APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

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It may be criminal, cruel and unpalatable, but poached warbler is still very much on the national menu of Cyprus, where millions of songbirds are trapped each year to feed a lucrative market.

The south-eastern corner of the Republic of Cyprus has been heavily developed for foreign tourism in recent years.
Large medium-rise hotels, specializing in day packages for Germans and Russians, ok beaches occupied by sun beds and umbrellas in orderly ranks, and the Mediterranean is nothing if not extremely blue. You can spend a very pleasant week here, driving the modern roads and drinking the good local beer, without suspecting that the area harbours the most intensive songbird-killing operations in Europe.
On the last day of April, I went to the prospering tourist town of Protaras to meet four members of a German bird-protection organisation, the Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS), that runs seasonal volunteer `camps' in Mediterranean countries. Because the peak season for songbird trapping in Cyprus is autumn, when southbound migrants are loaded up with fat from a northern summer's feasting, I was worried that we might not see any action, but the first orchard we walked into by the side of a busy road, was full of lime sticks: straight switches, about 80cm long, that are coated with the gluey gum of the Syrian plum and deployed artfully, to provide inviting perches, in the branches of low trees. The CABS team, which was led by a skinny, full-bearded young Italian named Andrea Rutigliano, fanned into the orchard, taking down the sticks, rubbing them in dirt to neutralise the glue, and breaking them in half. All the sticks had feathers on them. In a lemon tree, we found a male collared flycatcher hanging upside down like a piece of animal fruit, its tail and its legs and its black-and-white wings stuck in glue. While it twitched and futilely turned its head, Rutigliano videoed it from multiple angles, and an older Italian volunteer, Dino Mensi, took still photographs. `The photos are important,' said Alex Heyd a sober-faced German who is the organisation's general secretary, `because you win the war in the newspapers, not in the field.'
In hot sunshine, the two Italians worked together to free the flycatcher, gently liberating individual feathers, applying squirts of diluted soap to soften the resistant gum, and wincing when a feather was lost. Rutigliano then carefully groomed gum from the the bird's tiny feet. `You have to get every bit of lime off,' he said. `The first year I was doing this, I left a bit on the foot of one bird and saw it fly and he got stuck again. I had to climb the tree.' Rutigliano put the flycatcher in my hands, I opened them, and it flew off

low through the orchard, resuming its northward journey.

We were surrounded by traffic noise, melon Crisfield's, housing developments, hotel complexes. David Conlin, a beefy British Army veteran, threw a bundle of disabled sticks into some weeds and said, `It's shocking - that you can stop anywhere around here and find these.' I watched Rutigliano and Mensi work to free a second bird, a wood warbler, a lovely yellow-throated thing. It felt wrong to be seeing at such close range a species that ordinarily requires careful work with binoculars to get a decent view of. It felt literally disenchanting. I wanted to say to the wood warbler what St Francis of Assisi is said to have said when he saw a captured wild animal: `Why did you let yourself be caught?'

As we were leaving the orchard, Rutigliano suggested that Heyd turn his CABS T-shirt inside out, so that we would look more like ordinary tourists taking a walk. In Cyprus, it's permissible to enter any private land that isn't fenced, and all forms of songbird trapping have been criminal offences since 1974, but what we were doing still felt to me high-handed and possibly dangerous. The team, in its black and drab clothing, looked more like commandos than like tourists. A local woman, perhaps the orchard's owner, watched without expression as we headed inland on a dirt lane. Then a man in a pickup truck passed us, and the team, fearing that he might be going ahead to take down lime sticks, followed him at a trot.

In the man's backyard, we found two pairs of 20ft-long metal pipes propped up in parallel on lawn chairs: a small-scale lime-stick factory of the sort that can provide good income for the mostly older Cypriot men who know the trade. `He's manufacturing them and keeping a few for himself,' Rutigliano said. He and the others strolled brazenly around the man's chicken coop and rabbit cages, taking down a few empty sticks and laying them on the pipes. We then trespassed up a hillside and back down into an orchard. Criss-crossed by irrigation hoses and full of trapped birds. *'Questo giardino é un disastro!'* said Mensi, who spoke only Italian.

