Birds

a Consolation

I lie awake; I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.
Psalm 102.7

The French royalist Xavier de Maistre left France in the 18th Century to join the Piedmontese army. An aristocrat, he is not remembered as a soldier but as a writer. In 1790, as a consequence of an illegal duel, he was confined to his room for 42 days.

"We were happy in our mistakes. And now, alas! that is no longer the case; we too, like everyone else, have had to read the human heart; and the truth, falling among us like a bomb, has forever destroyed the enchanted palace of illusion."

De Maistre used his time in isolation to write an abiding classic of literature: *A Journey Around my Room*. Far from being a morose diary, it is a delightful response to his confinement. The book is in the form of a travelogue around his room. There are 42 chapters, one for each day, in each of which he describes his daily progress. He chronicles that he made it to his armchair one day and then looks over at his desk longingly, hoping to make it there by tomorrow, where he imagines he will have a delightful conversation with someone interesting, and subsequently creates that exchange. There are depictions of his pajamas and suggests that everyone should have pink and white bed linens because they induce calm and sleep.

"In my travels I am taking lessons from my valet and dog." At the end of his confinement he regrets having to return to society.

In 2021, Slovenian furniture company introduced a collection of interior pieces intended to boost people's well-being during the Covid quarantine. They named the collection *Voyage* after *A Journey Around my Room*. The French title of the book being *Voyage autour de ma chambre*.

The years 2020-21 have brought unique challenges to most people in the world, and our responses to them are as varied as the individual and his, her, or their circumstances.

It was a time apart: from our families, friends, concerts, museums, restaurants, traveling; and it involved enduring a necessary isolation to save our lives and the lives of others.

For some, the quarantine was not too much of a change; in some instances, some of my overextended or misanthropic friends even welcomed the respite, at least initially. Isolation affects all of us differently, and for too many it has taken on

some painful and unwelcome lingering aspects. I think loneliness has perhaps been the most common complaint, along with at times a near crippling, claustrophobic cabin fever, even for those living in large houses.

We have all had to grapple with Zoom meetings and FaceTime. This has brought us a great consolation and sense of connectedness, but ultimately there is a sameness in such comparatively cold communications, as we have experienced with Chit Chat Club presentations. We need the immediate embracing warmth of one another. We are social beings, and this period has left us all wanting, in varying degrees. Some are still struggling to remember how to comfortably and confidently socialize in conversational play, and find the courage to eat indoors in restaurants. The world's institutions have beautifully exploited the internet to increase their exposure and cultural generosity, with lectures, exhibitions, concerts, films and educational opportunities. These will undoubtedly be used in the future to great effect and our benefit, but it is not a substitute for our need to be around others.

People during this lapsed phase used their time to rediscover cooking, the outer reaches of Netflix, reading, rereading, meditation, and for many, birds. With people spending more time in their gardens there has been a renewed interest in birds: observing and studying them, attracting them with seed and treats, and in many cases getting involved in the vast profusion of bird song. Something that I had been unaware of is that there are blind bird watchers.

We experienced for a while a freshly quietened environment: less traffic and pedestrian sounds. Some even contacted ornithologists, wondering if there had been a population explosion of birds. They simply had not taken the time previously to pay attention. The birds had been there all along. The sobering fact is that North America has lost 3 billion birds in 50 years; since 1970 there has been a 29% drop in bird populations. It's known that birds respond negatively to urban and human noise. It is still to be determined whether the quarantine has had an impact on their numbers.

Birds have been a constant presence in our literature: Homer, *The Conference of the Birds* by Attar, the Bible, Shakespeare, *The Raven* by Poe, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *The Albatross* by Baudelaire, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Chicken Little*, *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Anderson and recently *Apeirogon* by Colum McCann, in which birds are interspersed throughout the narrative as figures representing freedom of movement and unfettered natural migration. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* the mockingbird represents the idea of innocence. The character Scout explains, "Remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

Birds feature importantly in painting from all centuries and continents, but in the West you will remember works by Dürer, van Gogh, Audubon, Arcimboldo, Monet, Morisot, Katz, Dine, and there has been a lot of attention paid to the

small painting *The Goldfinch* by Fabritius, used as the cover image of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Donna Tartt.

