

# Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine

---

Volume 68  
Issue 1 *Volume 68: Hope and Healing*

Article 1

---

2021

## Each Time I Held a Dying Bird

Grace E. Daverson  
*Humboldt State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Daverson, Grace E. (2021) "Each Time I Held a Dying Bird," *Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine*: Vol. 68: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol68/iss1/1>

This Creative Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Toyon: Multilingual Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cal Poly Humboldt. For more information, please contact [kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu](mailto:kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu).



## Each Time I Held a Dying Bird

Grace E. Daverson

### Canary

There were eggs resting in the palm of Mama's hand. There were four of them, each a pale spotted blue, delicate and tiny, about the size of her pinky nail. She took me to the smallest room in the house and turned off the light. There was absolute dark, and then *click*. A penlight. She made sure I had a clear view as she pointed it up and through one tiny egg, lighting it up from the inside. There were no shadows in it, only golden light shining through a paper thin shell.

"No baby in this one," she told me, "Want to hold it?"

### Yellow Cockatiel

She was the size of a whiteboard eraser, decorated with happy yellow feathers. On each cheek, a perfect red circle. When she was happy, the feathers on her head would stand up like a woven crown, a mohawk of joy. I named her Treat, because she liked treats and I was nine.

Taking her outside wasn't my first mistake. My first mistake was teaching her how to fly with clipped wings. It was just too sad for her not to. She was meant to fly and she wasn't allowed to and so I helped her. We practiced until she could circle around my room with ease. And then I stepped outside with her and she flew and I never saw her again.

## **Grey Cockatiel**

He was the same size as Treat, had the same beautiful happy mohawk, but he was much louder than Treat ever was. I taught him all kinds of whistles and always made sure to clip his wings.

Technically, I didn't hold him until he was already dead. It was my fault, again.

My family was dog-sitting a known bird-killer. I kept my door shut for the entire week, except for the very last day when I forgot.

It didn't matter that I was only gone for two minutes, and it didn't matter that the bird was in his cage. When I returned, I mistook feathers for fabric, a stuffed animal strewn across my room. I only realized what had happened when his body was in my hand. I can't remember if I had it in me to cry. His body was already stiff. The dog had already left.

## **Mourning Dove**

He was too comfortable around people to be safe in the wild, so I caught him and brought him home. I knew he was a mourning dove right away. I was eleven, and had been studying local birds. I wanted to be an ornithologist.

I knew he was a he because of the purple shimmer on his neck. You could only see it when the light caught it just right, otherwise he was grey. His name was Olive. He was loudest just before the sun came up, cooing as loudly as his little lungs would let him. A dog got him, too. My aunt's dog, on Christmas day.

## **Robin**

Its beak was cracked and its eye had bled over. My brother had hit it with a slingshot.

"I wasn't aiming for it," he told me, sad, ashamed, embarrassed, "I didn't want to actually hit it." Then, because I

knew about birds, “Can you fix it?”

I tried. I cleaned its eye the best I could. I let it rest somewhere safe for a few hours, and then I set it free. It took a moment for the robin to remember how to fly, but then it flew, and I never saw it again.

## **My Sister**

Zoe stole a steak knife from the kitchen and perched herself atop the tree in the front yard, twenty feet in the air. She sang out her plans for all to hear, just like any bird would do. No one loved her, she said. No one cared about her, she said. It didn’t matter what happened to her, she said. Zoe was eleven. I was thirteen.

When she landed on the ground, it was safely and on her own feet. Police officers surrounded her, taking the knife, giving her water, asking her if she was up for a ride to the hospital. Before she left, Zoe said she wanted to talk to me.

We sat down on the step of our porch, side by side. Her eyes were caught on her shoelaces, untied and limp against the concrete.

“I want to be like that robin you saved,” she told me, not looking up. “I want to feel pain.”

It took me a long moment to know what she was talking about.

“Zoe,” I said, being honest, not letting her have this, “That bird is blind in one eye. It has a severe disability. It’s probably already dead.”

## **Scrub Jay**

A ruffled little blue bird with a dusty brown back, it was too young to be on its own. It wouldn’t fly, only hopped around our driveway. I spent hours chasing it, bath towel in hand. I found it a safe place, gave it water, gave it seed, and still, it died. A day passed, and Grandma greeted me with a joke. “Found another bird to kill?” she asked.

## Conure

I named him Salsa for his feathers, green and yellow and red. When he was happy, he'd say his name, repeat it over and over again. He had all the speaking ability of a scratchy old radio, but that never stopped him.

I came home after a week and found his water bowl dry. It must have been empty for days. He was slack, lying at the bottom of his cage, but alive. Still alive.

I fed him water through an eyedropper, cradled him in the palms of my hands. When he died, I felt it beneath my fingers.

## Chicken

There was something downy and soft in Mama's hand, something that shouldn't have been red, but was anyway.

"A dog—" she started to explain. The chicken made a halfhearted attempt to escape. Its neck flopped from one side to the other. "Can you help it?"

I thought about saying no. I was sixteen and had long since given up studying birds. I no longer wished to work with things that live and move. So many things have died in my hands. Still, I thought it'd be worth it to try.

Before it died, the chicken drank water. It ate. It moved and chirped and listened when I spoke to it. And still, it died.

## Varied Thrush

It crashed into my window, a stunned mess of orange and brown. It wouldn't fly, only hopped around my dorm building. Jacket in hand, I caught it easily. I found it a safe place, and let it rest for a few hours. My roommates thought I was some crazy bird-whisperer, but I was just acting out of experience.

A wildlife rescue center was called, and someone was sent to pick it up.

“We’ll take care of it,” they told me. It was still alive when they drove away.

## **The Thing About Birds, My Sister, and Dogs That Lunge**

The thing about birds, and songbirds especially, is that they are fragile. They’re famously fragile. Birds are vulnerable to the slightest change in temperature, in air quality, and in the water they drink. They’re vulnerable to cats, to dogs, to buildings, to windows, and to little kids who don’t know as much about scrub jays as they think they do. I’ve never known a bird to die of old age.

My sister is not a bird. She doesn’t fly. She doesn’t crash into windows. She doesn’t need to be wary of brothers with slingshots or unattended dogs. She doesn’t need anyone to refill a water bowl for her. She is not a bird. She will still die someday, but first, she will live a long and happy life. I have learned to believe that she will.

Sometimes, on a walk, my dog will lunge at a bird. It’s okay, because she is a dog, and sometimes dogs lunge after birds. There’s no changing the nature of things. She hasn’t caught one yet, but I think about what will happen if she does. What will I do if the bird is still alive? What will I do if it’s dying?

I think of the robin singing just before it flew away. I think of my yellow cockatiel flying a lap around my room, landing on my hand, and whistling all the way. I think of golden light shining through a paper thin shell. I think of all of this, and I know exactly what I’ll do.