A female blackcap had torn most of its tail off and was stuck not only by both legs and both wings but also by the bill, which sprang open as soon as ' Rutigliano unglued it; it began to cry out furiously. ' When the bird was freed altogether, he squirted a little water

in its mouth and set it on the ground. It fell forward and flopped piteously, pushing its head into the mud. `It's been hanging so long that its leg muscles are overstretched,' he said. `We'll keep it tonight, and it can fly tomorrow.' `Even without a tail?' I said. `Certainly' He scooped up the bird and stowed it in an outer pocket of his backpack.

Blackcaps are one of Europe's most common warblers and the traditional national delicacy of Cyprus, where they're known as *ambelopoulia.* They are the main target of Cypriot trappers, but the by-catch of other species is enormous: rare shrikes, other warblers, larger birds like cuckoos and golden orioles, even small owls and hawks. Stuck in lime in the second orchard were five collared flycatchers, a house sparrow and a spotted flycatcher (formerly widespread, now becoming rare in much of northern Europe), as well as three more blackcaps. After the team members had sent them on their way, they wrangled about the tally of lime sticks at the site and settled on a figure of 59.

A little farther inland, in a dry and weedy grove with a view of the blue sea and the golden arches of a new McDonald's, we found one active lime stick with one living bird hanging from it. The bird was a thrush nightingale, a grey-plumaged species that I had seen only once before. It was deeply tangled in lime and had broken a wing. `The break is between two bones, so it cannot recover, Rutigliano said, palpating the joint through feathers. `Unfortunately, we need to kill this bird.' It seemed likely that the thrush nightingale had been caught on a stick overlooked by a trapper who had taken down his other sticks that morning. While Heyd and Conlin discussed whether to get up before dawn the next day and try to `ambush' the trapper, Rutigliano stroked the head of the rush nightingale. `He's so beautiful,' he said, like a little boy. `I can't kill him.'

`What should we do?' He said.

`Maybe give him a chance to hop around on the ground and die on his own.'

`I don't think there's a good chance for it,' He said.

Rutigliano put the bird on the ground and watched as it scurried, looking more mouse like than birdlike, under a small thornbush. `Maybe in a few hours he can walk better,' he said, realistically.

`Do you want me to make the decision?' He said.

Rutigliano, without answering, wandered up the hill and out of sight.

`Where did it go?' He asked me.

I pointed at the shrub. He reached into it from two sides, captured the bird, held it gently in his hands, and looked up at me and Conlin. Are we agreed?' he said, in German.

I nodded, and with a twist of his wrist he tore the bird's head off.

The sun had expanded its reach across the entire sky, killing its blue with whiteness. As we scouted for an approach from which to ambush the grove, it was already hard to say how many hours we'd been walking. Every time we saw a Cypriot in a truck or a field, we had to duck down and back-track over rocks and trouser-piercing thistles, for fear that somebody would alert the owner of the trapping site. There was nothing larger at stake here than a few songbirds, there were no land mines on the hillside, and yet the blazing stillness had a flavour of wartime menace.

Lime-stick trapping has been traditional and widespread in Cyprus since at least the 16th century. Migratory birds were important seasonal source of protein in the countryside, and older Cypriots today remember being told by their mothers to go out to the garden and catch some dinner. In more recent decades, *ambelopoulia* became popular with affluent, urbanised Cypriots as a kind of nostalgic treat - you might bring a friend a jar of pickled birds as a house gift, or you might order a platter of them fried in a restaurant for a special occasion. By the mid-1990s, two decades after the country had outlawed all forms of bird trapping, as many as 10 million songbirds a year were being killed. To meet the restaurant demand, traditional lime-stick trapping had been augmented by large-scale netting operations, and the Cypriot government, which was trying to clean up its act and win membership to the EU, cracked down hard on the netters. By 2006, the annual take had fallen to around a million.

In the past few years, however, with Cyprus w comfortably ensconced in the EU, signs advertising illicit *ambelopoulia* have begun to reappear in restaurants, and the number of active trapping sites is rising. The Cypriot hunting lobby, which represents the republic's 50,000 hunters, is this year supporting two parliamentary proposals to relax antipoaching laws. One would reduce lime-stick use to a misdemeanor; the other would decriminalise the use of electronic recordings to attract birds. Opinion polls show that, while most Cypriots disapprove of bird trapping, most also don't think it's a serious issue, and that many enjoy eating *ambelopoulia.* When the country's Game Fund organised raids on restaurants serving the birds, the media coverage was roundly negative, leading with an

account of food being pulled from the hands of a pregnant female diner.

`Food is sacred here,' said Martin Hellicar, the campaigns manager of BirdLife Cyprus, a local organisation more averse to provocation than CABS is. `I don't think you'll ever get someone convicted for eating these things.'