In popular music bird inspired songs are too numerous to mention and there are so many notable works in classical music by Tchaikovsky, Rautavaara, Respighi, Wagner, Haydn, Beethoven, Mahler, Delius, Stravinsky. They delightfully appear as Papageno and Papagena, the parrots in Mozart's *Magic Flute*.

The great debt that Olivier Messiaen the French composer owes to birdsong was that it got him out of a creative impasse he had reached in the early 50s, when he'd exhausted the vein of his compositional ideas largely drawn from the salad of contemporary musical language convention. He started walking in the forest, transcribing bird song on musical score paper; and it was at this point that the bird's song became part of his musical language. His wife Yvonne Loriod, fabulously adept technically at the piano, was the perfect interpreter of his very complicated works. It is said that ornithologists listening to his compositions can identify the notated species of bird. There is an extended and awe-inspiring avian scene in his opera, *St. François d'Assise*.

There are bird idioms and expressions in every language. To name just a few in English: "happy as a lark," birds of a feather flock together," "eagle eye," "the early bird catches the worm," "eats like a bird," "like water off a duck's back," "night owl," "as the crow flies," "proud as a peacock," "an albatross around the neck," "like a duck to water," "free as a bird," "as scarce as hen's teeth," and "up at the crack of sparrows."

And we eat birds.

François Mitterand, the former president of France, chose as his last meal a few days before his death (in 1996) a now illegal delicacy: a roasted ortolan. It has been called a "single hedonistic mouthful." The ortolan is a relative of the sparrow in the bunting family. After caged fattening the bird is drowned in *Armagnac*, roasted for eight minutes, and the feet and feathers removed. It must be sizzling when brought to the table. Following convention, one covers one's head completely with a white napkin, like a shroud to embrace the aromas. One places the bird into the mouth by holding the head, feet first, and eating it whole, spitting out the larger bones. The barbaric preparation isn't why eating it is now illegal, but because of the decreasing population.

Some birds seem almost never to leave the air, with migrations of thousands of miles, and an impressive ability to sleep midflight. Birds can be found swimming, diving, flightless, living in tree tops, bushes, marshes, mostly solitary, only in flocks, mating for life, scarcely seen or constantly available to observation, as urban pests, scavengers, hunters, thieves, innocent, conniving. We have carrier

pigeons, even pigeon photographers. So many birds stunningly beautiful plumage, resulting in their feathers becoming part of costumes, hats and other ornamentation from the most primitive to the most sophisticated of societies. We are enthralled by their seemingly gratuitous beauty.

Bird-spotters are known as birders, while bird-lovers are more commonly called birdwatchers. In terms of etymology and ornithology, there is barely a difference, but the distinctions matter greatly to those involved. Birders in their desire to tag and list, exercise a passion for rarity, travelling great distances as if they were trying to corner all of birddom. Conversely birdwatchers pursue a sentimental education, if only to admire momentarily the avian world with awe, discovering an embracing inter-species gentle connection.

The artist Man Ray said "I prefer inspiration to information."

Richard Walheim the British philosopher of aesthetics said that painting and drawing are not semiotic: semiotics in language being a study of signs and symbols. We all have an essential intellectual comprehension but it comes after our natural initial impression. Language can seduce and distract, but observation is primordial: a drawing of a bird is a drawing of a bird is a drawing of a bird. There is no contrivance. Ancient cave artists painted them exactly as we might, from thorough contemplation. Cultural history has not made any appreciable contribution to such imaginings.

We are just looking at the bird/ as the bird is / and always has been. The thrill of bird watching is basic, primordial.

It is a drink of clear water.
Bird watching is a drink of clear water.

