The owner had all the curtains closed and a mini-split was pumping cool air.

What all I could get for eight hundred dollars a month was 400 square feet of a house under a flat roof with no kitchen and no bathtub. But there was a big fenced-in backyard with swings and a great view of the biggest mountain. There were acres of desert all around me.

In a year of a pandemic and uncertainty, I somehow had hope for an impossibility of unhappiness here, at least unhappiness from outside myself. It was a wish as open and wild as the land I was going to be living on.

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In December, people periodically came to visit where the man had died. His name, I learned, had been Sky. The visitors left candles and rocks and created a small altar on the side of the road. On Christmas, a group of them gathered. Oftentimes I was home and watched them from my window.

I wanted to put a vertical line of text in the crease of each page I was writing, then, to tell the reader how it was the day I wrote it. I wanted it to say things like *Sky died last night*. I wanted it to say *I forgot I was boiling eggs and they exploded* and *I walked one mile to the right of my house and laid underneath a dying Joshua Tree* and *I cried the entire time I wrote this, about something that had nothing to do with what I was writing*.

None of it would have made sense for the book I was writing, but I began to feel like just the act of writing anything else other than what was happening around me was lying by omission. I had never felt this way about writing before.

The gnarled bird and I continued our little routine and it brought me new comfort. He was tangible; in my view and not just my mind. I could write about the past and see him in my present.

He was all desert, all survival and routine. He was also different. The other birds flew from the feeder if I moved anything other than my fingers on the keyboard, but the gnarled bird didn't mind me—I'd reheat my coffee or stretch my arms over my head and he was unbothered. He'd stay until the sun was almost fully risen and then he'd fly off until the next day.

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The Mojave Desert holds a different kind of quiet. Sounds are either gentle and belong here — a quail bird, a howling coyote, a rooster in the morning— or they are loud and unnatural, jarring — a four-wheeler, a gun shot, a car without a muffler. You have to either be paying some attention to

notice or you're shocked out of everything by it. It was what had drawn me in most when I moved that August—all the quiet and land to hear it from.

All five sense out here exist in this way. You're lulled or you're accosted. Anything in between is most often describe as *quiet*, the kind people visit and move here for.

The night Sky was killed was no different. I had heard the coroner's van, the friends, the family members arrive. I sat watch at the same window where I wrote each morning. I hear it went the night went totally quiet again—no coyotes, not even dogs that night.

All that quiet, all that open land, all those heightened senses and no one had seen or heard anything.

No one ever found out who hit him. If it was a local or a tourist. Eventually, people theorized it could have been someone leaving The Integratron who had killed Sky. A visitor. A foreigner, not necessarily to California, but to the desert. That was who had hit him.

Aviator and UFOlogist George Van Tessel claimed that one August evening in 1953, aliens from Venus invited him onboard their ship where they gave him a formula for a proprietary frequency for rejuvenating living skin tissues. In 1957, Van Tessel began building The Integratron to perform the rejuvenation. These days, it is a tourist destination where people come to experience soundbaths inside of it.

The 38-foot high, all-wood and white umbrella dome shape of it is impossible not to notice in this part of the desert.

It would have been one of the last things Sky saw. I couldn't bring myself to visit it for a first time when I realized. It was a small way to feel some kind of control, some tangible response I could have as a stranger adjacent to his death.

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In February, I witnessed a second accident. I saw the car, first. Red-orange and flipped over onto its roof, smashed in the middle of open desert on a stretch of the main road. My foot on the gas pedal did the shake like I'd just avoided my own collision and my foot was in almost a spasm when I switched over to the brake, steering my car onto the side of the road.

I knew the vehicle. It belonged to a man I had briefly dated.

I pulled my car behind his other vehicle, which was parked, safely, on the side of the road. I didn't understand, couldn't understand, so I began walking towards the body lying on the ground,

towards the familiar flash of his flannel shirt. As I got closer, I saw him standing off to the side of it all, unharmed. He opened his arms into a hug and he held me for the first time in two months.

The second car hadn't been his, just one that looked like his. He'd pulled over to help after seeing it, too. The person on the ground was a woman and she had flown through the windshield. Her boyfriend, who had been driving, was upright and fine, searching the shrubs and creosote bushes for a cat and a dog who had been riding in her lap.

The man I had dated had tucked his flannel shirt there under her head for some support, some comfort. I knew that shirt smelled like him and I had a moment of grotesque envy. It hadn't been a kind ending between us.

We stood there until a helicopter was confirmed to be coming to lift her away. The last words I said to him that day were "Please." Please just talk to me again. Please just be my friend.

I didn't want to lose anyone. Or: I couldn't understand any more pain.

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All my self-respect, the kind Didion once wrote springs from a willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life, had dwindled that winter. I woke up some mornings certain that I shouldn't have; that the whole universe had made a grave mistake. It was not depression, it was beyond it, and paralleled only by how barren things looked from my windows and how hard the earth got that first winter.

I had mistaken the deserts openness and quiet for a promise of peace and no harm. A promise of no one hurting me.

It had started outside of the desert, this desire to protect myself from others. It was part pandemic and part something else, something much older. I associated my hurts with cities— metropolitan places with buildings and sirens and the occasional person openly weepily, that was where I had constantly felt some level of touched by hurt.

A protection that kept the world from happening— that was what I had wanted. And, of course, no such thing exists. But I had expected quiet and nature and solitude to provide me with this type of protection that does not exist anywhere in life. And I had mistaken the desert for being barren at all.

