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The Thrush Sings Me Home

What is killing the birds of my heart?

Amy Boyd



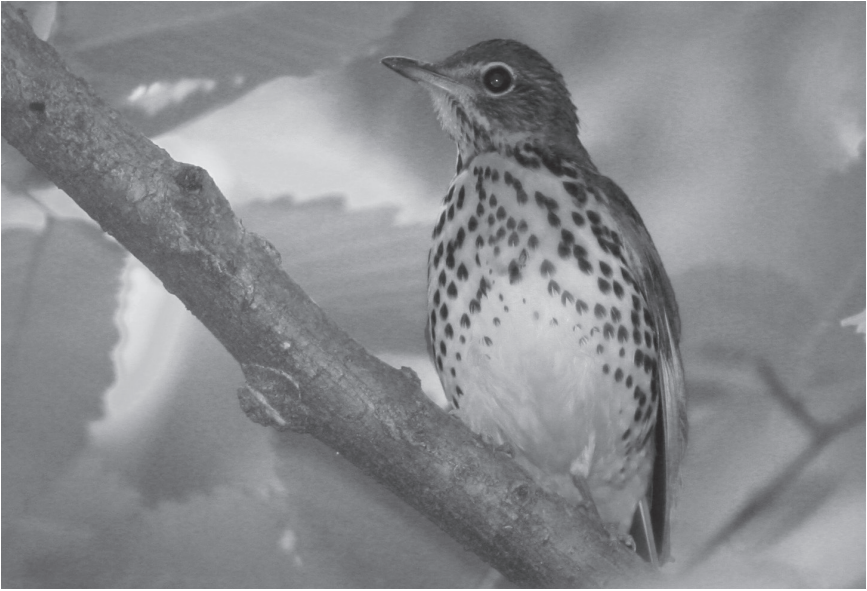
THERE'S A MOMENT EACH SPRING WHEN MY HEART FLIES INTO THE trees. It comes unexpectedly, when my mind is on the laundry that still needs to be hung in the sun or the check-engine light that just came on in my car or the email from my brother that I haven't answered. I'm usually rushing out the door in the morning, moving forward into a day of constantly moving forward. And then it happens, this voice calling to me from the trees, and I stop in my tracks. The chatter in my brain suddenly muted, my heart lifts up into the canopy. My friend is back again, something I can't be sure of, something I fear may not happen one day. Wood thrush has returned from the tropics and sings out to me, a song I receive as hope and memory, home and longing and joy.

I'm not sure when I first heard a wood thrush, but its trilling reaches such a deep part of me. As a child, I lived in a city; the bird songs that take me back to where I grew up are cardinals, robins, mourning doves. Not thrushes, which need actual forest, something much different from even the big old oak trees that lined our neighborhood streets. But somehow, it's this bird, this song, that makes me feel like I'm home. Is it from Camp Shantituck, my first summer escape into the woods to which I tied my heart? Did the wood thrushes sing to me as I woke in the orange canvas platform tents, as I searched for crayfish in the creeks, as I sang grace in the lodge before breakfast? Or did it come later, when I worked on Kentucky Lake, raising the sails on a little butterfly sailboat or building a fire for girls to cook foil-wrapped dinners?

I don't know, but I know it sang to me in the hemlock forests of New Hampshire and the rainforests of Costa Rica, the oak woodlands of Pennsylvania, and the mountains of Oaxaca. I also know that I can't assume it will always come back to me in the spring. Habitat destruction in the tropics, in North Carolina, and all across its range, reduces the vigor of the population year by year. Other threats are out there, too. I want to save them, keep the wood thrushes coming back, hear that song until my dying day, but I don't know how, just like I don't know how to make my country take care of its people and its land. The thrush's voice seems so delicate and vulnerable; it communicates the joy that is intrinsic in my heart, connects me to the beauty I resound with, but also expresses fragility in the face of all that threatens us.

One morning recently, I came out of my house and onto my front porch, carrying my mug of coffee and a bowl of oatmeal and pears, to sit in the sun and welcome the day. And there, by my chair, was a dead wood thrush. I had

The wood thrush sings with a delicate voice that radiates joy. U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



Climate change is expected to reduce wood thrush habitat by 80 percent over the next 60 years. BILL HUBICK/U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

never seen a dead wood thrush before. I've seen so many dead birds in my day, but never one of these. In college I worked in a small natural history museum, and one of my tasks was looking under all the windows on campus for birds that had hit the glass and fallen dead beneath. I tallied them up, hash marks on a data sheet, and then slipped them into plastic bags to bring back to the museum. They'd be stacked into the big white chest freezer in the hallway until one of us would thaw one out and skin it and prepare it to lie, eye sockets bulging with cotton, lined up in a drawer with a little tag tied to its leg.