My subject is sparrows. The ubiquitous house sparrow.

A San Francisco resident, I found myself caring for my parents in Michigan for two years, obviously challenged by the quarantine. I was raised there and hadn't experienced four distinct seasons in succession in decades, a sensual delight all its own.

I, a bird watcher, was observing one garden, one species and photographing them through one window in a part of my parents' home. Being far from my studio, friends, and professional contacts I sought a creative outlet in an inspired otherness. A pursuit born of limits allowed the extraordinary to reveal itself in the finite. Finding myself enjoying the garden I began to relish in particular my long, close, and extended access to visiting birds. Throughout the year there are seasonal avian visitors, with what I would consider comparative exotics: cardinals, orioles, bluebirds, grackles, doves, various finches, ravens, mocking birds.

The assumption is often that a professional photographer should be able to photograph anything that reflects light. It is possible, given proper motivation, but as in medicine, music, athletics, literature or law and perhaps every discipline, to be truly accomplished requires a specialization. The learning curve as to how best to photograph the birds was dauntingly steep. I cut a hole into a board which I kept open all winter, camera on a tripod at the ready with thick flannel to cut the draft, natural light, no computer tricks, no arranged groupings and very importantly perfect vertical orientation.

Far from being an ornithologist, or even an active birdwatcher, I am a photographer. My concentrations have tended toward portraits, cityscapes, flowers and the book arts. Though passionate in what I do, I've never considered approaching wildlife with a lens in any dedicated way, but I have long hoped to do an extended series with birds. My attempts had either not been sustained into a full body of work or were too derivative of photographs I had seen.

Their airborne antics far exceeded my previous imaginings. Their acrobatic capabilities are astounding: quick silver, midair decisions and sheerly awe-inspiring athleticism, all of which seem to embrace near aesthetic intentions, as though they were striving to display their beauty. The opportunity to photograph these birds seemed to present itself as a gift, one that I could never have predicted, intellectualized, planned or imagined. A pursuit born of limits allows the extraordinary to reveal itself in the finite. I am intrigued with the quiet, the overlooked, and underappreciated, but I believe that had I not been quarantined I would have forever overlooked them. But these dances are ongoing constantly, sight unseen.

Watching a single flock of birds over more than a year was revelatory: mating, feeding, fledging, fighting, cooperating, alerting others of danger, teaching and tending to their young are all wholly fascinating. I never knew where they nested.

Mozart in a letter to his father described himself not as a composer but as a scribe, merely writing down the sounds that he was hearing in his head. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, said "God listens to Bach while the angels listen to Mozart."

Everyone knows of sparrows. It is one of the most common and easily recognized of all bird species. Many people may find them annoying, and overwhelming bird feeders when what they wanted was an opportunity to attract rare exotics even fantasizing about a toucan alighting one day in Mill Valley.

The house sparrow's rapid spread around the globe is legendary in ornithological circles. It was introduced to the states in Brooklyn in 1851 to help control moths. There were attempts by individuals and naturalist societies in the 19th century to populate parks and forests with animals and plants from the Old World. By 1900 sparrows had spread to the Rocky Mountains. Two more introductions in the early 1870s in San Francisco and Salt Lake City contributed to the bird's proliferation.

Before long they had spread across the United States and Canada, adapting to environments as extreme as Death Valley, at 280 feet below sea level, and the Colorado Rockies, at more than 10,000 feet above sea level. They moved southward into Mexico, through Central and South America as far as Tierra del Fuego, and along the Trans-Amazonian Highway deep into the rainforests of Brazil. In Europe, Africa, and Asia, they dispersed to northern Finland, the Arctic, South Africa, and clear across Siberia. Now the sparrow is the world's most widely distributed wild bird, with a global breeding population of some 540 million. It's found on every continent except Antarctica and on islands everywhere, from Cuba and the West Indies to the Hawaiian Islands, the Azores, Cape Verde, and even New Caledonia.