Hellicar and I had spent a day touring netting sites in the country's south-east corner. Any small olive grove can be used for netting, but the really big sites are in plantations of acacia, an alien species there's no reason to irrigate if you're not trapping birds. We saw these plantations everywhere. Long runners of cheap carpeting are laid down between rows of acacias; hundreds of yards of nearly invisible `mist' nets are strung from poles that are typically anchored in old car tyres filled with concrete; and then, in the night, birdsong is played at high volume to lure migrants to rest in the lush acacias. In the morning, at first light, the poachers throw handfuls of pebbles to startle the birds into the nets. (A telltale sign of trapping is a mound of these pebbles dumped by the side of the road.) Since it's a superstition among poachers that letting birds go free ruins a site, the unmarketable species are torn up and dropped on the ground or left to die in the nets. The marketable birds can fetch up to €5 apiece, and a well-run site can yield a thousand birds or more a day.

The worst area in Cyprus for poaching is the British military base on Cape Pyla. The British may be the bird-lovingness people in Europe, but the base, which leases its extensive firing ranges to Cypriot farmers, is in a delicate position diplomatically; after one recent enforcement sweep by the Army, 22 SOVEREIGN BASE AREA signs were torn down by angry locals. Off the base, enforcement is hampered by logistics and politics. Poachers employ lookouts and night guards and have learnt to erect little shacks on their sites, because Game Fund officers are required to get a warrant to search any `domicile', and in the time it takes to do this the poachers can take down their nets and hide their electronic equipment. Because large-scale poachers are nowadays straight-up criminals, the officers are also afraid of violent attacks. `The biggest problem is that no one in Cyprus, not even the politicians, comes out and says that eating *ambelopoulia* is wrong,' the director of the Game Fund, Pantelis Hadjigerou, told me. Indeed, the record-holder for most *ambelopoulia* eaten in one sitting (54) was a popular politician in north

Cyprus.

`Our ideal would be to find a well-known personality to come out and say, "I don't eat *ambelopoulia,* it's wrong,"' the director of BirdLife Cyprus, Clairie Papazoglou, said to me. `But there's a little pact here that says that if anything bad happens it has to stay on the island, we can't look bad to the outside world.'

`Before Cyprus joined the EU,' Hellicar said, `the trappers said, we'll pull back for a while. Now, for 18- and 19-year-olds, there's a kind of patriotic machismo to poaching. It's a symbol of resistance to Big Brother EU.'

What seemed Orwellian to me was Cyprus's internal politics. It's been 36 years since Turkey occupied the northern part of the island, and the ethnically Greek south has prospered immensely since then, but the national news is still dominated, seven days a week, by the Cyprus Problem. `Every other issue is swept under the carpet, everything else is insignificant,' the Cypriot social anthropologist Yiannis Papadakis told me. `They say, "How dare you take us to European Court for something as stupid as birds? We're taking Turkey to court!" There was never any serious debate about joining the EU - it was simply the means by which we were going to solve the Cyprus Problem.'

The EU's most powerful instrument of conservation is its landmark Birds Directive, which was issued in 1979 and requires member states to protect all European bird species and preserve sufficient habitat for them. Since joining the EU, in 2004, Cyprus has received repeated warnings from the European Commission for infringement of the directive, but it has so far avoided judgments and fines; if a member state's environmental laws accord on paper with the directive, the commission is reluctant to interfere with sovereign enforcement.

Cyprus's nominally Communist ruling party ardently embraces private development. The tourism ministry is touting plans to build 14 new residential golf complexes (the island currently has three), even though the country has very limited supplies of fresh water. Anyone who owns land reachable by road can build on it, and, as a result, the countryside is remarkably fragmented. I visited four of the south-east's most important nature preserves, all of them theoretically due special protection under EU regulations, and was uniformly depressed by their condition. The big seasonal lake at Paralimni, for example, near where I was patrolling with the CABS people, is a noisy dust bowl commandeered

for an illegal shooting range and an illegal motocross course, carpeted with shotgun shells and extensively littered with construction debris, discarded large appliances and household rubbish.

And yet birds still come to Cyprus; they have no choice. Returning to town at some less white-skied hour, the CABS patrol stopped to admire a black-headed bunting, a jewel of gold and black and chestnut, that was singing from the top of a bush. For a moment, our tension abated and we were all just bird-watchers exclaiming in our native languages.

