

IN A WINTER RAIN

By Michael Ventura

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Once, for some minutes, the strangest dove walked to and fro on my window's ledge. The back of the creature's skull was caved in. A gray crust had formed over the breakage. It seemed to do all right without half its brain. I thought of that poem by D.H. Lawrence: "I never saw a wild thing/sorry for itself./A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough/without ever having felt sorry for itself. "

Like the sparrow I found dead in my room. I'd been gone for weeks, all the windows are screened – but there it was, wings folded neatly, in a dignified way, on the floor in the corner. It's eye jellies had dried out. I'm not paranoid enough to think anyone was hexing me, though such things happen; I just couldn't figure out how it got in, not till a friend noticed that one window didn't close well at the top where the screen is broken. Did the sparrow think this opening some sort of crevice in which it could nest, only to find itself trapped in a skylless place? Mistakes about where one should nest often destroy people – why not birds?

Do you wonder where birds go to die? There are countless birds in this city, but you rarely see one dead. I have the image of lone sparrows and pigeons suddenly and almost magically found dead in the rooms of people living alone.

Some of us are less lonely, living alone, that we've ever been while living with others – or at least more sane, which perhaps amounts to the same thing. This took me a long time to learn, but now I spend most of my days working in this room-and-a-half apartment with its wide view of the city. I'd feel lost in a bigger space, or a newer building. This genteel-seedy brick place with its art-deco front is at least half a century old, and its housed many not unlike me, people who never intended to stay in this town, yet stay and stay until one odd day you realize you aren't ever going home, because you *are* home; this strange and driven city somehow has become your home. (You may one day go *back*, but going back isn't the same as going home.)

But I wonder, seriously, if I could make it through my week without the birds. They have become part of my community, part of the population of my L.A. Some in my circle live in rooms and houses, while some live in trees and on ledges. That seems as it should be. Some write, some act, some waitress, and some fly – and that, too, is as it should be. I don't know the ones that fly as I know, or think I know, the others, but I have come to depend on their grace. I often get up from my writing table to watch them; in fact my day begins with them.

With one: an owl. They say owls hoot, but most don't; this one, which I hear every morning but have never seen, sings three round notes as though from the lower register of a clarinet – sings them over and over, in a tone both soft and penetrating, beginning when darkness has lightened just a shade and ending before full sunrise. Later, a mourning dove takes up a similar call. By then sparrows have begun their friskier chirping and cheeping. Some mornings the crows join in.

The crows live, or at least hang out, in two large trees down the street. Some days, for reasons only crows would know, they get agitated beyond endurance. "Caw" is a good word for their cry, or would be if you could whine it through your nose at screech pitch, but there are no good words for 20 or 30 crows wildly cawing at once. Their din frightens me; it's such a primitive sound of anger and alarm – as though the panic we all share is suddenly being broadcast from a tree.

At full light the pigeons appear from wherever they spend their nights, circling in their dozens, all tilting at the same signal, flashing with the sun as they bank, then taking to the wires and the rooftops. They perch on the ledge above me; often I'll hear a rush of wings as they settle or take flight. And sometimes, many, many, will swoop suddenly straight at my third-story window – that moment of pure glide when, motionless, they float toward me is glorious.

You wouldn't think that hummingbirds could live here, but they do, many of them. They show themselves in the heat of the day or early evening, and no matter how often I see them I'm surprised that anything that delicate can survive on its own among us. Or sometimes I'll see a sparrow fighting a crow, flying just above it, cheeping with unmistakable anger, pecking the crow's back. Or two sparrows, or two pigeons, chasing each other high up, startling one another with wonderful sharp dives. Or the pigeons will make love on the wires. I watched one male try to mount a female for nearly half an hour, while she hopped aside, flew away, flew back, shook him off, then, at last, remained still for him. They coupled for some moments, just barely keeping balanced on that wire, and then he flew the loveliest gliding circle around her – a sweet gesture that looked more like love than most human behavior after the same act.