In spite of this proliferation, as with so many other animals, their populations are diminishing to a worrisome extent for all of the reasons we are too familiar with.

Birds can generally place one geographically, but in the case of sparrows, we could be anywhere in the world. Ted Anderson in his book *Biology of the Ubiquitous House Sparrow*, writes that he can sit in his living room listening to news reports from just about anywhere in the world on the radio or TV and hear the characteristic chirrup of house sparrows.

Sparrows as their Latin name *passer domesticus* suggests, are the polar opposite of migratory birds. They're like a pushy houseguest who, once invited in, often overstays its welcome. It's a permanent resident through most of its range – and remarkably sedentary, clinging to the locality of its chosen home, foraging close to roosting sites, breeding close to its natal colony. Anderson proposes a theory of the sparrow's origin that is revealing of its nature, which is that the bird was always "an obligate commensal of sedentary humans." It is presumed to have come into its own as a species approximately ten thousand years ago, at the advent of agriculture in the Middle East. Other theories place its origin earlier than that, more like half a million years ago, based on fossil evidence found in a cave near Bethlehem.

Sparrows are adaptable, working in concert with one another, much more successful in cooperation than alone in problem solving. So highly skilled have they become at adapting to any environment occupied by humans that they have been called the ultimate opportunists, our avian shadow.

Here is a distilled anecdotal recipe for its success:

A taste for novelty
An embrace of varied habitats
An ability to change climate and diet seemingly at will
A pinch of the innovative
A dash of daring
The rare ability to brood several times in a single breeding season
And a penchant for hanging out in mixed gangs

Their too often overlooked beauty, cleverness and adaptability are all ultimately a marvel to behold. Though I kept my feeders cleaned and filled, the birds would at times be absent for as much as a week. Some days only one or two would visit; and at other times there would be a tremendous flurry of activity. Initially I found these unpredictabilities frustrating. Certain days there would be incredible and breathtaking action either before or after there was enough light to photograph them. But those entrancing moments I believe are when I marveled, appreciated and loved them the most. Just gently watching. They became an ineffably lyrical inspiration.

For a few years I have sent one image of a bird each day to a list of 60 friends, not as a group email but individually, thinking of each person before clicking "send." Doing so became a discipline and perhaps a mantra – a way of sending a prayer, of feeling connected. To many they were received as consolations. Among some I created an expectation with some complaining after a delay of only a few hours "Where's my morning sparrow?" and a deepening of friendship and intimacy among others. It has been wholly gratifying to me along with warming lonely days.

I have given all of the images one word titles. This has become a parallel dialogue, sometimes describing an imagined mental state I project the birds are experiencing, occasionally slipping into something I might be feeling, a bit of the irreverent comical, or a description of their positions in the air. I had at first thought I might run afoul of true birders with these anthropomorphic titles but I felt exonerated when the marvelous author of various books on birds Jennifer Ackerman, who wrote *The Genius of Birds* said she loves them.

Social media, which I normally would be loath to engage in, found me posting daily sparrow images on Instagram, an involvement that blossomed into a revelation. It resulted in multiple publications and most gratifyingly in developing new friendships with artists and photographers from all over: England, France, Russia, Malta, Austria and Italy.

Einstein once wrote, "As a human being, one has been endowed with just enough

intelligence to be able to see clearly how utterly inadequate that intelligence is when confronted with what exists."

Will we ever be enlightened and informed enough to comprehend the resourcefulness and brilliance of animals?

Consider the extraordinary genius tightly packed into these tiny puffs of feathers, laying the mind open for a moment to the resplendent mysteries of the magnificence of birds. They are wonderful enigmas to keep on the bookshelves of our mind, to nudge us into recognition of how little we know of the wonders and felicities of the natural world.

Jennifer Ackerman says that, given the great advances in what we are learning about birds in the last decade alone, it turns out that to call someone a "bird brain" is a tremendous compliment.