

Slowly Through Glass

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Standing at the kitchen window, looking into the yard, I was enthralled by a bird which seemed intent on dismantling my tiny garden. Its beak, claw and body were a blur, and I couldn't recall having seen such frenzied activity as it catapulted itself forward in a succession of tiny leaps, using the force of its fall - the stab of a beak, the scratch of a foot – to excavate such quantities of soil that it seemed only a matter of time before the plants would be uprooted and the bird swallowed whole. Yet taking a backwards step, resetting itself, it kept up its serious work, tossing aside everything in its path, showering itself, the plants, the bricks which separate each bed with particles of earth and mulch. In the midst of its industriousness, however, it would frequently pause, and with quick instinctual care sweep a bright eye across land and sky alert to predators, be they winged, feline, or human. The domestic cat - a fierce hunter by any standard – is the most likely, lethal threat, slinking a foot-at-a-time, deathly silent, across roof, ground, and fence.

Of the thousands of bird species that exist (9800 by one recent account), a number of species impress themselves more frequently onto our psyches. Thoreau, Wilde, Shelley, Austen, Homer, Aesop et al, each mention the thrush, and if only by their suggestion I suspect that the bird which enthralled me might also be a member of the family Turdidae. Yet I cannot claim to know much of anything about it, either of appearance or general characteristic. What did other authors say of that bird? That it flitted across the sky/from bough to bough/a small yet picturesque movement across the eye? I vaguely recall a disparaging comment made by Thoreau concerning the thrush: that it was bland? Yet this

strikes me as odd given his reverence for all things ungovernable. Does the Thrush possess a speckled breast?

The bird returned the next day. I was in the kitchen at the time. If I had to be confined to just one room it would be this light and airy chamber, where, irrespective of the how the sky is painted that day, I while away minutes, sometimes hours, absented from my work upstairs, where I seem to be perennially reordering the contents of a tiny veneered desk. Downstairs I gaze through a wall of glass onto a garden of raised beds, a fence of silvered timbers and faded green iron, and a trembling olive which sits beyond the slip of the neighbors' fence. A gate of baby iron lies to the right, or north of the yard. If the gate were open it would reveal a cobbled lane, a building of vertical timbers, painted white, and a red door, where in its nook, teachers, and alternatively, students, come to smoke. Opposite the gate, standing almost half the height of the fence again, is a thick-stemmed rose which year round produces abundant pink blooms. The petals of these blooms, which seem to be constantly detaching themselves, litter the narrow paths that run between the beds, and the beds themselves. An upstairs addition to this rail-road-styled house, the room containing my desk and a single lopsided chair, also faces west, and would offer a bird's-eye view of the garden, but its windows have been set to a height to ensure the neighbors' privacy, and its panes only capture slivers of sky, tree-tops, and chimneys, most of which have had spiny aerials tacked to their sides.

Reaching for the kettle I sensed a movement. Perched on a vegetable bed's rough lip, head bowed, tail feathers ruffling air, the bird displayed a slender back. Its breast, or under parts, whether speckled, colored, patterned, or of a solid hue, remained hidden. Holding my breath I pressed an ear to the glass, hearing only the sound of an ear trying to listen. Between visits I'd read a little about the thrush. Apart from having confirmed that it often possesses speckled under parts, that it perches, is insectivorous, I had discovered that until quite

recently the bird was often held captive as a result of its reportedly enchanting song. From late in the 18th Century, onwards, queens and aristocrats had the option of an approximate bird, a delicate, sophisticated automaton which would sing on demand within fine enameled flasks and gilded boxes. Yet, as alluring as this *boîte à oiseau chanteur*, or singing bird box, is, its bird only knows one unerring tune; and often a real passerine was trapped and expected to perform a beautiful feat from behind bars. Un-gluing my ear from the glass, the ocean subsided, but scanning the yard the bird had gone.

The next day, however, it returned. I had dispersed a batch of compost on the garden, covering it with a thin layer of soil, but this dark little bird was only encouraged, beside itself ransacking such easy pickings. It darted back and forward on nimble legs, ecstatic, gulping things whole. It was then that I heard its sound. It chirped once, then again, then pointing its beak towards the clouds let forth a series of messages, or exclamations. It paused, scanned the sky, but its chorus seemed to have had no effect so it returned to its energetic scraping of soil, plunging again and again down into that vegetal goodness. It continued foraging as energetically as before, and after a few more minutes stood upright, stretched itself tall and began preening itself, dislodging crumbs of soil from its twig-thin legs, dusting its long wing feathers; then froze. From behind glass the danger was imperceptible, but the bird took wing making the steep ascent to a strand of wire. The line pitched back and forward, along with the bird, and it took flight again to stop on a post, which withstanding the tangle of the rose bush is the highest point in the yard. It blinked a bright eye, breathed a few rapid breaths, and watching its breast rise and fall it was clear that neither its breast nor its under-parts were speckled. With the cause of its concern apparently passed the bird eased from a state of hyper-vigilance to one of alert relaxation, and returned to preening.