“ah, che bello!'

“Fantastic!'

“Unglaublich schón!'

Before we quit for the day, Rutigliano wanted to make one last stop, at an orchard where the previous year a CABS volunteer had been roughed up by trappers. As we were turning, in the team's rental car, off the main highway and up a dirt track, a red four-seater pickup truck was coming down the track, and its driver made a neck-slicing gesture at us. After the truck had moved on to the road, two of its passengers leant out of windows to give us the finger.

Heyd, the sober German, wanted to turn around and leave immediately, but the others argued that was no reason to think the men were coming back. We proceeded up to the orchard and found it hung with four collared flycatchers and one wood warbler, which, because it couldn't get airborne, Rutigliano gave to me to put in my back-pack. When all the lime sticks had been destroyed, He again, more nervously, suggested that we leave. But there was another grove in the distance h the two Italians wanted to investigate. `I don’t have a bad feeling,' Rutigliano said.

There's an English expression, "Don't press your luck",' Conlin said.

Ay that moment, the red pickup sped back into sight, 50 yards down the slope from us, and stopped with a lurch. Three men jumped out and began running towards us, picking up baseball-sized rocks and hurling them at us as they ran. I would have guessed that it was easy to dodge a few flying rocks, but it wasn't so easy, and Conlin and I were hit by them. Rutigliano was shooting video, Mensi was taking pictures and there was a lot of confused shouting -`Keep shooting, keep shooting!' `Call the police!' `What the hell is the number?' Mindful of the warbler in my backpack, and not eager to be mistaken for a

CABS member, I followed Heyd as he retreated up the slope. From a not very safe distance, we stopped and watched men attacking Mensi, trying to pull his back-pack from his shoulders and his camera from his hands. The men, who were in their thirties and deeply suntanned, were shouting, `Why do you do this? Why do you make photos?' Mensi, keening terribly, his muscles bulging, was clutching the camera to his stomach. The men picked him up, threw him down and fell on him; there ensued a blur of fighting. I couldn't see Rutigliano but later learnt that he was being hit in the face, knocked to the ground and kicked in the legs and the ribs. His video camera was smashed on a rock; Mensi was also hit in the head with it.

Conlin was standing amid the fray with formidable military bearing, holding two phones and trying to dial the police. He said to me, later, that he'd told the attackers that he would drag them through every court in the country if they touched him. Heyd had continued to retreat, which seemed to me a good idea. When I saw him look back and go pale and break into a dead run, I panicked, too.

Running from danger is like no other kind of running - it's hard to look where you're going. I jumped a stone fence and dashed through a field full of brambles, found myself stumbling into a ditch and getting hit in the chin by a piece of metal fencing and decided: that's enough of that. I was worried about the warbler I was carrying. I saw Heyd running on up through a large garden, speaking to a middle-aged man and then, looking frightened, continuing to run. I walked up to the garden's owner and tried to explain the situation, but he spoke only Greek. Seeming at once concerned and suspicious, he fetched his daughter, who was able to tell me, in English, that I'd blundered into the yard of the district director of Greenpeace. She gave me water and two plates of biscuits and told my story to her father, who responded with one angry word. `Barbarians!' the daughter translated.
Back down by the rental car, under clouds threatening rain, Mensi was touching his ribs gently and dabbing at the cuts and abrasions that covered his arms; both his camera and his backpack had been stolen. Conlin showed me the smashed video camera, and Rutigliano, who had lost his glasses and was limping heavily, confessed to me, with matter-of-fact fanaticism, `I wanted something like this to happen. Just not this bad.'

A second CABS team had arrived and was milling around with grim expressions. In its car was an empty wine box into which, as a police cruiser was pulling up, I was able to transfer the wood warbler, which was looking subdued but no worse for the wear. I would have felt better about its rescue had there not been, on my phone, a text from a Cypriot friend of mine, confirming our clandestine date to eat *ambelopoulia* the following night. I was managing to half-convince myself that I could simply be a good journalistic observer and not personally have to eat one; but it wasn't at all clear how I could avoid it.