A few years ago, I saw a Cooper's hawk hit our window at home and fall to the porch. My young son saw it, too, and we went outside and gently cradled it in our hands, feeling its heart fluttering for a few moments before it died on our laps. We talked quietly, stroking its blue-gray flight feathers and cinnamon-flecked breast, and then put it in a bag to take to the ornithologist at the college where I work. It now lies in a drawer, too, waiting for students to pay attention.

The hawk taking its last breath in our hands was sad, to be sure, but finding the wood thrush's dead body truly broke my heart. I cried there on my porch, seeing this bird there bleeding and still, unable to sing our song anymore. I was devastated and angry, guilty and gutted, as if it were my own heart there lying still on the painted boards.

Eventually, I scooped it up, dug a hole where the tulip bulbs send up their giant crimson blooms every spring, and laid the bird to rest there, sending up a bit of a prayer to whatever gods might be out there looking over the wood thrushes still alive in our world. I don't usually bury the dead animals I find; I leave them for the detritivores and scavengers, happy to let the natural recycling process have its way with their flesh and gristle. I do the same with my jack-o-lanterns after Halloween, watching them rot away day by day next to my porch, a vigil that reminds me of the flow of matter and energy that keeps the world alive. I want the same to happen to my body: If I had my druthers, I'd like to be composted after my last breath, left to return quickly and easily into the soil and nourish trees and vegetables and people, to keep my molecules flowing through living systems, to give back. With this bird, though, I needed ritual and pause, a vessel for grief, and so I dug the hole and placed it inside.

In the late afternoon, I ordered takeout from my favorite Thai restaurant and then went to pick it up. There on the steps of the restaurant was another dead wood thrush. This one wasn't bleeding, just still and quiet, and so heart-breakingly beautiful with its mottled breast, and indeed my heart did break, even more than before. It seemed impossible, seeing two in one day after never seeing any before, and I felt dizzy, disoriented, disheartened. I envisioned thrushes falling to the ground all over the place, dropping from some mysterious and malevolent force that surely is the fault of my own damn species that can't seem to keep from destroying everything, or even caring.

What is killing the birds of my heart? Habitat destruction, certainly. Fragmentation, too: Smaller bits of forest mean more edge, bringing more dogs, cats, raccoons, and other predators that eat the birds' eggs. Edges are our vulnerable places, where communities come together in an enriching mix of species, ideas, ways of life—and inevitably with that, at times conflict, competition, one potentially trying to dominate another.

Edges bring nest parasitism, too. Brown-headed cowbirds lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, letting other species do the work of child-rearing for them, and although many species of birds will recognize cowbird eggs in their nests and kick them out, wood thrushes tend not to. They nurture the cowbird babies alongside their own, but the cowbird young grow very quickly and dominate the nest, getting more food and having better chances of success than the thrush's own offspring.

Some climate change projections predict that more than 80 percent of the wood thrushes' current summer range will be lost in the next 60 years. Vulnerable hatchlings in their nests are threatened by higher temperatures as

well as heavier rains. More frequent fires can destroy habitat and make it difficult or impossible for the forest to recover the maturity it needs for hosting wood thrushes.

Acid rain is also a culprit. Wood thrushes need about 30 times the calcium in their diet as a similar-sized mammal, and they mostly get it from eating slugs as well as the land snails so diverse in these mountains. Acid rain leaches calcium from the soils, which means less for the snails, which means less for the birds. The result is defective eggshells, leaving the young embryos less likely to survive to hatch and sing their own melodies.

Wood thrushes sing a song unlike any other bird song I know. It varies each time it's repeated, the bird hitting different notes with a clear ringing voice, and ends with a distinctive trill, sounding a little like what I might imagine would come out when a fairy waves her wand. The trill is described as an *internal duet* because the bird creates two notes at once, a chord, and so is accompanying itself, in a way, something no human can replicate with our clumsy vocal folds. We can sing, though, we humans, and I believe everyone should sing, should have song as part of daily life, a way of responding to what comes. In my culture, we've been taught that only some people can sing and everyone else should be quiet, just like we've been taught that only some people can be artists, or athletes, or dancers. But all these things are our birthright: Almost every child can create art, can run and jump and dance and sing, and do so instinctively once their bodies are ready. And then, someone tells them that they're not the best or not good enough, and they stop, leaving us with a country full of adults who think only the elite in any field should be the ones practicing these birthrights.

