

nesting instinct

Feeling disoriented after a cross-country move, writer **CYNTHIA D'APRIX SWEENEY** got her bearings with the help of a hummingbird.

THE QUESTION I'm asked most often since my move from New York City to Los Angeles is, "Don't you miss the seasons?" The short answer: Sure, sometimes. I miss the dramatic demarcation of autumn and spring in colder climes. But I don't miss winter one bit, and if I never have to battle the humidity-induced torpor of a New York City summer again, I'll live.

The longer answer is that we do have seasons in Los Angeles. They're more nuanced, to be sure, but spring is one of the things Southern California does best, from the heady scent of honeysuckle in the evenings to the explosion of violet jacaranda blossoms along the city streets in April. And then there are the birds, the nearly round-the-clock cacophony of mating adults, squawking nestlings, and protective mamas.

Luckily for us, hummingbirds are year-round residents in our garden, and I never tire of watching them. In those difficult first months after our move here, the hummingbirds were a constant source of comfort. As I watched them on their daily rounds—hovering and dipping, occasionally flying backward—their curious mix of franticness and focus calmed me. What could be wrong about a place where these tiny iridescent creatures flit around lemon trees and wild rosemary all day?

So I was thrilled, three springs ago, when my husband first spotted a hummingbird nest in plain sight on a tree that shades our back patio. For days, we watched the bird build her nest at the fork of a broad, waxy leaf; it was a tiny cup, no bigger than a walnut. Then one morning she sat, regal and still, beak raised high in the air as if brandishing a sword. I impatiently watched the calendar, knowing we should see hatchlings at about the two-week mark. *What a perfect harbinger of spring,* I thought. *Who needs forsythia?*

"I have some bad news about the hummingbird egg," my husband said one morning. He'd noticed the tree branch hanging at an odd angle and then found bits of shell on the ground, along with a bright yellow splotch that was disturbingly yolkl-like. The bird never returned to her nest. I told myself the egg hadn't developed properly, which seemed more palatable than the alternative: that it had been easy breakfast for a raven or our resident lunatic squirrel, who loves leaping from a nearby pergola onto that tree.

We cut down the damaged branch and examined the empty nest, which had been woven using lint from our dryer vent,



bits of leaves, and plant down; the inside was cottony white, the outside covered with bright green moss. It was as deliberately beautiful as a Fabergé egg. I put it on my desk under a small bell jar.

The following spring, the bird built a new nest near the site of the old one. (Hummingbirds have strong homing instincts.) This time, something hatched. The nest was too high for us to peer inside, but one morning I spotted the bird gingerly balanced on the rim, clearly feeding one or more hatchlings. Optimistic, I crossed my fingers and kept an eye on that squirrel. But within days, the hummingbird had abandoned her nest again.

My disappointment quickly turned to self-pity one night over dinner, as our friends recounted how one of their hummingbirds had successfully launched two hatchlings the previous week, right outside their kitchen window. (Braggarts.) The next morning, I took to the Internet, wanting to troubleshoot what I now thought of as my "hummingbird problem." Various sites suggested an aggressive tree pruning to force the bird

to relocate her nursery. *Good idea!* I thought. *Who needs this perennial disappointment?*

As I examined the tree, weighing how many branches to cut, my enthusiasm waned. I remembered how light and perfect that first nest had felt when I held it in my palm. I thought about the bird's tenacity and how unmoored she might feel to find her reliable perch missing. I thought about how loss is woven into the fabric of birth and renewal, how if every egg reliably rendered a viable baby bird, we wouldn't stand and fret, wouldn't take the time to notice the effort overhead. I thought about how hard it is to start over in a new location.

In the end, I left the tree untouched. With apologies to Emily Dickinson, sometimes hope is the thing with feathers, and sometimes it's just a nest—as complete a gesture of hope, of spring, as I've ever seen.