Every spring, some five billion birds come flooding up from Africa to breed in Eurasia, and every year as many as a billion are killed deliberately by humans, most notably on the migratory flyways of the Mediterranean. As its waters are fished clean by trawlers with sonar and efficient nets, its skies are vacuumed clean of migrants by the extremely effective technology of birdsong recordings Since the 1970s, as a result of the Birds Directive and various other conservation treaties, the situation of some of the most endangered bird species has improved somewhat. But hunters throughout the Mediterranean are now seizing on this marginal improvement and pushing back. Cyprus recently experimented with a spring season on quail and turtledove; Malta, in April, opened its own spring season; and Italy's parliament, in May, passed a law that extends the autumn season there. While Europeans may think of themselves as models of environmental enlightenment - they certainly lecture the United States and China on carbon emissions as if they were - the populations of many resident and migratory birds in Europe have been collapsing alarmingly in the past 10 years. You don't have to be a bird-watcher to miss the calling of the cuckoo, the circling of lapwings over fields, the singing of corn buntings from telegraph poles. A world of birds already battered by habitat loss and intensive agriculture is being hastened towards extinction by hunters and trappers. Spring in the Old World is liable to fall silent far sooner than in the New.

The Republic of Malta is the most savagely bird-hostile place in Europe. There are 12,000 registered hunters (about three per cent of the country's population), a large number of whom consider it their birthright to shoot any bird unlucky enough to migrate over Malta, regardless of the season or the bird's protection status. The Maltese shoot bee-eaters, hoopoes, golden orioles, shearwaters, storks and herons. They stand outside

the fences of the airport and shoot swallows for target practice. They shoot from rooftops and from the side of busy roads. They stand in closely spaced cliffside bunkers and mow down flocks of migrating hawks. They shoot endangered raptors, such as lesser spotted eagles and pallid harriers, that other European governments spend millions of euros to conserve. Rarities are stuffed and added to trophy collections; non-rarities are left on the ground or buried under rocks, so as not to incriminate their shooters. When bird-watchers in Italy see a migrant that’s missing a chunk of its wing or its tail, they call it `Maltese plumage'.

Italy itself is a long, narrow gantlet for a winged migrant to run. Poachers in Brescia, in the north, trap a million songbirds annually for sale to restaurants offering *pulenta e osei* - polenta with little birds. The woods of Sardinia are full of wire snares, the Venetian wetlands are a slaughtering ground for wintering ducks, and Umbria, the home of St Francis, has more registered hunters per capita than any other region. Hunters in Tuscany pursue their quotas of woodcock and wood pigeon and four legally shootable songbirds, including song thrush and skylark; but at dawn, in the mist, it's hard to listinguish legal from illegal quarry, and who's keeping track anyway? To the south, in Campania, much of which is controlled by the Camorra (the local mafia), the most inviting habitat for migratory waterfowl and waders is in fields flooded by the Camorra and rented to hunters for up to €1,000 a day; songbird wholesalers from Brescia bring town refrigerated lorries to collect the take from small-time poachers; entire Campanian provinces are blanketed with traps for seven tuneful finch species, and flush Camorristi pay handsomely for well-trained singers at the illegal bird markets there. Farther south, in Calabria and Sicily, the highly publicised springtime hunting of migrating honey buzzards has been reduced by intensive law enforcement and volunteer monitoring, but Calabria, especially, is still full of poachers who, if they can get away with it, will shoot anything that flies.

In one of the southern provinces, I got to know an impishly boyish ex-poacher named Sergio. He'd been well into middle age before giving up poaching, feeling that he'd finally outgrown that stage of life, and he now tells stories of his `sins of youth' for comic effect. Going hunting at night was always illegal but never a problem, Sergio said, if your poaching companions were the parish priest and the brigadier of the local carabiniere.

The brigadier was especially helpful in discouraging forest rangers from patrolling in their neighbourhood. One night, when Sergio was out hunting with him, they froze a barn owl in the headlights of the brigadier's Jeep. The brigadier told Sergio to shoot it. When Sergio demurred, the brigadier took out a shovel, walked around behind the owl and whacked it on the head. Then he put it in the back of the Jeep.

`Why?' I asked Sergio. `Why did he want to kill the owl?' I

`Because we were poaching!' '

At the end of the night, when the brigadier opened the back, the owl, which had only been stunned, flew up and attacked him - Sergio spread his arms and made a ridiculously ferocious face to show me how.

For Sergio, the point of poaching had always been eating. He taught me a rhyme in his local dialect which approximately translates: for meat of the feather, eat a crow; for a heart that's kind, love a crone. `You can cook crow for six days, and it's still tough,' he told me. `But it's not bad in a broth.'

