

Jon Remmerde  
jon@Oregonauthor.com  
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Essay

## **Blackbirds Flying in Sunshine**

I drove the big yellow tractor down the field and back and down again, twelve hours a day. I wore ear covers against the diesel engine roaring three feet ahead of me. I wore goggles to protect my eyes and a kerchief to protect my breathing from dust the implement I pulled behind the tractor stirred up. I chisel-plowed, disced, and land-planed to prepare ground to plant rice. Diesel exhaust stank. Exhaust and dust wrapped me round and then blew away in wind across the broad Sacramento Valley.

Sixty blackbirds flew from plowed ground ahead of me and turned at the same instant, as if they were one bird. All their wings reflected sunshine to me at the same instant as they turned.

Two burrowing owls stood long-legged on the bank of the big drainage ditch at the bottom of the field and watched the tractor and me. I said, "Sorry for the noise and shaking the earth." My words drowned in noise of thundering diesel engine, noise of rattling tracks, sound of chisel plow ripping open the earth.

Mike asked me to work Easter Sunday. "Pray all day on the tractor," he said, when I said I planned to go to church. Mike thought he had said something funny, but I didn't laugh. I hadn't laughed at Mike's jokes for a while. I worked Easter, not to meet Mike's needs, but to meet mine. Farm-work pay is low, so I worked many hours to make a living.

Sunday morning, I drove onto the field at daylight, got out of my pickup, and watched where sky met earth, south of me. Geese and swans flew up out of the game refuge on their way to feed. The sun rose above mountains that stood against blue sky east of the valley. I raised my palms toward the sun and soaked warmth. I climbed up, started the tractor, pulled the disc down the field, and left moist earth open to sunshine. Birds of many kinds and colors harvested earthworms and other usually sub-surface life from newly-opened earth behind me.

Laura borrowed her mother's car and drove out after church. We held our own Easter service at the edge of the field. Laura read about the father and the son. At first, I thought she said

“sun.” I tried to focus my thoughts, flying like wild birds in sunlight. I laughed, and she stopped reading.

I said, “My mind boiled in sunshine, and I lost track. The tractor casts some shade.”

She reaches up from where she sits in green grass. I take her hands and help her up. We stand against each other, with our arms around each other. She is large with child against me. The baby turns inside her. The motion of new life against me stimulates liquid warmth clear up into my hair, down to my feet on hot, dusty ground.

Laura says, “This baby is happy we came out to visit you. It’s been moving so much, I think it’s dancing.”

I lean back and lift until I support most of her weight. “Before they got so modernized, people in some cultures believed you began the baby, and then you had to keep adding to it, or it wouldn’t be complete. This would be a good place to add to this baby some more.” I pull at the tie of her maroon skirt with the expandable waist.

She pulls away. “Not out here in the open.”

“Nobody around for miles. Tall grass all around us.” But I am jesting; I let go of the cord, and we walk down and sit in shade the big yellow tractor casts.

We read together, then sit for a while. I say, “I could linger here all day with you, but I did hire on and say I’d work.”

She drove home. I disced the field until dark. Dust rose from the dry surface of soil when the discs cut in. Dust settled on newly exposed, moist soil, on the tractor, on me, my clothing.

Mike asked if I would take a cut in pay. “Why? What’s the matter with my work?”

“Nothing’s the matter with your work, but hired help is too expensive. Nobody can afford to farm anymore.”

Mike just bought a new manufactured house, a new pickup and a new car. My sense of humor might be returning. I laugh. I don’t think Mike understands why I’m laughing. “You can fire me and hire somebody else at a lower wage if you want to.”

I finished working rice fields. I had a few days off. Then I quit that job.

Laura, round, leaned back to balance the child’s weight, stood by our front steps. Early sunshine glowed red in her dark hair loose to her shoulders. She asked me, “Will you get the ground ready for me and get me some seeds? I want a flower garden here. I want to grow zinnias for the birth.”

“I don’t think there’s enough sun here. It needs to be farther

from the house, so the house doesn't shade it."

"It gets sunshine all morning. It'll work."

