

ENCOUNTER - Modalities of the Robin

Many Worlds: a Logic of Re-Enchantment

From the beginning of my grief story, encounters with robins were common. This was likely due, first, to their prevalence and relative fearlessness in encountering humans; and second, to an increased tendency to notice and attribute meaning to them based on the metonymic associations humans have imposed upon the robin—from the onset of spring and new beginnings to messengers from loved ones who have passed on. This cultural signification sets robins apart in human perceptual attention, and during my early grief period I found great comfort in their presence. I experienced them as simultaneously inhabiting multiple worlds, and as vehicles for feeling closeness to my mother.

Of course, it is precisely this kind of anthropocentric adoption of other species to serve human needs that my project ultimately aspires to move beyond. Still, not unlike the way ‘goblin hunts’ functioned as a strategic anthropomorphism-against-anthropocentrism, exploring the concept of the robin as ‘spanning’ worlds or realities eventually became a particular point of ecocentric meditation.

It began one afternoon in my garden at Jammu, as I was burying a fox I had found on the side of the road. I dug the hole and placed the fox, then began to take some artistic and archival photographs.

A journal entry from 06/12/2021 reads:

“As I fiddled with my lens, something moved, sleight and quick to my left. Here was curious robin. I should have known. She hopped and fluttered danced around us in circles, moving now closer, now farther away, now flying back to her branches.”

I had witnessed this kind of behavior once before in Glastonbury after an arduous rescue of a sheep from some nasty brambles. After, I’d continue on my usual path to visit the ancient Oaks, Gog and Magog. There, I was greeted by robin. The bird seemed to pay me total attention, hopping around me in circles, always widdershins (counter-clockwise). That day, I was allowed within a foot of the bird. They say robins are messengers from the other side, and I have often been comforted by the thought of a manifestation or messenger of Mom. A spirit from the land of the dead. Or, I thought to myself, was this messenger from the sheep?

Bringing a word of thanks. Imagine robins as agents of the woodland network, bridging wild and the human realms. In a way, it was all of these things. All andnone. It was just a bird. Later that month, I would encounter a robin at the same site, who would land in the palm of my hand to eat sunflower seeds.

But now, at the fox grave, I noticed something new. The robin, while certainly curious enough, was more interested in the freshly dug clumps of dirt. There, she pecked and poked for morsels. Tiny bugs? Fresh roots? Bits of fungi? It suddenly occurred to me that this might be the reason robins have so often been associated with death. They are brave and curious creatures, and they clearly enjoy a fresh feast out of upturned soil. Might robins have been showing up at burial buffets for centuries? Did this produce an enduring metonym that gradually embedded itself in folklore? And if so, does it explain away the notion of robins as messengers from beyond the veil?

But why does it have to be one or the other? We so often expected to choose *between* explanations, judging one “right” and discarding the others. What if both stories simultaneously expressed facets of truth? Complex phenomenon rarely emerges from a solitary or isolated cause. Bio-organic life is a many-faceted thing, and the presence of a naturalistic correlation (hunger and opportunity in this case) does not automatically rule out the parallel possibility that robins *are* in fact an integral part of some multi-dimensional telecommunication network. Certainly the robin functions as a messenger to the grief-affected individual—even if that message is purely reflexive. At the same time, the bird is *hungry*. Is there a sense in which the “spiritual” aspect catches a ride on physical impulse, or alternatively that the impulse itself is driven by an invisible nudge? The Deleuzian concept of assemblage is more than a collection of different materialities in arrangement, and it is energised by underlying desires, and the ways desires in assemblages negotiate complex interactions. Neither the desire of the robin for food or the desire of a grieving human for solace exists in a vacuum.

Engagement as a facet of practice recognises such points of intersection as a means of undermining the structural limitations imposed on how we relate to and commune with non-human species. But what if there is another path between and beyond *symbolic representation* and *data extraction*? And what affordances might such a path offer for broadening and deepening our ecological perspectives and relations?

From the same journal entry as above:

“In 1864, James Clerk Maxwell formulated the concept of light as an electromagnetic wave consist of an oscillating in two fields, electric and magnetic. These waves propagate perpendicular to one another (orthogonality), and the resulting electromagnetic wavemoves perpendicular to both. These entangled phenomenon compose what we call light. Their unity and orthogonality means that in

some sense they maintain stability through simultaneous convergence and divergence. One dimension apart, the oscillations still intersect at an instant, and that instant is light.

What if the causal threads of mystic lore stitch intersections out of divergent dimensions through an orthogonality of their own—the naturalistic in symbiosis with the spiritual? Two worlds that are so often in modernist societies decried as incompatible, could be theorised as bound together in collaboration, converging along traces of our consciousness, stitching into one another's flow. Algae and the fungi combine into lichen, something entirely other than the sum of its parts. The virus and the cell have coevolved for millions of years, creating themselves and each other out of the negative space carved along shared and turbulent boundaries. Deleuzian assemblage relies on material and desiring dimensions. *Lykke's miraculous assemblages function at intersections between material entities and metonymical associations* **[added later]**. As entangled as the wasp and the orchid, as mind and matter, as opacity and shadow.

As I write, I can look out my window onto the garden and see three stones set upon sionnach's grave. A meter away is a fence and just over the fence is a slope leading through ash, holly, and hawthorn to a stone as big as a whale and shaped the same. There lies Goblinwoode and a willow tree I've populated with skulls. Perhaps by midsummer, the flesh will have eaten away to make a skeleton of sionnach. Then it can join the sheep in their branches. My mother's branches, really. Her tree. I'm certain it's her. No doubt, too, it's just a willow. Mom liked to wander the hills and sage, collecting bones. A deer skull with antlers would be grand prize. One of my oldest remaining photos shows the two of us side-by-side holding up an anatomy coloring book. Three angles on a human skull. I can't be older than six. Together we bear our teeth, emulating the image on the page. Teeth are just bone. We are one with this photo, and she is still with me now. She is gone forever. Both of these truths weave themselves into an instant, and the instants weave from word to word.

The first drops of rain came down as I was covering the mound with stones. The sun set soon after. A fierce breeze kicked into motion. It was a cyclone, they said, pushing in from the North Atlantic. Twenty hours of swirling cries, creaking trees, rattling windows and tumbling patio furniture. A message from the earth I lack the codes to translate. There's this notion of Åsgårdsreia, or Oskoreia, which crossed my radar just last week. Norwegian lore in which a procession of trolls, ghosts, tussers and more tromp across the sky. This is supposed to take place on the night of December 12th. Our storm hit on the 7th. Don't go outside, they say, or you might be swept up and carried off. Spirited away, is how they put it Japan, where the hyakki yagyō, night parade of a hundred demons, also owns the streets but once a year, locking sensible people inside. Here, the bay has flooded into the main road and they've closed the bridge leading to town. I am warm inside with my little projects and music and housework and stories. With this bit of translation. The fox in hisden.

Robins wherever they go for shelter, or do they alone leap into the fray, join the parade, and whirl back to distant shores to bring back news in grains of earth?"

I include this extended entry because it provided much of the source material for the flash fiction piece included in the Research Catalogue exhibit, titled '*6. Fox*' or '*Fox Funeral*', one example from a series of vignettes produced from the experiences of my practice. It is also a segment indicative of a "logic of re-enchantment", this entry's subtitle. I present all of these here as a mishmash of practice, fiction, ecology, and philosophy—disciplines (re)wilded by this project and allowed to interact with one another for the generation of novel (unplanned for) artworks and ideas.