

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to be free

Blackbird fly, blackbird fly  
Into the light of a dark black night

Blackbird fly, blackbird fly  
Into the light of a dark black night

Blackbird singing in the dead of night...

- *The Beatles (1968)*

### **My blackbird pitched against the sky**

One year of cancer treatments have left me feeling like a broken house. I am all smashed windows; a trail of litter and destruction running up to my door. Maybe like a house that looks like you have been burgled but actually it was just your toddlers. I imagine, or try to imagine my life floating heroically up to greet me, congratulating me on all I have withstood. There is nothing there though. Just a messy kitchen, littered tea-plates and bits of blackberry jam smudged on the table top, old bottles of half-drunk red wine and dirty tea towels hurled.

My therapist says that is normal to feel like a broken house. She also says I am holding back. I am. I can cry about my cancer and my feeling of nothingness now. I can do that. What I can't tell her about is your breakdown. Or what led up to your breakdown. I can't tell her I'm afraid to go to sleep in case you aren't alive in the morning. I hold that close to me, she's right.

I often wonder how much you really remember. Do you remember the first time we came to visit you? Do you remember all the useless objects we bought you? Do you remember the songs? I can't believe I've forgotten the name of the ward. Primrose? Was that it? I know it had some innocuous name; some flower designed not to sound like the prison it was.

The first time we came to see you was two days after they took you (they advised we stay away the first day so you could settle in, take your medication). I phoned constantly that first day,

'How does he seem? Has he taken his tablets?'

I was still torturing myself with the version of reality that if we had managed to persuade you to take your anti-psychotic tablets you would not have ended up being Sectioned. I know now that was not correct. Your psychosis was too far gone at the point we realised what was happening to you, or unravelling inside of you. Reality itself spiralling away, taking you to another place, skies away from our reach.

We didn't really realise how secure a high security hospital was. What it really meant. That it meant bag searches and many objects being taken away. That it meant locked doors and a sterile visitor's room you could only have for two hours. I didn't know any of this. Until I got there. I didn't know that when someone has a psychotic breakdown they regress back to childhood. I didn't know. Until we got to you that first time. And you cried like a baby, all your wonderful words lost— still loving the colourful children's books but reading them so fast it was like you were pretending to be a robot but you weren't; your mind was still spinning down, out of your control. You cried on us, you wanted to be held like a baby. We sung to you, songs you liked as a baby and songs you liked as a teenage boy. The Beatles. Our words and our bodies: they were the invisible gifts we bought, smuggled in; they didn't confiscate them at the front desk. You can't search a song.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night.*

I remember sitting in the uncomfortable red plastic arm chair, my knees pressed right up to Dave's chair, where you sat, clinging to him as we sang and cried silently.

*Take these broken wings and learn to fly.*

Trying not to look at each other in case we broke down. Properly broke down. The words of the songs, Dave knew all your favourites and could remember them all. We sang, you buried your head inside his shoulder and cried and when you cried it was a relief only so we could cry too.

*You were only waiting for this moment to arise. Blackbird...*

The words of your favourite songs reached you. The only thing that did. And that was beautiful. A glimmer of hope. You were still there. Somewhere inside. Our words held so much. Although I'm finding this really hard to write, the words themselves are slippery and wet, they want nothing more than to come out. My sister last week while on the phone from her little farm in Wales said how much love she felt in that room on that first visit. I had completely forgotten she was with us.

That reminds me of a bitter sweet photo I didn't know I had kept tucked away. Goodbyes were getting harder the more you healed. After about two weeks you had unfolded your infancy, your toddlerhood and your ten-year-old self and started the steep climb back to being the sixteen-year-old you. The closer you came to wellness, the more incredible progress you made; the more your brain healed, recovering so quickly from what the doctor described to be as a 'psychological car crash', the harder you found it to say goodbye to us. Visits became much harder for all of us. You clung and sobbed and begged for us not to leave you. I dreaded it. One time I handed you a picture your little brothers had drawn for you just before I said goodbye, some monsters or dragons I think, I can't recall the actual picture but I can still see, I can feel, the smile on your face as you showed it to the girl on your ward. I remember she always looked so lost. It was the first time I had seen her smile.

'Hey, look what my brothers made for me – '

'Wow', she whispered, drawn in. Your heads bent together and you both, for that moment were lost to a marvel only you knew. As the double doors slammed in front of my face, the view of the backs of the two of you shuddered and your voices were lost to me; your smiles not though or the way you walked together, leaning into each other, the drawing a treasure to share. I left that night warm with wonder for you. Not at the speed of your recovery but at the way you wanted to share some of your own little brothers' fierce love. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. On the other side of those doors, I was alone briefly in the stark corridor, still smiling; still wondering where it was, I had put my heart.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Had I buried my heart beneath the floorboards?

'Morning Mumma.'

You pull me back to the present with your thumps down your grey spiral stairs, landing softly outside my bedroom door. Everything I was just reliving leaves me. Instantly.

'Morning baby. I've put some clean joggers on your stairs but couldn't see many of your pants in the wash?'

Why am I always talking about laundry?

'I'm making coffee, would you like some?'

'Yes, please baby.'

I'm so grateful. For you. For the present tense of our lives. For your soft words, especially the way you say Mumma; I smile into the kiss on your cheek. I need to make my peace with the past; the corridors and consultation rooms; the agony and disbelief; the way grief unfolded its wings and we never knew how wide those oily feathers could stretch – it can't live inside on me. But right now, I'll take your sleepy bed-hair at my bedroom door; the softness of your words pressed against the bristle of your beard and the enchanting smell of you making me a cup of coffee. An incantation to the sky. The

feathers of grief pale to insignificance when we pitch them against the sky. Like words,  
the sky holds no limits. Like you. My boy.