

The Birds: The Remarkable Robin

written by Guest Contributor | July 21, 2021



I watch and love the birds most people fail to notice. Just another house sparrow, dressed in its dull buff. A handsome male is building a nest between the screen and broken pane of my neighbor's window at the rear of the house. I watch the nest grow in size day-by-day; I listen to him serenade his would-be mate from the window sill. My neighbor seems none the wiser.

Just another turkey vulture, no majestic hawk. It wobbles in the wind, wingtips fanned into fingers. A group of them circle a reminder around the things we do not like to think about—death, a hunger for rot.

Just another robin. Though celebrated as the first sign of spring, they are soon forgotten as they proliferate in suburbs and woodlands alike. I delight in their comical bounce, their shuffle and perk, shuffle and perk. I watch as they pull elastic worms from the soil. I take their chirrup as my own reminder to cheer up.

I tell a friend I have been watching the robins and she says she thinks of them as the squirrels of birds—so common, such a nuisance sometimes. She forgets to notice them, much less appreciate them. Exactly, I say. Isn't that reason enough to take heed? Why are we so opposed to loving the ordinary? Or, even if it is not about love and appreciation, why do we take so little notice of the things that exist in plentitude?

Another friend takes notice of a robin only when she finds one lying dead on her doorstep. What does it mean? She wants to know. What omen is this? It means only that what is alive also dies, and sometimes death lands on your doorstep.

I try to pay attention to the things most people forget to—squirrels, robins, where you parked the car, the man who's been just a few steps behind for too many blocks now.

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In *How to Know the Birds*, Ted Floyd describes the American robin as "at once ordinary and extraordinary." That you might be within one thousand feet of a robin this very moment, Floyd claims, is the ordinary part. But I think such

a possibility is quite extraordinary. On the North American continent, during most times of the year, at any time of day, any one of us is likely within a short distance of a robin. We could connect each person from Canada to northern Mexico through a tangled human-robin network and still share little else in common. As you read this, is there a robin rooting around your lawn or singing from the tree branch or fire escape outside your window? Maybe the bird is just out of earshot or eyesight, but nonetheless nearby. As I write this, I watch a robin skip up the sidewalk toward where I sit on the patio. I imagine her cousin, two or three states away, flitting about your backyard. She pauses less than ten feet from me, tilts her head, and flies off into the trees. I can still spy her rusted breast through the foliage. Does she notice how much I notice her?

So many robins are alive today because they go unnoticed. Once upon a time, robins were commonly hunted and eaten, an easy feast in winter when they gather in large roosts to stuff themselves with berries while worms lie inaccessible in the frozen ground. Or, their breast meat was indulged as a decadent, succulent treat in early fall after they had spent the spring and summer months fattening themselves on worms and berries. But hunting them was made illegal with the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. However, if you happen to have a justifiable "bird conflict," you can apply for a migratory bird depredation permit. The permit, issued by the US federal government, allows for the lethal "taking" (capture or killing) of certain migratory birds in permissible amounts.

Robins love to eat berries. There are stories of robins gorging themselves on fermented berries and stumbling away in a drunken stupor. They have been known to decimate entire blueberry crops. I read about blueberry farmers who get depredation permits and hire people to "take" the birds—that is, take them out, as in shoot them, kill them—before they destroy the crops.

Perhaps I want to find the robin remarkable because I fear she and I share the same plight: largely unnoticed in life, our death the result of being hunted even when we are presumably protected.

As a girl, I evaded the attention of men because I had been taught to. Every girl and woman is given lessons in how to dress and how to conduct themselves so men will notice them in just the right amount, in just the right way. And every girl and woman quickly learns the lies in those lessons. They learn what it feels like to be pursued, and they develop their own tactics to shake off the huntsman—by ducking into peopled spaces, getting lost in the crowd, wrapping an oversized coat around their body like an invisibility cloak, whatever it takes to make oneself as inconspicuous as possible. Every girl and woman knows how to disappear herself lest a man disappear her first.

I tried to disappear my girl self into a man self, but even when I am read as a man at first glance, I am still just as cunning in my vanishing act. It still often feels safer to remain unseen and unheard. I used to be afraid men would make meat of me. Now, I am afraid they will take me, that they'll see me as a threat to be extinguished before I ruin their whole crop of blueberries—their investments in what it means to be a *real man*, their lines drawn between boy and girl, right and wrong. Being noticed might mean being

found out and we all know what people—usually men—are capable of doing when they find out about people like me.

Maybe going unnoticed by those who hate us or want to harm us is a way of loving ourselves.

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I try so hard to love myself, sometimes I completely erase myself without intending to.

I once attended a lecture by a famous scholar. He read what must have been a forty-page treatise at rapid-fire pace. I tried to keep up for the first several minutes, but then spent the next hour daydreaming doodles and to-do lists on scraps of paper. Later, I tell a friend how I could barely follow what the man was saying. What could I even say of the content? My friend chuckles, “You don’t go to those kinds of lectures to learn something. You go there to be seen.” A beat. “Wait,” he says, “I was at that lecture. You were there?”

