

A Joyful Noise

by
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It was a winter of disasters great and small. Nature heaved around earth and oceans as if she were just rearranging furniture, snuffing out the lives of thousands as she cleaned house. Then the despots, and revolutions, and threat of nuclear meltdown. Winter might be over, but it seems as though we've slipped over the last, dirty crust of snow to the very edge of existence.

And *then*...then the blackbird starts singing! He simply quick-steps out of the dawn murk one day and cocks an appraising eye at our Brussels garden. For months we've been staring out at this slumberland of browns and grays, cracked flowerpots, mud. But the blackbird sees something else entirely: soft, generous earth full of worms; a bargain basement of nesting material; and behind the protective walls – so handy against cats – an ash tree in which to sing. Peace, security, a patch of earth to call one's own: things that in the endless tunnel of winter we forgot that we had. The blackbird is as good a proof as any that there's always another way to look at things.

Sure enough, we venture into the dozing yard to find that a snail has budged on the wall. An eager spider is setting up shop under the hedge. The desiccated vine creeping over from the neighbors now has tiny pearls of green on it: life, where before there was none. Now surely that's a miracle.

Speaking of neighbors...

This being Old Europe, gardens and courtyards huddle together inside a labyrinth of tile-capped walls. Closer to the ancient heart of the city the walls are even higher, the courtyards more secretive. Such an elaborate system, obscured by brooding wisteria, bamboo and privet, could be a metaphor for this venerable continent. Things here are intuited, sensed, divined. Move aside a branch, and you might find out something new about your neighbor. Pull away two or three, however, and you have learned too much.

But clues to this backyard labyrinth literally hang in the air. A teaser of garlic means that the restaurant two courtyards away has mussels on the menu - very useful information come lunchtime. Then there is sound, that incorrigible gossip: the melancholy scrape of a violin over the left wall reveals a winter not spent practicing. The chopping you hear means

that the lawyer behind the back right corner has been idle on Sundays and let his linden tree grow too dense.

But the sound of sounds in this micro-universe is that quick-stepping bird himself, whose voice glistens and soars like Caruso. The blackbird sits in the ash tree at dusk spinning his ballads, laments and love songs. The notes are so pure they can make your teeth zing. We sit on our terrace and listen eagerly for the life lessons hidden in that music. One lesson is clear at once: inspiration doesn't need the gardens of Versailles to flourish.

The cataclysm came early one morning. A chain saw snarled in the restaurant courtyard. A crash followed, punctuated by an obscene yell. I looked out: the blackbird's ash tree lay sprawled across the lawyer's garage roof. There was another obscene yell, this time from the lawyer's direction. The tree was removed with haste, and guiltily, having left a small dent in the roof.

All went silent after that. For a while it felt like Rachel Carson's spring. The birds simply vanished. The violin – blessedly - ceased.

There were no love songs that evening. Or the next. If you think about it, the felling of the tree was the blackbird's tsunami, a meltdown, the disaster that would pass into blackbird legend and be sung about for generations like the stuff of troubadours.

At last he appeared in the linden tree - a compromise, no doubt. The ash had a far better view. He sounded mellow that evening, resigned. But as always, he had something to say, and I'm certain that he was singing about how, from this new perch, he had found another way of looking at things.