Italian hunters who, unlike Sergio, haven't outgrown the pursuit and who are frustrated by declining game populations and increasing state restrictions have learnt to go elsewhere in the Mediterranean for a thrill. On the Campanian coast, I spoke with a gap-toothed, gleefully unrepentant young-old poacher who, now that he can no longer set up a blind on the beach and shoot unlimited numbers of arriving migrants, contents himself with looking forward to holidays in Albania, where you can still shoot as much as you can find of whatever you want, whenever you want, for a very low fee. Although hunters from all nations go abroad, the Italians are widely considered to be the worst. The wealthiest of them go to Siberia to shoot woodcock during their springtime display flights, or to Egypt, where, I was told, you can hire a local police officer to fetch your kills while you shoot ibises and globally threatened duck species until your arms are tired; there are pictures on the internet of visiting hunters standing beside 3ft-high piles of bird carcases.

Like most Cypriot restaurants that serve *ambelopoulia,* the one I went to with a friend and a friend of his (I'll call them Takis and Demetrios) had a small private diningroom in which the little birds could be consumed discreetly. We walked through the main room, in which a TV was blaring one of the Brazilian soap operas that are popular in Cyprus,

and sat down to an onslaught of Cypriot specialities: smoked pork, fried cheese, pickled caper twigs, wild asparagus and mushrooms with eggs, wine-soaked sausage, couscous. The proprietor also brought us three fried song thrushes, which we hadn't asked for, and hovered by our table as if to make sure I ate mine. I thought of St Francis, who had set aside his sympathy for animals once a year, on Christmas, and eaten meat. I thought of a kid named Woody, who, on a backpacking trip I'd taken as a teenager, had given me a bite of fried robin. I thought of a prominent Italian conservationist who'd admitted to me that song thrushes are `bloody tasty'. The conservationist was right. The meat was dark and richly flavourful, and the bird was enough bigger than an *ambelopoulia* that I could think of it as ordinary restaurant food, more or less, and of myself as an ordinary consumer.

After the proprietor went away, I asked Takis and Demetrios what kind of Cypriots like to eat *ambelopoulia.*

`The people who do it a lot,' Demetrios said, `are the same ones who go to cabarets, the lounges where there's pole-dancing and Eastern European girls who make themselves available. In other words, people with not a high level of morality. Which is to say, most Cypriots. There's a saying here, "Whatever you can stuff your mouth with, whatever your ass can grab

'Le., because life is short,' Takis said.

`People come to Cyprus and think they're in a European country, because we belong to the EU,' Demetrios said. `In fact, we're a Middle Eastern country that's part of Europe by accident.'

The night before, at the Paralimni police station, I'd given a statement to a young detective who seemed to want me to say that the attackers of the CABS team had only been trying to get the team to stop taking pictures and video of them. `For people here,' the detective explained when we were done, `it's a tradition to trap birds, and you can't change that overnight. Trying to talk to them and explain why it's wrong is more helpful than the aggressive approach of CABS.' He may have been right, but I'd been hearing the same plea for patience all over the Mediterranean, and it was sounding to me like a version of modern consumerism's more general plea regarding nature: just wait until we've used up everything and then you nature-lovers can have what's left.

While Takis and Demetrios and I waited for the dozen *ambelopoulia* that were coming, we argued about who was going to eat them. `Maybe I'll take one small bite,' I said.

`I don't even like *ambelopoulia,'* Takis said.

`Neither do I,' Demetrios said.

`OK,' I said. `How about if I take two and you each take five?'

They shook their heads.

Dismayingly soon, the proprietor returned with a plate. In the room's harsh light, the *ambelopoulia* looked like a dozen little gleaming yellowish-grey turds. `You're the first American I've ever served,' ; the proprietor said. `I've had lots of Russians, but never an American.' I put one on my plate and the proprietor told me that eating it was the same as taking two Viagras.

When we were alone again, my field of vision shrank to a few inches, the way it had when I'd dissected a frog in ninth-grade biology. I made myself eat the two almond-size breast muscles, which were the only obvious meat; the rest was greasy cartilage and entrail and tiny bones. I couldn't tell if the meat's bitterness was real or the product of emotion, the killing of a blackcap's enchantment. Takis and Demetrios were making short work of their eight birds, taking clean bones from their mouths and exclaiming that *ambelopoulia* were much better than they remembered; were rather good, in fact. I destroyed a second bird and then, feeling somewhat sick, wrapped my remaining two in a paper napkin and put them in my pocket. The proprietor returned and asked if I'd enjoyed the birds.