The presence of rain means also the absence of birds. They disappear. Where, I don't know, but watching then (for I can't see people from my window, only some rooftops and wires and trees) has been teaching me, of the "animalness" of life. I've been seeing even the sunlight as a kind of animal, with its own hunger and moods and behavior. So now the slow, long rain seems animallike too, a being pressing on the city, gentle, huge, somber. But its continuous pour has the odd effect of making our human sounds inside the building echo more.

We humans here know so many little things about each other, though we hardly know one another's names. The girl upstairs, I know her footstep – and a footstep is an intimate thing to know about someone. The person downstairs knows mine. I know when my neighbor upstairs wakes, turns on the TV, flushes the toilet, is in a hurry, has a bad night – and I'm known in the same way to the people below me. The rain encloses us in these knowledges, these sounds.

Last week, when I walked in the rain, I felt the birds sheltering in the leafy trees on this Raymond Chandler-era street – and felt the contrast between these wild things, taking care of themselves against all odds, and West Hollywood's dogs. Most are tiny and fussy and bark with high squeaks, strutting around on leashes held by every manner of man and woman, every morning and evening – a pitiful procession of animals bred such that now they could not possibly survive on their own. Little dependences dropping numberless turds. On the sidewalk. On the grasses. A street of shit. Or trickles of urine from various ledges, posts and steps.

Down the block a gorgeous woman of perhaps 50, clearly a stunner all her life to be so stunning even now, walks one of the few West Hollywood dogs that *looks* like a dog, that might compete with a country dog. He leaves his trickle of urine across the sidewalk in the same place every morning, where, every morning, I step over it. It is odd to associate such a lovely woman with a trickle of urine.

You can convince yourself you love *anything* you need. We humans are like that, so those fussy, wee dogs must be loved. Because in these rooms many are lonely, and the lonely are often afraid. The dogs comfort. Thus loneliness and fear in small rooms translates to feces on the street – all shapes and sizes of turds, up and down the block, all shapes and sizes of fear and loneliness. With the rains, the street smelled sweet for the first time since May.

During pauses in the downpour, out crawled the snails. How can anything as vulnerable as a snail survive in this town? Yet they do. (Vulnerability isn't as vulnerable as it appears.) And on this particular street there's even a man who walks a pig. Pigs have the most self-satisfied

strut on the planet, and when you see this pig you realize that all those fussy little hounds are imitating *it*. While the birds look down – and the cats, who share a certain grace and dignity with them, look craftily up.

And to have chosen this writer's life, chosen it long ago . . . how it takes you from one small room to another, one concentrated space to another, where words come or not, find their subject or not, are published or not, are read or not, you go back and back to that tense, concentrated space, in whatever small room (and the rooms are always small, no matter how big the house) in which you can manage to create and keep that concentration . . . a room you go back to because there is something in the *mood* of writing, the mood of the act of writing, that is not unlike being indoors during a long, slow rain. Or a steady wind. Or the sort of snow that floats straight down. There is something in the mood of the act of writing prose that is like being indoors during harsh but beautiful weather, larger than you, uncontrollable, which will come at you, pass and return.

The writing of scripts and poems is very different, is nothing like the *flow* of prose, a flow that the writer tries to find and join and become one with. Prose has its rhythms, its rushes, its lulls, stops, refrains, ends, and those small silences that can occur within a sentence, hardly noticed, but powerful and sweet. And all this makes prose a natural thing, like a rain.

So the rain reminds you why you wedded yourself to the task of writing prose, long ago. The rain takes you back past the deadlines and the subjects you didn't really want to write about, and the muddy work done hung over or distracted or depressed or exhausted, and the earning-a-living article where the best you could be was crisp and clear, and you were lucky to be that . . . all that invokes nothing of the richness that *is* prose, prose instead of "writing," prose instead of "journalism," prose where the language that has come to you from so many sources over the centuries *instructs you* as you write it, teaches you its ways, the language guiding you to passageways you couldn't have guessed at, leading you to your own deeper spirit and propelling you more forcefully into your time.

Giving you something, in the end, that is more than you. You, who are only someone enthralled by birds. Only something in the rain.

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