I drove to the sheep ranch where I worked the year before. I shoveled our pickup full of manure the wind had dropped over a cut-bank for the road below a feeding area north of the barn. Sun shone hot on me while I shoveled. No breeze blew.

I spaded hoof-chopped manure into the soil where Laura wanted a flower bed.

I called her out into bright sunshine and told her, "Water it heavily. Water it a little more every day for a few days. Then rake it and plant it. I loaded more fertilizer than we need. Let's take the rest to your mother's garden and spade it in for her."

I wanted to practice breathing and do exercises. I brought home a book about natural childbirth, and we worked together from the book. The third day, Laura said, "I don't want to do it this way. Most of this book is written to overcome fear, because fear makes birth more difficult. But I don't have any fear, because I know God takes care of me. This child is part of His plan, so I don't need fear, and I can't have pain or problems."

"Oh. Okay. But what about the exercises? Shouldn't you get muscles built up for the hard work ahead?"

"I should be in good physical condition, but if I rehearse too much and exercise specific muscles, I'm trying to take the plan into my own hands instead of trusting God to take care of me and this baby and this birth. I trust God to provide me with the knowledge and the strength and the stamina he gives woman for birth. I can't do it part one way and part another."

I read the book that night. Laura was right. The author wrote to overcome an expectant mother's fear. She wrote some of the book to get the husband involved. I was already involved. I hadn't understood the depth of Laura's conviction. I thought I probably didn't understand yet.

I studied the book and understood why shallow, fast breathing worked best at times, and deeper breathing worked best at other times. I understood how to avoid working too hard too soon. I studied everything I thought might be useful to know.

I went to work for another farmer, closer to town. He was more relaxed, easier to work for, but his tractor drove just as hard.

I worked ground for winter wheat. Here too, ten miles away from the other farm, two burrowing owls stood on the bank of the big ditch that drains fields into the Sacramento River and watched me. Grey and white sea gulls followed me and ate

worms I turned up. Damp, newly-opened soil smelled fresh and clean in sunshine. A white egret followed the tractor parts of some days, and flocks of blackbirds. I didn't like driving tractor, but I loved all the birds who came to find food in the soil I'd just stirred. A fox watched me over its shoulder as it ran into grass along the fence at the edge of the field. Tall grass closed around the fox.

Laura came out and started to walk across the field. I pulled the lever to pick up the disc, swung out of my work pattern, and drove toward her.

She's very large. She places her foot in rough ground and shifts her weight forward when her footing is firm. She wears a light grey skirt and top. She looks like a pregnant doe, slim-legged, heavy-bodied, graceful, testing the ground and starting across it. She sees I'm coming to her, and she stands and waits.

I shut the tractor off and soak in the quiet, then climb down and shed ear-covers, goggles, and dust mask. She reaches up, and I say, "I'm dusty and gritty," but she reaches up, and I enfold her in my arms, lifting gently. The baby turns between us. Laura steps a half-step back. Heat rises from open soil. The smell of dust permeates the air around us.

She says, "David called. Your dad is in the hospital in Palm Desert. He's had surgery, and he seems to be doing okay. David's thinking about going down there, but he isn't sure yet. He wanted me to let you know as soon as I could, so I borrowed Mom's car and came out."

We sit down in dirt in shade of the tractor. Laura hands me a glass of ice and a can of soda pop. I open the can and pour and drink cold pop. Laura tells me what she knows, and I think about it. The tractor cracks, pops, and moans as metal cools. I say, "I'll have to keep going the way I'm going and see what happens. Call David and tell him I'll call as soon as I get off work."

When I got home, I telephoned David. As far as he can find out, everything is going okay. He says, "I'm going in tomorrow and assign all my cases and catch a 12 o'clock flight down there. I'll call you after you get home from work tomorrow."

The next morning, I pull a land-plane behind the tractor to break down clods left after discing and smooth the ground. Land planing works just the dry surface of the ground. It's the dustiest job of all.

I pull the land plane down the field into the sun. Thick dust rises from the plane and drifts in the breeze. At the end of the

field, I turn the machinery. I watch the land plane closely so I don't turn too sharply and run the tractor into it. I drive back up the field into dust drifting toward me.