I once lived with a housemate who closed the front door in my face. Not to make a point in an argument or to intentionally shut me out, but because she actually did not see me right there in front of her. I arrived home with a smile and a wave as she stood in the doorway, gathered up the mail in one hand and scooped her dog up with the other, turned and looked right through me to an empty street, quietly closed and locked the door, and walked upstairs to our shared apartment.

I once sat across from someone and wept through an entire meal. After she cleared her plate, she noticed I had barely touched the pile of tepid food on my own plate. “What’s the matter?” she said, “You don’t like your food?”

Maybe I’m just too ordinary. Unremarkable. Just another. Generally, I prefer to slip in and out of life’s activities undetected, but when I do want to be noticed—which is another way of saying, when I want to be loved—nothing hurts more than being a ghost in the room.

A friend (a therapist, of course) tells me I probably get so worked up about my loved ones ignoring/forgetting/not recognizing my presence because as a child I didn’t get attention from my parents. I spent my whole life trying to get someone to notice me, she reminds me. No one should have to fight so hard to be loved.

True, and maybe sometimes, we just forget each other. Sometimes those who love me most are the first to forget I exist. It’s understandable. Sometimes I also forget the robin. Sometimes I forget myself.

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The robin sings a distinct song. *Cheerily, cheer up, cheer up, cheerily, cheer up.* But most people wouldn’t be able to pick it out of a chorus of springtime chirps. And many people don’t hear the birdsong at all, tuning out as they tune into their own silent spring. You could ask them, “Did you hear

that bird call?" They'll glance up briefly from their glowing palm. "No, I didn't hear anything. What did it sound like?" It's understandable. I, too, sometimes lose my ear for the world around me.

All my life, I have been told I need to speak up for myself. If I want someone to notice me, I need to say something. It doesn't come naturally, especially now that I have buried my voice so deep inside me. My voice a sure tell, sometimes as high-pitched as a robin's tweet, refusing to bend to the will of testosterone, eliciting fumbled apologies of *sir, I mean ma'am, I mean sorry sorry sorry*. I'd rather say nothing. But I fight the impulse to choke on the lump in my throat rather than squeak out a nervous verbal existence, and I try to speak up when I must. But I often feel like I'm shouting from the bottom of the ocean. Later, they say, "Why didn't anyone tell me?" Or "Why didn't you say something?"

Just another voice in the hum of white noise. *Chirp chirp. Chirrup chirrup. Cheer up. Cheer up.*

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René Descartes never wrote about robins (as far as I am aware), but he did write of the value in being unremarkable. While residing in Amsterdam, he wrote, "I could live here all my life without ever being noticed by anyone," and for him, there was a freedom in being paid no heed and thus not having to pay heed. But several years later, Descartes' desire to live unnoticed awoke in him a vigilance, a need to pay attention in order to maintain his safety undercover, to evade unwanted pursuit and inquiry. Under the shadow of the Inquisition and in the face of the censure of Galileo, he wrote in a letter to mathematician Marin Mersenne, "I want to live in peace and continue the life I have begun under the motto *Bene vixit, bene qui latuit* (or, "He lives well who is well hidden").

This sentiment has since been revised into an inspirational poster quote, overlain on sunsets and seascapes, framed and hung on the walls of restrooms, in rear view through the mirror above the sink. A silhouetted bird is caught in flight against a marmalade sky. Over my shoulder, the blocked white lettering reminds me: "To live well, you must live unseen." But for some of us, it seems like just to live, we must live unseen. Or we must live regardless of whether or not we are seen. Cheer up.

How, then, to live well—to be loved—and remain hidden? I want the robin to be noticed because she is loved, not because she is disdained. I want her to be adored because someone sees something beautiful and remarkable in her despite how commonplace she is. I want her to be known for how extraordinary she is, despite her ordinariness. We don't need my therapist friend to point out that when I write about what I want for the robin, I am also writing about what I want for myself.

I meet a robin on a path through the wood. He looks at me and hops along. I think he is telling me to follow him. So I do. Hop hop. He looks back. Hop hop. I follow. I think he must be taking me somewhere. He must have something important to show me. I follow as if I expect him to have all the answers, to

show me how to be robin-like, how to thrive in a world that both hunts you and ignores you. Suddenly, he flaps his wings and is gone in the trees. I am left standing alone on the path in the middle of the forest. The oak leaves whisper in the wind. A tree trunk rattles in the distance under the pressure of a woodpecker's beak. A branch snaps as a squirrel leaps from limb to limb. Hidden in the foliage, the robin sings: *cheer up, cheerily, cheer up*. He has shown me nothing and everything.

How remarkable.



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