

A TASTE OF FEAR

Joining a national lockdown, an author connects with anxieties that those on the margins face all the time.

Birds don't heed the headlines and thus avoid the onslaught of troubling news. When I need a break from that onslaught, especially now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of reading the news, I watch birds.

It's mid-April, three weeks since our governor here in Indiana, aiming to slow the spread of the coronavirus, issued a stay-at-home order. Fortunately, decrees against social gatherings do not apply to birds, which keep flocking to our feeders. In addition to the species we see year-round, in spring we also see migrants—the feathered kinds that don't need permission to cross borders. This morning at breakfast, my wife, Ruth, and I were gazing out the window at the white blossoms on our pie-cherry tree when a woodpecker glided in and settled on the trunk. Not one of the regular visitors, it was a yellow-bellied sapsucker, a bird that nests in forests rather than city backyards. So here was a traveler, stopping over on the way from southern wintering grounds to breeding grounds up north.

When I was a boy, too young and churchy to swear, this bird's name came in handy for taunting friends, as in, "You're a yellow-bellied sapsucker!" The name sounds comical, but the bird is dignified and handsome: an inch or two shorter than a robin, slenderly built, with black wings and white shoulder patches, a black-and-white streaked face, a yellowish belly, and a red cap. The males, like the one in our cherry tree, are distinguished by a rosy red throat.

Our migrant gripped the trunk and made no move to probe for insects or hammer the bark in search of sap. He lifted his bill a couple of times, exposing his colorful bib—a display he will use on the breeding grounds to court females—and then he grew still, oblivious to the dozen or so other birds that swirled around him as they nibbled suet and sunflower seeds. Even the blustery gang of starlings and grackles, swooping in like pirates, didn't faze him. He ignored the feeders and water cups. Gusts of wind set the branches swaying and ruffled the feathers on his back, yet he did not stir.

"Do you think he's sick?" Ruth asked.

"I think he's tired," I said.

"But why would he be tired so early in the day?"

"If he flew up here from the South last night, he must have skirted tornados and fought headwinds the whole way."

The bird seemed bone-weary to me. Of course, I might have been projecting. Quarantined at home due to the pandemic, while every flower and bush and tree surged with spring, I was spending most afternoons working in the yard, mulching and weeding, caging plants with wire fencing to protect them from rabbits and deer, forking up the soil in our garden, turning the compost. All my joints ached.

Every other bird near the feeders was jittery, watchful, head swiveling to scan for danger. Any slight movement or noise sent them flying. After a brief spell, they would return to the feeders, only to whirl away at the next hint of trouble. But through all the ruckus, the sapsucker never shifted position on the cherry tree, never glanced around, never so much as widened his half-shut eye. Whatever the cause of his stillness, it was strange behavior for a creature that might fall prey to our local Cooper's hawk or the neighbors' prowling cats.

The sapsucker's lack of caution, in contrast with the vigilance of the other birds, set me thinking about how little wariness I feel in ordinary circumstances, and how much more stressful life must be for those who live with a constant sense of danger. I think of homeless people, never wholly safe whether sleeping on the street or in a shelter. I think of children in households with an alcoholic father, a drug-addicted mother, a lecherous uncle. I think of women living with violent men, women pregnant with no one to help them care for a child. I think of men laid off from work and unable to find another job, while bills pile up and the rent falls due. I think of civilians trapped in war zones with nowhere to flee, refugees jammed in holding pens at the border. I think of old people living in rough neighborhoods, teenagers menaced by

gangs, sick people lacking health insurance, the migrants, the hungry, the poor.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given me a taste — and only a taste — of what such lives might feel like. Suddenly, the world is filled with hazards. Any person whom Ruth and I encounter might carry the coronavirus, and so might the newspaper, the mail, or a still-warm loaf of bread wrapped in a dish towel and left on the porch by a friend. In any crowd, the virus might reach us by way of a cough, a sneeze, or a boisterous laugh. A handshake or a hug might prove risky, even fatal. So we keep to the house and yard during the day, then in the evenings, wearing masks that Ruth has sewn, we walk in the nearby park or along eerily deserted streets. When other walkers approach, we change course to keep a safe distance from them, or they steer clear of us, and in passing we nod across the open space to acknowledge our shared caution.

Such swerving to avoid oncoming strangers is new for me, a straight, white, middle-class male, living in a safe neighborhood in a small midwestern city. It is not new for Ruth, who tells me that when walking alone, especially at night on her way to the car from an errand or event, she has often crossed the street or skirted the edge of a parking lot to avoid encountering a lone man. An African American friend tells me he has always felt wary in all-white neighborhoods, but now, because of the virus, he also feels wary in Black neighborhoods. A lesbian friend, ever alert to potential hostility outside the gay community, tells me she no longer feels safe to mix even within that community.

Although anyone can succumb to COVID-19, including newborns and teenagers and people in the prime of life, the coronavirus does not erase all privilege. My gender, the pale cast of my skin, my education and relative financial security still ease my way in the world. Except for gender, Ruth enjoys the same advantages. Despite our greater vulnerability due to age, we are more secure than most of our fellow Americans. Since we're retired, we needn't worry about losing jobs. We can rely on pensions, insurance, Medicare and Social Security benefits, and savings accounts. We own our house and car. Our daughter lives with her family a few doors away, and she checks in on us, as do neighbors and friends. There is a first-class hospital nearby.

While the coronavirus places everyone at risk, early reports show that those in the US most endangered by the pandemic are residents of nursing homes, soldiers in camp and sailors at sea, Native Americans on reservations, African Americans and other people of color, inmates in jails and prisons, minimum-

wage and migrant workers, the homeless, and the uninsured. Aside from the elderly, who are in greater jeopardy because the human immune system weakens with age, those most endangered now are the people in our society who are most vulnerable in ordinary times. The pandemic simply makes these pre-existing inequities glaringly obvious.

The birds at our feeders can swiftly scatter at any sign of threat. For humans it is not so easy to escape the menace of poverty, prejudice, or pollution, of genocide or war, or of drought, floods, wildfire, and other natural disasters intensified by global heating. If no other good emerges from the pandemic, which has given all of us a taste of fear, perhaps it will increase our compassion for people who are trapped in a constant state of danger, and who cannot escape without our help.

After the sapsucker landed in the pie-cherry tree, Ruth and I checked on him occasionally that morning, and he hadn't budged. Then along in the afternoon, while on my way to make a cup of tea, I glanced out the dining room window and saw him perched on the suet feeder, avidly pecking. My approach startled him, and he rocketed away. Evidently he had recouped enough energy to resume his journey north toward the breeding grounds, where, we hoped, he might win a mate by flashing his bright red throat.



**SCOTT
RUSSELL
SANDERS** lives

and writes in
Bloomington,
Indiana, where he

retired as Distinguished Professor of
English at Indiana University. His latest
book is *The Way of Imagination*, a
collection of essays.

