



## Forever Maiden: Wild Dirt-Worship in the Digital Age

by Alison Leigh Lilly

### COWBIRD/CHANGELING

Didn't somebody's mother once say it was rude to hover in doorways? Not my mother, of course, it wouldn't occur to her to say that kind of thing. But somebody's mother's voice is in my head, querulous, lecturing: *it's rude to linger, to lallygag.*

I can't help it, though, I've always been a lingerer on thresholds. Half in, half out. When I'm outside, I'm always peering into places: the display windows of shops downtown, the neighbor's bay window lit up by the television's blue glow, the many shadowed nooks and crannies that every forest affords. But when I'm inside, I'm always gazing out a window at the sky.

Here's the thing: I've just never been good at groups. I'm what they call "un-churched" — un-coven'd, un-clubbed. Joining isn't the problem, I'm very big on joining. Staying is where it gets hard: all that credulity. All those windows. Growing up Catholic, the windows were stained glass and saintly, the sky a puzzle piece of translucent cobalt blue edged with lead around a haloed head. With a view like that, I was bound to leave eventually, flicking my fingers in the little font of holy water nailed to the doorframe on my way out.

After a decade or so of wandering in the woods and open air, eventually I found my way to

a UU church with a very friendly Pagan group. The big block-letter sign at the entrance was so welcoming, the flyers in the front window full of promise. Besides, somebody's voice was in my head, lecturing me on the importance of community, how there are some

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things you can only do in groups, how you can go faster alone but farther together.

The UU church was round and geodesic, with lots of windows made of ordinary glass that looked out on an old orchard behind the parking lot. I sat on the outer edge of a middle row, near the exit, listening to the sermons and joining in the songs. No use. It wasn't long before I was gazing out the window again — watching a chubby squirrel teetering on the thinnest tip of an apple branch, or a cowbird flicking its tail feathers in the birdbath before bursting into flight. And inevitably, the questions came.

### HOW DOES A COWBIRD KNOW IT'S A COWBIRD?

Here's the thing about cowbirds — maybe you've heard of them,

but even if you haven't, you've seen them for sure.

Running down the center of this country are sweeping grasslands so big they swallow rivers whole. In the grasslands, once there were huge herds of bison wading through the prairies. As they moved their great dark bodies through the grasses, they stirred up insects on all sides — grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and weevils, flies, aphids, all kinds. You might not see the bugs except as a dusty, buzzing cloud trailing out behind the herd... but you must have seen the cowbirds.

Perched on the bison's hunched backs, those dark little birds keeping their balance — that's them, the silhouettes you see in all the pictures. Cowbirds feast on all those bugs that would otherwise pester the bison and chew the grassland to tatters. That's why the cowbirds hang around, and the bison don't much mind. (Most of the bison are gone, but ask any rancher and they will tell you the cowbirds are still there, following cattle and horses.)

In nature this kind of thing is called symbiosis. (Even the syllables have a swinging give-and-take.) The world is full of simple little marvels — cooperation, mutual aid, little winged creatures keeping the balance.

Here's the other thing about cowbirds you might have heard — they're parasites, home-wreckers, thieves. They lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, hiding one or



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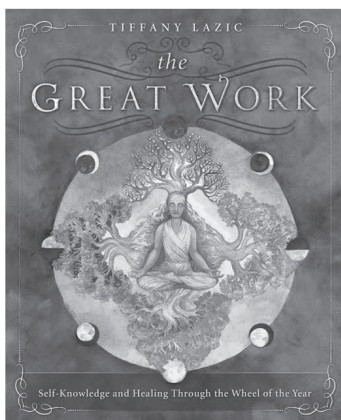
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two among the others' brood.

Warmed and hatched by another mother's care, the cowbird chick outpaces her own in how quickly it grows and how much it consumes, and so some of her own offspring starve and die, unable to compete.

That's if the cowbird's lucky. If it's not so lucky, it may find itself born into the nest of a finch or house sparrow, with a mother who feeds only seeds to her young. Her own chicks grow husky while the little cowbird struggles. The tiny calf-chick chirps, begs for food, but as hard as it tries to mimic its mother, its stomach grumbles with an inarticulate longing for cricket wings and beetle legs.

#### LEARNING BY WATCHING

How does a cowbird know it's a cowbird? Don't we all learn who we are by watching those around us and trying to join in? Like the story of the ugly duckling, a cowbird chick grows up surrounded by siblings of another species, raised by the wrong mother. Does it have a querulous voice in its head, lecturing it for never being proper, never quite being right?

Mostly you only hear how awful cowbirds are. You don't hear much about their service to the bison, the careful balance of their hollow bones, their wandering souls. In a country that supposedly prides itself on cowboy individualism, it's strange how much we hate the cowbird. As if there were only one rule for birds we expect all of them to follow.

One rule for mothers, too — so you don't hear much about the finch who kills her own young when she cannot feed them. Refusing to feed the smallest and weakest, she carefully rations her time and energy so that the strongest of her

offspring will have the best possible chance of survival. If it's a particularly bad year, with scarce resources, she may even abandon her nest completely, her instincts urging her to self-preservation so that she might live to try again. Like the writer who must kill her babies for the poem to fully form. Like the Zen monk who must kill the Buddha when he meets him on the road.

Does the finch love the changeling in her nest, and mourn the bitterness of her obligation? Is there a part of her that knows she cannot give it what it needs? Aren't we all sometimes fooled into answering someone else's calling as if it were our own? Pouring our resources into the darling gaping mouth, is there a voice that tells us we are failures if we can't see every commitment through, make every relationship last?

Somebody's mother's voice is in my head — is there one in yours? Finch or cowbird? Bison or brood? What kind of company do you keep? How many different rules do you follow, and to what end? Or do you, like me, swing back and forth depending on your mood, the time of day, which way the light is shining through the window pane? Do you hover in doorways, wondering...?

How does a cowbird know it's a cowbird? After listening so long to the stranger speaking in its own peevish throat, when it finally understands — when it knows in its hollow bones that its own kind are wanderers, lallygags, riding on the bison's buzzing wake as it ripples out beneath the wind... How does it feel, at last? Not abandoned, but beckoned, my mother might say, and eager to be on its way. ☺

*Nurturing the spiritual heritage of her Celtic ancestors, ALISON LEIGH LILLY explores themes of peace, poesis and wilderness. Find her website at [www.alisonleighlilly.com](http://www.alisonleighlilly.com).*