

**THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS:
LITTLE BIRDS DIE**
by Jacob Conner Harris

Rain poured down on Oregon that day. Not on the coast like one expects every outdoor outing, but in the East—in the flat arid land—where a drone overhead observes textured ripples of grain and orchard; so subtle in its hills that the land serves as some people’s proof of God’s finger print: placed into the soil, imprinting His identity.

Perhaps this is what drew Jackdaw there. A connection to his Greater Presence.

His lips chapped from wind, his cheeks calloused from sun, and on that day—the rainy day in the East—his thinning, salt and pepper hair slicked with water; cleansing it for the first time in over a month. Earthworms gathered at his feet to suck up the grease and grime, turning them plump, perfect for catching.

Jackdaw’s fat fingers pinched at their tubular bodies. A thin string of black shit evacuated itself from each one’s linear intestine as the weight of his thumb rested on their banded bellies. “It’s alright, little guys. Jesus needs you elsewhere today,” he spoke to them in his usual pained, raspy tone. Reflux strangulated his vocal cords, forcing mucus, acid and wispy breath out his nostrils.

The worms collected inside his flannel’s four pockets: two on the chest, and two on the sides. A few spilled out and the rain masked their retreat. He scanned his perimeter again; the rain’s increasing pace flooding the remaining survivors. “Time to bolt action.” His sneakers splashed in thin mud on the way toward his hut. Clean smoke billowed from its tin chimney; its

scent blending with the petrichor rising from the wet wild grasses. Together they tasted sweet on the tongue—mushroom honey, juniper beer. Delicious, succulent beer.

Wood heat, artificial light, and the faint chirping cry of baby birds assaulted his senses inside. “Big bird wasn’t gone long, my little friends. I’m back. I’m back.” His volume started high—still deaf from the outdoor storm—but lowered into a soft, snotty hum. Stuffed in the hollows of a dishcloth draped over the rim of a hard plastic bucket by the burning stove was the source of this shrill squawking: three infantile birds—featherless, veiny and the color and shape of an inflamed nutsack. Jackdaw hovered over their tiny bodies; earthworms dangling from his pockets.

Squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak went on indefinitely. He kneeled to their level. “Food, see.” Their beaks widened into soft open circles as he placed an earthworm inside their mounded towel. It squirmed away from the heat emanating off the stove, but was gently knocked back by Jackdaw’s fingernail. “Eat little birdies.” They did not eat; still waving their gaping mouths in the empty air.

Jackdaw’s brow crumpled. “Tip #4 of being a big bird. Check the internet.” A few generations old smartphone laid on the couch to his left. He unlocked it with the code 1977—his birth year; an easy four digits to remember. *How to feed baby birds?* inserted into the search engine.

“You like your food mushed up, huh?” he concluded after a brief research period. His hand reached deep into his front shirt pocket and pulled out a fistful of worms; his other hand groping for the pocket knife clipped to his pants. Its dull blade ran through the ball of entangled

annelids; the cracked linoleum a cutting board. “I’m sorry friends.” His wrist rocked back and forth, slicing the fleshy mass into a chunky beige paste.

Squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak—Jackdaw pinched a glob of mush and released it into the baby bird’s throat. It swallowed with primal satisfaction. Death for life: the animal experience. Then the squeaking subsided. “Better little friends?” Better. Much better.

Sun setting and the birdies’ bellies full, a veneer of skin shrink-wrapped around their bulbous eyeballs, signaling a moment’s rest. Jackdaw’s attention held on his little birds as they nodded off. His lip bit into a Mona Lisa smirk.

White gunk—guano—shot from the birds’ cloaca. “I’ll get you a clean cloth, little birdies.” So fragile—a glass Christmas ornament crafted of blood and organs—each one held inside Jackdaw’s mighty palms. Worker’s palms: fat, swollen, cut; two holes scarred from a snake bite, and the tip of the right pinkie missing.

One chick squeaked awake in the transition to clean bedding. It gawked around until its neck surrendered under the weight of its own head. “I see you little birdie. Big bird is going to get you tidied away so you can sleep. And me too. So I can sleep too.”

Peaceful. The birds rested in their new nest. Jackdaw backed away on his toes. Excess earthworms went in a Rubbermaid in the fridge. Dinner was a sausage paddy and white bread toast. No butter.

Jackdaw scrolled through social media as he ate—alone. The lightbulb hanging on a string above the dinner table buzzed with an electric hum just out of his hearing register—old ears. Or damaged ears.

On TikTok there was a funny video with Jack Black, then a sad video about cancer, followed by a sexy video of a woman dancing in her underwear, all culminating in a long string of sad videos. This time not about cancer, but life—inspiration porn, some call it. Pornography starring homeless men and disabled women; body transformations: staged, set and directed by flaccid positivity.

Jackdaw's thumb hit the plus button to create a video of his own. He held the phone's front camera to his face, catching every enlarged pore and sweat infused mud droplet in frame.

“Hey guys, it's Jackdaw,” he spoke—perpetually constricted by phlegm. “Just wanted to share some good news. Really good news actually. I found some baby birds today.” He paused, unable to hide his prideful, fatherly smile. “Yeah, it's really cool. Three lived through the day, so now they're sleeping in my living room for the night. It's pretty awesome. I'm going to make some calls tomorrow about getting them taken care of and everything, so hopefully they have a chance. Everyone deserves that.”