`Mm!' I said.

`If you hadn't asked for them' - this in a regretful tone -`I think you really would have liked the lamb tonight.' i

I made no reply, but now, as if satisfied by my complicity, the proprietor became talkative: `Young kids today don't like to eat them. It used to start young and you'd get used to the taste. My toddler can eat 10 at a time.' Takis and Demetrios exchanged sceptical glances.

`It's a shame they've been outlawed,' the proprietor went on, `because they used to be a great tourist attraction. Now it's become almost like the drug trade. A dozen of them cost me €60. These damned foreigners come and take down the nets and destroy them, and

we've surrendered to them. Trapping *ambelopoulia* used to be one of the few ways people around here could make a good living.'

Outside, by the edge of the restaurant car-park, near some bushes in which I'd earlier heard *ambelopoulia* singing, I knelt down and scraped a hole in the dirt with my fingers. The world was feeling especially empty of meaning, and the best I could do to fight this feeling was to unwrap the two dead birds from the napkin, put them in the hole and tamp some dirt down on them. Then Takis led me to a nearby tavern with medium-sized birds grilling on charcoal outside. It was a sort of poor man's cabaret, and as soon as we'd ordered beers at the bar one of the hostesses, a heavy-legged blonde from Moldova, pulled up a stool behind us.

The blue of the Mediterranean isn't pretty to me any more. The clarity of its water, prized by holiday-makers, is the clarity of a sterile swimming-pool. There are few smells on its beaches, and few birds, and its depths are on their way to being empty; much of the fish now consumed in Europe comes illegally, no questions asked, from the ocean west of Africa. I look at the blue and see not a sea but a postcard, paper thin.

And yet it is the Mediterranean, specifically Italy, that gave us the poet Ovid, who in the *Metamorphoses* deplored the eating of animals, and the vegetarian Leonardo da Vinci, who envisioned a day when the life of an animal would be valued as highly as that of a person, and St Francis, who once petitioned the Holy Roman Emperor to scatter grain on fields on Christmas Day and give the crested larks a feast. For St Francis, the crested larks, whose drab brown plumage and peaked head feathers resemble the hooded brown robes of his Friars Minor, his Little Brothers, were a model for his order: wandering, as light as air, and saving up nothing, just gleaning their daily minimum of food and always singing, singing. He addressed them as his Sister Larks. Once, by the side of an Umbrian road, he preached to the local birds, which are said to have gathered around him quietly and listened with a look of understanding, and then chastised himself for not having thought to preach to them sooner. Another time, when he wanted to preach to human beings, a flock of swallows was chattering noisily, and he said to them, either angrily or politely - the sources are unclear - `Sister Swallows, you've had your say. Now be quiet and let me have my say.' According to the legend, the swallows immediately fell silent.

I visited the site of the Sermon to the Birds with a Franciscan friar, Guglielmo Spirito, who is also a passionate amateur Tolkien scholar. `Even as a child,' Guglielmo said, `I knew that if I ever joined the Church it would be as a Franciscan. The main thing that attracted me, when I was young, was his relationship with animals. To me the lesson of St Francis is the same as that of fairy tales: that oneness with nature is not only desirable but possible. He's an example of wholeness regained, wholeness actually within our reach.' There was no intimation of wholeness at the little shrine, across a busy road from a Vulcangas petrol station, that now commemorates the Sermon to the Birds; I could hear a few crows cawing and tits twittering, but mostly just the roar of passing cars and lorries and farm equipment. Back in Assisi, however, Guglielmo took me to two other Franciscan sites that felt more enchanted. One was the Sacred Hut, the crude stone building in which St Francis and his first followers had lived in voluntary poverty and invented a brotherhood. The other was the tiny chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, outside which, in the night, as St Francis lay dying, his sister larks are said to have circled and sung. Both structures are now entirely enclosed by later, larger, more ornate churches; one of the architects, some pragmatic Italian, had seen fit to plant a fat marble column in the middle of the Sacred Hut.

Nobody since Jesus has lived a life more radically in keeping with his gospel than St Francis did; and St Francis, unburdened by the weight of being the Messiah, went Jesus one better and extended his gospel to all creation. It seemed to me that if wild birds survive in modern Europe it will be in the manner of those ancient small Franciscan buildings, sheltered by the structures of a vain and powerful Church: as beloved exceptions to its rule.

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