For half a run down the field, Dad is with me, his being in my mind. This is unlike anything I've ever experienced, but it seems as natural as a flock of blackbirds ahead of the tractor lifting from the field in unison, turning, sixty birds simultaneously, so every right wing of every bird catches the sun at the same instant and reflects it to me in morning sunshine. There are no words in this experience.

On my birthdays, when I was a child, Dad gave me puzzles. A box I could open only by moving parts in a particular order. Tools I could open to their working position only by moving several parts in particular patterns. A lamp that unfolded only if I moved key parts into correct positions in the right order.

Sometimes, I couldn't solve the newest gift. Dad showed me the solution rapidly and talked a steady stream. Sometimes, I couldn't work the puzzle after he demonstrated how to do it.

After my fifteenth birthday, I didn't want any more birthday puzzles. I didn't want as much ceremony. My birthday celebrations had too much of Santa Claus and unreal magic in them, with gifts and cake appearing mysteriously when Dad distracted my attention, a lot of cornyness I'd liked when I was small, but only tolerated the last few years.

When I turned sixteen, Mom brought out the cake. The first gift I opened was a boat of dark, oiled wood. I liked it. It would look good with the walnut carvings on my dresser.

Dad said, "That isn't your average boat." He held out his hand, and I gave him the boat. Within five seconds, the boat lay on the table in forty pieces, another puzzle and obviously a complex one.

I reached for another package and unwrapped a sweater. "I like this. Thank you." I opened several packages. I liked the gifts, and I said so. We ate cake and ice-cream. The puzzle pieces sat on the table, and no one touched them or spoke of them.

The fourth day after my birthday, when I came in from school, the table had been cleared. The fifth day, Dad handed me the assembled boat. I hesitated, and Dad said, "I glued all the pieces together. You couldn't take it apart if you wanted to." I accepted the boat and kept it on my dresser with my walnut carvings.

Dad's 62. He's too young to die. He has always been vigorous.

Two years ago, at the family reunion up Little Butte Creek Canyon, Dad didn't compete in any of our races up the creek, but he still had the smoothest stroke and the cleanest dives of anyone there. He stood on the log we'd been diving from, soaking sunshine, his black hair brushed straight back. I treaded water above the deep part and looked at him as we talked. He was as trim as his sons.

He thought he had some years yet to come to terms with his own mortality, and here it is, coming at him like dust in a hot wind, like diesel exhaust dissipating in sunshine.

I kept the tractor headed down the field. It took less thought to let it run than to stop it and shut it down. Dad, the sense of Dad being with me, vanished into dust above the field.

We had good times too, yes, some good influences. I need to think of that. I need to remember those good times, to find good influences from my dad. I need to remember when I was small and saw only his shining goodness, hadn't begun to realize the chaos he brought to his family, the chaos growing up in that family gave his children and his wife, his main wife, we all learned after his death.

I never will figure out, does someone bring extreme disorder into our lives intentionally, or does everyone just live the best way they know how, and almost no one knows how and some worse than others?

I tracted the land plane up and down the field. I became a cloud of dust drifting on the flat valley floor.

Late morning, David drove down the road along the edge of the field. Brown dust boiled up around his white car.

I picked up the blade on the land plane and drove to where David waited. I shut the tractor off and climbed down. We stood in dust at the edge of the field, sweating in sunshine. The smell of hot oil, diesel fumes, and clay dust hung in the air. Sounds of metal cooling penetrated dust and smells and sunshine.

David said, "Dad died this morning."

I nodded, but I didn't say anything. David told me a story he had made up, "He went into the hospital because he had an intestinal blockage. They opened him up and cleared that, but then something went wrong, and they had to open him up again, and it was downhill fast from there. I don't know if the doctors did something wrong or what."

I didn't know until years later that Dad had lymphatic cancer and died from a heart attack probably caused by his weakened condition. I don't know why David veered from

reality when he told me of Dad's death.

