

The Blackest Crow

(a.k.a. "My Dearest Dear" or "I Love You Well")

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(Originally published: Inside Bluegrass, March 2005)

There are certain traditional genres that feel very old, as if they existed from the beginning of human song. Lamentation over parting is one of these, and there are uncountable songs and poems on the subject. The chances are that you've heard at least one version of The Blackest Crow, since it's been recorded a lot in recent years, both by bluegrassers such as Laurie Lewis or James Reams, and by old-time musicians such as the Down From The Mountain trio (Dirk Powell, Tim O'Brien, John Herrmann).

Versions of this song containing references to glass breasts and superlatively black crows have been collected in both Appalachia and the Ozarks. Some of these versions are diary entries dating from the time of the American civil war. Written copies of the words and the existence of multiple tunes indicate that the song was spread by broadside or newspaper publication rather than in the oral tradition. I find it odd that, although the song seems to be widespread, there were no commercial recordings made of it during the first old-time music golden era of the 1920s, if you exclude songs that contain only the commonest image in parting laments (lonesome doves). The numerous modern recordings are due to Tommy Jarrell (1901-1985) of Mt. Airy, NC. He inspired a whole generation of musicians who flocked to learn old-time music, including this song, from him.

The tune given here is probably even older than the words. The pentatonic scale predates modern harmony, and so makes it hard to find guitar chords to fit the song. The G chord works fine until you get to the E note, which would seem to call for an E minor chord. When I tried that, it sounded all wrong to me, as did all other chords I know involving E, so I eventually abandoned both key signature and guitar chords when writing out the music. Banjo and/or fiddle accompaniment work fine, as does playing a dyad chord using only the E and A notes on the guitar (I couldn't figure out how to do that). Variants of this tune appear in Irish songs such as John Barleycorn Must Die.

I don't have Jarrell's recording (it's out of print), so I make do with this one, by Bruce Molsky and Carla Gover on Molsky's CD *Lost Boy* (Rounder 0361).

The Blackest Crow

(original lyrics)

Words & Music:
Traditional American

As time draws near, my dearest dear, when you and I must part,
What little you know of the grace and awe of my poor aching heart.
Each night I suffer for your sake, you're the one I love so dear;
I wish that I was going with you, or you were staying here.

I wish my breast was made of glass wherein you might behold
Oh there your name I's wrote, my dear, in letters made of gold.
Oh there your name I's wrote, my dear, believe me what I say,
You are the one I love the best until my dying day.

The crow that is so black, my love, will surely turn to white
If ever I prove false to you, bright day return to night.
Bright day return to night, my love, the elements will mourn.
If ever I prove false to you, the seas will rage and burn.

And when you're on some distant shore, think of your absent friend,
And when the wind blows high and clear, a line to me, pray send.
And when the wind blows high and clear, pray send a note to me,
That I might know by your handwrite how time has gone with thee.

NOTE: Songs with glass breast / blackest crow imagery are to be found in:
Belden Ballads & Songs, MO Folklore Society, p. 484 (Banishment)
Brown North Carolina Folklore, vol. III, p. 262 (The Slighted Girl)
Randolph Ozark Folksongs, vol. IV, #760, (I Love You Well)
Sharp English Folksongs from S. Appalachians, Vol. II, #77 (p. 13) (My Dearest Dear)

The Blackest Crow

(Fleecy Fox lyrics)

Words & Music:
Traditional American

The time draws near, my dearest dear,
When you and I shall part.
The grief and woe you soon must know,
Of my poor troubled heart.

I wish that I could go with you,
Or you could tarry here,
Your company, my dearest dear,
So charming unto me.

It makes me think when you're away
That every day is three,
But every day is three, true love,
And every hour is ten.

It makes me weep when I should sleep,
And say I've lost a friend.

The blackest crow, my dearest dear,
Soon shall turn to white.
If ever I prove false to you,
Bright day shall turn to night.

Bright day shall turn to night, true love;
The elements shall mourn.
If ever I prove false to you,
The rugged sea shall burn.

Also found in Randolph, Vol. IV, #760, "I Love You Well."