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A week after the accident a woman having a psychotic episode burst into my house and demanded to know what I had done with the babies. For a second, I'd thought, "*What babies?*" like maybe I'd forgotten or lost the ones I had, she was so adamant, before I realized she meant my neighbor's two young children. She had some sort of stick and she was raising it at me while she yelled. She was angry I couldn't understand what she did. I got her out of the house by explaining that the babies were alright, that I was taking good care of them.

A week after that, the woman arrived again at midnight and tried to smash in my landlady's windows. The local newspaper published an article and included the part where she'd said she'd barbecue the kids and feed them to their dogs. She'd said it over and over.

The house the woman's adult children had left her in was behind where I lived. It was meant to be a camping cabin, but she'd been living there for months with no electricity or heat or running water and it smelled like human shit. Human shit that wafted over to my house on a windy day and sat cooking on a still, hot one.

California laws left me unmoving at my desk for hours then, wondering how in the world there could be so many and that they could do so little about this. I cried on the phone with adult protective services when they told me they couldn't take a report without an address or phone number. I pleaded with them to just come, that they could use *my* phone number and address, but please just come.

They never came.

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Everything that winter had felt unfamiliar and I had turned it around in my mind to be a *cruel* unfamiliar. A pointed and unjustified one. I had not been wrong, but I had not been right, either.

I was gutted by who and what had died nearby. I was aching for what was left or left behind. That the desert possessed these, that they had all happened here, had felt unfathomable and pointed and cruel. It was naïve and childish—the kind of thinking I had embraced in my twenties. That enough pain must mean some period of good was coming. That I could control anything just by wanting it enough.

I spent that February almost entirely inside of my small home. My sense of hearing began to grow and I could hear smaller sounds—roosters from two miles away, a fly on the other side of the house. I took the world in, in small, digestible bits, sometimes only as much as I had to. A trip to the grocery store for food, a short walk for some sunshine.

More died around me, including several wild animals I had been caring for and I had to learn new ways to grieve. I made small graves for desert mice and baby rabbits. I sat outside wrapped in blankets and watched the milky way at night. I went outside more and cupped the landscape I'd been looking at all winter in my hands. I watched every sunrise and every single sunset.

I learned to be in communion with the land I had expected so much from. My death grip began to loosen on trying to control what was always uncontrollable.

I made it to the first snake season, to spring, and I kept going.

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The first snake I saw that spring was a red racer in the front yard. I was hanging clothes to dry on my fence. I hadn't seen her and maybe she hadn't seen me, either, because we met in a few seconds of shared panic.

I sent a photo of her to friends who had lived in the desert longer than I had and they let me know she was a "good" snake. She would eat the rats that liked to chew up people's car engines, they explained, and she wasn't poisonous. She'd bite, but only to defend herself.

The second time I saw the red racer she was tangled in my landlady's fence. The man who came to release her held her with black gloves. She was gracefully slinking in and out of his fingers as much as she could. The man looked tired and weary around people and calm and happy near the snake. I understood in a way I hadn't before.

He let the red racer go in a front stretch of the yard and she went down into the nearest hole, a moment after he'd said she would.

"If there's another snake in there they won't fight until they're back above ground. They'll share the hole," the man explained.

I sensed a deeper meaning I could make of what he'd said, but I was learning to let animals be animals by then.

The metaphor I did not make then is obvious to me now: like the red racer who had gone into the nearest hole, no matter the consequences, I had chosen to live in the desert out of a certain desperation, with a childlike caveat that it would somehow prevent me from pain. I could have gone anywhere and had been ready to, but I chose the desert. I chose a place where I could be more present, more aware of, more susceptible to, the world around me. All of it.

The self-respect I thought had dwindled had, in fact, been dormant. And with all I had expected from the desert, it had given me something different and more. New ways to process. New ways to grieve. It forced me open.

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I encountered a Mary Ruefle passage that winter that summarized how I'd felt then:

Once I witnessed a windstorm so severe two 100-year-old trees were uprooted on the spot. The next day, walking among the wreckage, I found the friable nests of birds, completely intact and unharmed on the ground. That the featherweight survive the massive, that this reversal of fortune takes place among us — that is what haunts me. I don't know what it means.

I had imagined myself to be an uprooted tree that winter. I had, instead, been a preserved bird's nest. A gnarled bird safe inside one, if I'm especially kind to myself. And I am kind to myself, now. Or at least kinder. I learned again how to be.

Perhaps that is what it means for the featherweight to survive. What the featherweight owes what didn't. A renewed willingness to learn and grow and survive.

People still came to visit the place where Sky died. Sometimes they come alone, sometimes in groups, with their cars lining the sides of the road. Just yesterday, I saw two men come by on bikes and lay them on the ground where he had laid and they sat with him for a while.

I eventually saw the man I used to date again and we exchanged a few words. The chance for them to be cruel, or for them to be kind, had long passed. Perhaps this was what he'd meant when he told me, the day of the accident, that I just needed time. Who does not?

The woman living in the cabin was arrested and her children came and put a padlock on the door of the small cabin. I went into it just before they did, when it was wide open and desert animals were beginning to move in. The woman had sprayed hot sauce all over the walls and floors and hung old bed sheets over the windows. There were candles and small personal items I recognized from the roadside altar Sky's friends had made, things they had been pleading with people on Facebook to return.

Next to the woman's small mattress on the floor were several notebooks full of her writing, not unlike the piles next to my own bed. She had, perhaps, expected some healing out of the desert, too. When I exited the cabin that day, I wished that for her, too.

I moved the bird feeder away from my window and I don't know when or if the gnarled bird stopped visiting. I had needed him so much that winter. His routines, his ingenuity, his sweet shape. I had learned to let animals be animals, but he felt like something else entirely and I couldn't bear to know if he left. But when I feel some of that old grief sink in, I think of him again.