David and I stand at the edge of the field in hot sunshine. Sweat streaks our dust. Sweat runs down my sides under my shirt. I don't compose my thoughts into verbal forms. I should, for my brother's benefit, but the effort seems beyond my ability. My thoughts rise toward words and then dissipate into the day, again and again. I breathe and try to speak, but I can't get any words said.

After a long time of saying nothing, David says, "I thought you'd want to know."

"I did. Thanks for coming out." I want to tell him I did know. I don't think it will fit into his consciousness. I let it exist as he will understand, I want to know.

"I'm going to catch a 12:15 flight down there."

"I'm not going to go."

"If it's because of the cost of getting there, I'll buy you a plane ticket. If you can't go sooner, you could fly down for the funeral."

"The baby's due. I can't leave. This baby's going to be born at home. I have to be here."

David starts to say something, stops and then says, "Okay. There'll be enough of the family there."

Every day before daylight, I tractor ground for winter wheat. I drive from midnight until noon. Every day, I watch daylight begin. I feel the day begin to accept sun's heat. Wednesday, I walk out of the bathroom after I washed the day's dust and sweat into underground pipes toward the ocean. Laura says, "This baby is getting ready to be born. I've had three contractions."

I throw the towel onto the bed, grab my clothes, and start dressing. Laura laughs and says, "I think there's plenty of time. They're a long way apart and not very hard. But I'm going to call Chas and Loretta and let them know."

I cleaned up the house and washed dishes. I picked zinnias from Laura's garden by the front step. I brought in big flowers of different colors and put them in a vase with water. I fixed dinner.

Laura didn't eat. She said, "The contractions are harder. They're about four minutes apart. I think you'd better call and tell them to come on over."

I called. Loretta said they'd pack up and start. They got there at nine. I tried to time contractions, but I couldn't keep track of the sweep of the second hand. I gave the watch to Chas. "Would you watch this thing? I can't make any sense of it."

Chas said, "It doesn't matter. She's dilated all the way, so it's time."

Laura lay down flat on the pad on the floor, but she tried to get up and said, "This isn't going to work. It's too awkward."

I arranged pillows behind her so she could sit up. She panted and strained to push, sweating, skin flushed red. She didn't make much noise. She said, "This is awkward. I can't push very well in this position."

I squatted beside her, picked her up, and held her. I said, "You're going to have to make some noise. Quit thinking about the neighbors. Getting this baby born takes first priority."

I lead her, panting, breathing deep, and hollering out loud, like I'm doing the hardest work there is. That works. She follows my lead, grunts and hollers. I hold her in my arms just above the pad on the floor, and I feel every movement.

She pants. The contraction of her muscles starts and builds. She adds her complete intention. A contraction of her uterus starts again. She breathes long, deep breaths.

She raises her voice from deep grunting to a shout, exultation and the beginning of pain that comes from extreme muscular effort, bordering on tearing muscles and ligaments.

I say, "Ease up a little. Relax. Catch up on breathing. You can't do it with one push. Breathe shallow and fast like this." I pant. Laura pants. Loretta wipes sweat from Laura's face and shoulders with a damp towel.

I coach. "Don't push yet. Let your muscles start the contractions. Now start longer and deeper breaths, like this. Now push hard."

Laura breathes, stretches back to loosen muscles and shifts position. I move so she can move and I can still hold her. She catches deep breaths. The baby opens her. She pushes with strength and determination.

Loretta says, "The baby is stretched out now. The baby is doing some hard work, too. Come on, everybody, more hard work now."

Chas moves to support Laura's perineum and receive the baby.

Laura hollers and pushes hard. The baby emerges to the shoulders, face down, and then rotates so she faces up. She blinks her eyes open, finds my face, and focuses on my eyes. My smile will crack my face. Everything happening in this room, the baby emerging, seems as natural as sixty blackbirds lifting from a field as one, turning in such precise synchronization that one wing of each bird reflects the sun to

me at the same time. I laugh and laugh again.

I say, "Let's do it again." Laura pushes. The baby emerges in one long, smooth motion. Chas catches her, lifts her, and puts her on Laura's abdomen. The baby raises her head and looks at everyone there, person by person. Loretta and Chas pat her with towels to dry her.

