

The Bird, The Snake, and Me

by Susan Davis

The truth about the bird and the snake is this. They are dead. And me? I cannot stop thinking about them.

The Bird

A bird, flapping its wings, flying, sees a passage, an opening. What seconds before had been peaceful freedom will soon be the cruelest form of captivity. The bird crashes into my picture window. It's a familiar thud, but it always takes me by surprise. And I always hate it.

I see three small feathers glued to the picture window by nothing more than the force of the impact. I believe and hope it was instantaneous and painless, a blunt force trauma to the head or snapping of the neck. The bird usually falls straight down just below the window, but not this one. I don't see it, but I also don't investigate. I don't want to know that I am somehow, again, indirectly responsible for a death. Maybe this one is more fortunate than the rest.

It's not.

I step out on my deck and see the bird. I'm expecting to see it just as you expect to see worms after a spring rain, but don't know exactly where they'll be. Because of its distance from the window, I think this one suffered. It must have flapped its wings and fluttered trying to take flight again, but only scurried itself along the boards before giving up. The bird is lying on its back, its white breast facing skyward, legs at right angles, toes splayed, its lead shot eyes looking up at me. The bird is perfect, still in repose, showing no signs of the injury it suffered. I take a long look, but don't move it. I want to grant it rest where it has fallen.

The Snake

I find the snake in the middle of the road, upside down, its white scales dirtied and dotted with leaves, twisted into a figure eight as if it had been killed elsewhere, dragged, then posed there after the murder. I stop to look, stare and wonder what happened. I take pictures and lower down on my haunches for a closer look, questioning and gathering evidence much like a detective trying to determine the cause of a crime, trying to piece it together.

I touch the snake, mindful not to mutilate it further. Thin red threads are strung from its body like pulls from an old sweater, unraveling on the ground around it. I press on it, notice it's soft and then turn it over. For some reason I just need to see its face. Despite its ordeal, its head is perfectly shaped and formed, though the rest of its body hasn't fared so well. Many of its green scales are broken and torn, the yellow stripe running the length of its body is twisted and askew.

I abandon the snake where I found it just as I had the bird. I have bothered it enough. It is time to let it be.

And Me

I found the bird and snake within days of each other. I'm not one to believe in signs such as flickering lights, familiar scents suddenly wafting through a room, or coins randomly placed in my path. Still I can't help but wonder if the bird and the snake are signs meant just for me, to remind me of the uncertainty of life, that at any moment we may be moving about our day to suddenly find ourselves twisted and broken, wrecked by an accident, illness, or betrayal. We know life can turn on a dime without warning or the chance to prepare or prevent it, just as the bird and snake could not foresee or prevent their fate. Humans, birds, snakes, we're really not so different are we? All living beings are connected in this way.

It's a good lesson. One I should heed and I will for a while. But the memory will fade and the images of the bird and snake will too. And then I'll do what most of us do after the thoughts of a tragic event are buried within us. I'll return to living without care or concern, forgetting how short life can be. And that may be the worst tragedy of all.