The bird began to visit my garden daily, sometimes more than once, and I learnt something of its habit. If it had occurred to me at times that the smallest possible intelligence was

animating that bird, I was mistaken. Its repetitiveness was no more automated than a human lifting its leg, placing one step after the next; those thousand reflexes and conscious gestures by which a day is negotiated. Flitting from bed to bed, overturning an object with its foot, pacing the edging bricks, sheltering beneath shadows and plants, perusing its surrounds, I could not have guessed its next move. Sometimes it would be rooted to the spot, at others hopping through earthen matter before becoming sure-footed as it looked up sharply after the fact of a passing shadow. It was however never completely still, and in those rapid movements of its head, which seemed to my eye a succession of disjointed movements, I knew the bird was seeing the world with an extraordinary sight; discerning the ultraviolet spectrum, magnetic waves, holding two objects - one in each eye- within a gaze. Yet even without the bird's remarkable and individual sight I would stare into the flecks of its plumage until that scintilla became white-hot points of illumination.

I have not always venerated birds, or any singular bird. In my youth I stalked and shot them, or attempted to. Armed with a .22 air rifle, a heavier pellet than the .177, I would roam alluvial plains, grazing land, tilled fields, seeking my prey. Yet I always left the birds where they fell, amongst stones, pasture, Swedish turnips: so they were more 'the destroyed' than 'the preyed-upon'; victims of my desire to kill. Yet peering down into those limp, feathered bodies, I dared only touch them with the rifle's tip. With the sound of rustling foliage, the flash of alien color crossing the surface of a field, my conscience fell quickly back to sleep. Caught in the thrill of the chase I would steady my aim against the bole of a tree, a fence-post, or occasionally, my brother's shoulder, allowing myself to believe again in the insignificance of each small life. Perhaps if I had looked into a living eye none of this would have transpired, but I was a distant and invisible executioner. By the time I was 12, perhaps 13, I turned my gun from birds to cans and bottles. In my early twenties, however, in what I can only explain as a fit of madness, I murdered a handful of magpies. This recollection still pains me, and it is only made worse by the fact that I was a paid killer. I can no longer

remember the charge laid against them, but I recall the man who put that price on their head having a mostly pathological hatred for anything that set foot within his garden.

But today, I tread lightly across the floorboards in the hope that I might spy my little bird. Passing from the dining room to the kitchen, I would inch closer toward the door, scarcely taking a breath, pressing my face to the glass with its border of painted wood. When the bird was there, on the bricks, or amongst the plants, seeing the fine ripples of alertness pass through it as it looked from ground, to fence, to sky, assuring its safety, I would watch with gratitude its necessary work, and a quietness would envelop those long still moments, and return to me unexpectedly throughout the day.

One afternoon, following a hastier than usual visit by the bird, I made a careful transit toward the door and was surprised to find a stranger. This bird, a deeper earthen color, like the color of moist topsoil, had a brighter sheen, and the intense yellow of its beak also encircled each eye with a bright halo. It worked as rapidly as its predecessor, but to its own fashion, tossing soil and mulch and plants over the bed, onto the path. It sent a few more lumps of matter over the edge before hopping onto the bed's rough lip, to survey the path below. Satisfied, it dropped to ground and started to sift the soft wreckage for its food. In this native processing of soil and mulch I recalled something I had read about the song thrush, that it is capable of battering the shell of a snail against a rock, using the latter as an anvil by which to smash open, then pull from this fractured mess, the soft writhing contents. But my thoughts were elsewhere, and it was only minutes later when my tea was poured, my bread and honey eaten, that I turned to find the impostor gone.

The next day I cast a sleepy eye onto the yard and caught the familiar bird and the stranger foraging together, in the same bed! It's good luck, it's said, to spy two blackbirds together. A week later the birds appeared together in the garden more often than not, leaving in their

wake silty piles and dusted leaves. I forgot my former allegiance and became as fascinated with the pair as I had the one. I was surprised, shocked even, to see that not only were they cohabiting in the garden, but that they worked cooperatively. One foraged, while the other acted as sentry. The sentry, an image of vigilance, its clawed feet gripping the bent edge of the fence swept its eye this way and that, zoning in every now and then on particular coordinates, while the forager, freed to dig, did so more ferociously than if it were alone. After a brief tête-à-tête they would exchange roles, a routine which probably continued in a similar vein across any number of gardens throughout the day. While they worked the birds rarely exchanged a glance, yet it was clear by their almost constant chatter that they were accounting for each other, for the lie of the land, and, I imagine, for what lies beneath it.

Leaning against the vanity, my knees tucked under my chin, the sun erasing the shadows on the kitchen floor and the garden path; their every moved captivated me. Although I sometimes made an unintended sound, it would no longer send them into flight. The percussive of a button striking a cup, a dish slipping from my grip, caused them minor concern. They would issue a furtive glance, making sure I remained as I was; a quiet figure behind glass. I had long given up tidying up after them, on returning soil to the garden a handful at a time, and the plants - mostly radiant with health - seemed indifferent as to whether the earth was pushed this way or that, and were certainly indifferent as to whether the paths were clear or dusted with matter. Instead, when the birds had flown I would leave the kitchen and survey the aftermath, peering as an archaeologist might into mounds and depressions, worked soil, debris. It seemed, magically, that if I left the garden as it was, those two bright apparitions might appear again, the next day, and perhaps even the one after that.