I ease Laura down against stacked pillows, stand, and stretch tired muscles.

White material like lotion covers the baby. Loretta says, "Her skin will absorb that." Downy fuzz covers her. I look at the bottoms of her feet. "Nope. Not on the bottoms of her feet."

Loretta says, "Most babies have fuzz like that, but I've never seen it so dense. She's really a big baby. She's strong. I've never seen a newly-born baby raise her head and look around like that. She looks like a three-month old baby. Hey, baby, you're strong and big. No wonder it was such hard work to get you born. Laura, now you need to get the placenta out. There's still work to do."

I picked the baby up and talked to her. She studied my eyes. It didn't matter what I said. I told her everything that came into my mind. I said she would grow up, and maybe some day she would give birth to a child, and it would be very like it was in this room the night of her birth, with people gathered, helping a child be born.

Loretta laughed, "She's only about fifteen minutes old. She'll have a few years to think about that."

Chas cleaned up. Laura discharged the placenta into a stainless-steel bowl. She said, "Give her to me," and I did. Laura held her and talked to her.

I helped with the clean-up work. I said, "There really isn't that much to clean up. Nobody ever did boil any water."

Loretta said, "I think that was part of the birth ritual in the old days, just something to get the husband out of the way."

We drank orange juice and put everything in order and talked with each other and with the baby. Chas and Loretta left at four a.m. Chas said, "The only thing I don't like about these parties of yours is they last so late."

Laura slept after they left. The baby lay on Laura, asleep. I put a blanket over them and sat and looked at them for a long time.

When dawn lightened the darkness outside the windows, I took the placenta out behind the garage and buried it. I didn't know it yet, but early in spring, I would plant squash there. The bushes would grow lush and deep green and bear us many

yellow crooknecks all summer.

I took garbage out later that morning. Joe, our neighbor on the north side, came out and asked how the birth went, and I said everything was fine.

“Don’t spoil her,” Joe said.

“Don’t spoil who?”

“That baby. Don’t spoil the baby.”

“She’s not even a day old yet. How can you spoil a baby that young?”

“If you pick her up every time she cries, she’ll get to be a very demanding baby.”

I thought, *My God. This guy has four children of his own.* I laughed out loud. Joe took it all right. He smiled at me.

I pushed the lid down tight on the garbage can and put a heavy rock on it. I said, “Excuse me. They need me inside.”

Inside, Laura and Juniper were awake. I picked Juniper up, and we looked at each other. I said, “The sun has just risen. It’s a beautiful day outside, and we’ll go out and have a look at it as soon as we all get ready.”

Some of the people who came to see Juniper and Laura said the zinnias by the front steps and in the vase on the dining room table were the largest, most perfectly formed zinnias they’d ever seen. They lasted in the vase for three weeks without wilting. The flowers still growing by the steps put on blossoms for more than a month.

At first, I said the flowers’ good health and large size was because of the sheep manure and the dolomite and the sunshine, but Laura said they were a gift from God for the birth, for her and for Juniper. I didn’t say anything more about manure and dolomite and sunshine.

Laura radiated happiness. Light glowed from her for the next several weeks and never did completely fade.

David came to visit, several days after the birth. He described Dad’s funeral. What David described had to do with Dad’s body, the disposal of the physical remains. The funeral was a ceremony to mark a conclusion in the minds of the living people who attended. The funeral was where we found out about some of our half sisters and half brothers we hadn’t known anything about.

Rain blew in hard wind for three days. Then the sun shone. After three days, I drove tractor again and disced fields for winter wheat. Rain had soaked deep enough that no dust rose from the soil.

Tractoring without dust was an experience I wouldn’t have

wanted to miss, no dust mask, no goggles, sitting up on the tractor in the clear, cool fall of the year. I wore ear covers to protect from the monotonous, too-loud sound of the tractor.

By then, the fields I seeded before the rain fell had sprouted. From up on the tractor, I looked into the field across the ditch from me, that I planted before Dad died, before Juniper's birth. New blades of wheat grew toward the sun. The entire sixty-acre field lay smooth and soft green in bright sunshine.