

In the air

Our feathered friends

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I was in the garden the other day poking around for signs of spring when there was a tiny rush of wings and a small brown and red shape came flitting in to land on a branch a couple of feet away making it briefly bounce.

„Hello“, said a small voice, „are you Ariel who writes in *kulturissimo*?“

I looked around, startled.

„In front of you. Lilac-tree.“

I turned and found myself staring into a bright black eye.

„The robin?“ I asked, feeling foolish.

„We don't normally talk to humans“ said the bird, „but needs must when the devil drives, as you say. And we have a problem. Your articles.“

Pique ousted astonishment. „Well you don't have to read them.“

„No it's not that. It's what you write about – or rather, what you don't write about. Your column is called *In the air*, isn't it? So tell me, who are the most important inhabitants of the air?“

„Why, birds, of course!“

„Precisely. And have you ever written about us?“

„Well not that I...“

„...You haven't. When your column first started we birds had high hopes. At last, we thought, someone's going to write about us and make us visible. Well we've been bitterly disappointed. Have you got something against us?“

„Oh, no; I really like birds,“ I said, glancing into the street. „I love the dawn chorus and the blackbird singing when I come home in the evening...“

„Usual birdist clichés! As if all we ever did was sit around on branches looking attractive and singing for the pleasure of humans. But seriously, why don't you write about birds?“

„Well, to be honest, it never occurred to me you read *kulturissimo*.“

„Ah, the language problem. An interspecies misunderstanding. You only ever hear us talking among ourselves so you imagine we only speak bird. In fact, we understand human language, at least the stuff we need for survival.“

„I'd no idea. I've only ever come across talking birds in operas and fairy tales.“

„Yes, and we're usually made to behave like humans with feathers! Anyway, we want you to do a column on birds every now and then.“

„Well all right. But what am I to write about you?“

„Just write about us as we really are, what it's like to be a bird in 2005. Make us visible. The problem these days is if you're not talked or written about in the media you don't exist. And we birds never appear in the papers or on the

news – unless, of course, something spectacular happens, like a tanker disaster, with thousands of sea birds choking to death in oil. Then we're suddenly visible and you care about us for a few days.“

„People rush to help you, I've seen them on TV, trying to clean black muck off seagulls...“

„Yes, but once we go off the front pages you forget us again. We fall back into invisibility and people stop caring. All we want is to be written about from time to time so you humans see the reality of the creatures you share the planet with.“

The robin cocked its head on one side. „Your feathered friends, as you say.“

„I understand. But, frankly, I'm not sure I know that much about birds. You're sort of...there. You fly around and sing. And the blackbirds eat the windfalls in the orchard.“

„And that's just what I mean about being invisible. You've lived with birds all your life and you don't care enough to find out who we really are! Perhaps we should start with a few facts: Did you know for instance that we birds have been on earth about a thousand times longer than Man? We evolved from reptiles about 150 million years ago – in fact our closest living relatives are crocodiles.“

I gazed at the plump little bird, with its red breast and round head.

„Surprised, eh? And there are still over 8.500 varieties of us in existence – despite you humans cutting down our forests and hedgerows, draining our wetlands and poisoning our waters. Of course, some of our rarest species have gone out of the world for ever and others are following them all the time – it seems penguins won't be with us much longer. But we can't defend ourselves.“

„I'm sorry,“ I said lamely. „Shall I write about that?“

„No. There's no point,“ said the robin, twitching its head to one side. „Those who care aren't in power and those in power don't care. Besides, being victims is not our only reality, you know. We also do all kinds of day to day things that are interesting.“

„You sing.“

„Oh 'Hail to thee, blithe spirit!' You romantics...“

Yes, we sing. But most of it's mating or territorial squabbles or fright rather than being full of the joys of spring. Try and imagine what our life is really like. Think how exhausted we get collecting material to build a nest, then finding enough food to feed a family – we can only survive a few hours without food, you know. And think how wary those



Photo: Internet

„Smothered in oil, we're suddenly visible“

blackbirds have to be with all your cats on the prowl.“

„Sounds dreadful...“

„Dreadful or not, it's how we live. But don't forget we also fly! You humans have always dreamt of flying. You made yourselves artificial wings, then machines to fly in, but you still envy us the freedom of the skies. And you lock us up in cages for revenge.“

„Look, I'm sorry but I'm a bit lost. You don't want me to portray you as victims but you tell me how hard your life is. You accuse me of being a romantic, then launch into a flight of fancy that wouldn't disgrace Shelley himself. Just what am I meant to write?“

The robin hopped a few paces along the branch, plucked furiously at a wing feather with its beak, then trained its bright black eyes on me again.

„Just make us visible, so humans will be aware of us and care about us. We're not saying you're hostile towards birds or actively wish us harm. But you let things happen to us because you don't care enough. Look, what you write is up to you. There are as many realities as there are birds: it's not the same being a robin as being a sparrow hawk or a seagull. I can tell you about my life but you'll have to ask the others about theirs. All we're really asking is that you take an interest in your fellow creatures. That you care. Is that so difficult?“

A tiny rush of wings and the branch was empty.