The thrush's voice is instead free and glorious, with no one to tell it not to sing, or that its song isn't good enough. Birds play around with their music all the time, too. Mockingbirds and other mimics will pick up other bird songs, other animal sounds, even the beeping of trucks backing up or an alarm clock they hear from a window every morning, or a baby crying, and integrate these into their own repertoires. Wood thrushes don't do that, but they do elaborate on the common practice of song matching. Males of many bird species will answer their neighbor's song by repeating it, in a battle of music to see who can sing it best and win the girl. Wood thrushes go one step further, answering their neighbor's song but with a *different* melody, a kind of one-upmanship.

I worry that wood thrushes will be silenced, not by cultural shaming or being told they can't or shouldn't, but by being *dead*. Which raises an interesting idea: What if the only way a person would cease to ever sing again is

if they were dead? It turns out it's pretty difficult to silence people when they really want to sing. In a prison camp in Japan during World War II, a group of women created a vocal orchestra, led by Norah Chambers, a musician who remembered the music so well she could teach each of the instrument parts to the women in the camp. The women learned and performed Beethoven and Mozart and whatever other classics Chambers could remember, using their voices as instruments, no words, just a simple syllable so that the focus was the resonating of their voice boxes and the way they wove them together. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world sang on their balconies, haunting moments shared on the internet of people joining in song from their homes on an Italian street when they were not allowed to go outside or be with each other. Their voices came together, a kind of communion, holy as any I know. In a stadium in Chile that was being used to torture and kill those who rebelled against the totalitarian government in the 1970s, Victor Jara sang to his people even after his hands were turned into unrecognizable bloody mush by the torturers so that he could not play his guitar. An unkind word might silence someone when that person is vulnerable, but when the human spirit rises up, we keep singing. We need to sing more, in more places and times, together and alone, against hate and for the things we love. We need to sing for the thrush, who is up against increasingly insurmountable odds in both places it calls home.

Home for the thrush is not one place but two, much like retirees who summer in cool Vermont but winter in balmy Florida. The thrush doesn't do it so much for comfort as for food: It's much more likely to find its meals of slugs and snails and insects where things are warm and moving around. My thrush finds its home here in my North Carolina woods in May and then, when the leaves turn, flies all the way to Central America for the winter months. Does it miss the howler monkeys at dawn when it is up here in the Appalachians? Or miss the great horned owl singing it to sleep when it is in Guatemala? I would, I do, and so the question: If you've lived in a bunch of different places, how do you have a clear view of what home is?

Home must mean finding those of your kind, other thrushes, other kindred souls. It must mean finding the foods that are familiar and delicious and nourishing, and hearing music that sings us our place in the world. It means feeling rooted, even when you've been rooted in other places. The thrush can feel at home with tropical monkeys and northern owls, can find morsels of tasty goodness and reminiscence in rainforest and Appalachian cove forest. Does the thrush feel nostalgia? Does it have moments in the rainforest when

it finds itself longing for tulip poplars and mayapples and the company of flying squirrels? I've lived rooted in desert soil, and though I love the Blue Ridge Mountains where I live now, occasionally I feel like I am ripped apart by a longing for the very different, gentler feel of the air there and the smell of creosote after rain and the yodeling of coyotes at dusk. And then I hear coyotes here—just three nights ago, right outside my bedroom window—and my heart wonders for a moment which home I am in, and whether it matters.

When I was a little girl visiting our hometown zoo, my favorite animals were the howler monkeys. I would stand listening to them for as long as my mother's patience held out. The first time I heard howlers in their native home, deep in the forests of Costa Rica, that sound grabbed my soul and held on. It felt like coming home somehow, even in this completely new and unfamiliar place, a sound so low I feel it more than hear it, deep in my chest, where my heart resides. Howler monkeys call me home just like wood thrushes do, and the great horned owl outside my bedroom window, and the coyotes in the desert. Home is, in fact, where my heart is, but my heart is strewn across landscapes, and so I need to migrate now and then, like the thrush, to find my disparate parts and feel connected and whole.

Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better to stay in one place than to scatter my heart about like seeds planted in diverging habitats. Hearing stories of people firmly rooted in one place, I feel a little tug of jealousy at that depth of connection and history. But my story, like the wood thrush's, is different, and I would not excise those parts of my history: the diverse meanings of home for me make my life a rich patchwork, colors and textures combining to make something unique. The cost is that my heart is at risk in many places, too: It's out there with the howler monkeys in shrinking rainforest threatened by habitat loss. It's out there with the desert coyotes, facing climate change in a place where water is life in an acutely desperate way and where rains that used to be reliable are now much less so. It's out there with the wood thrush, searching for enough snails to make eggs to carry on its genes and its song. And sometimes, it drops dead on my porch, there at my feet, stilled and broken.

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