FLANDERS LITERATURE

Reports from the Valley

A Nature Journal

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A Note To The Reader

My writing cabin is perched on a hillside. The large front window overlooks a sweeping valley with olive trees, the oldest of which – over a hundred years old, with their crooked trunks and fanned crowns – are randomly scattered around the plot, while the youngest are planted in tidy rows and are slowly but surely transforming the landscape into a uniform whole. Between the olive groves there are patches of wasteland and some fields, golden yellow in early spring, reddish and rusty the rest of the year. In the background, a greyish mountain range, reaching up to sixteen hundred metres, rises up above rolling hills. Its mountains bear names such as Chamizo, Peña Negra, Doña Ana, El Fraile and Tajo de Gómer.

To the bottom left of the valley is Loma León, a hamlet of several houses, including my own. Behind it towers up the Peña de Hierro, a mighty rock formation that seems to have been cast onto land like a shipwreck in severe weather before gradually becoming overgrown. This is the backdrop that, binoculars always to hand, I gaze out at during my writing hours, as I brood on the next word, a sentence, a turn in the story. There is always something to be seen – a swift whooshing past, a lizard warming its cold blood on a rock in the sun, a farmer ploughing, larks plummeting, a very still praying mantis waiting for prey before outwitting an inattentive fly nine Hail Marys and a Lord's Prayer later; the shadow of a cloud gliding over the landscape, a wasp crafting a nest made of paper, a short-toed snake eagle soaring overhead, an agave blossoming after years, an old man looking for wild asparagus, poking about the bushes like a tramp in a rubbish bin, a sparrow feeding its newly-fledged young – and even if nothing happens, there's still the panorama that tempts my gaze to rove, far into the distance until a word or plot turn reveals itself to me and I bow my head again to continue my story.

There are days when writing stalls and weeks when I'm too busy to concentrate on a novel. To keep my wrist flexible at such times, I take notes about nature around me. Sometimes it results in a line, sometimes a few paragraphs, sometimes a follow-up story that lasts longer than a season. This is how the nature observations in *Andalusian Journal* originated, as did these missives. They are meant to show my passion for plants and animals, my curiosity for the unknown and my thirst for knowledge.

Since I moved to Andalusia, a new world has opened up to me, which I observe, day in, day out, with the wonder of a child, but without the attendant naivety. Unfortunately not, I'm inclined to say, because sometimes these messages have a sad and alarming undertone. I'd love to constantly rejoice at how beautiful nature is at any given moment – and I often do – but in the six years I have lived here, I've seen a lot of change (read deterioration) around me, almost exclusively due to human beings, who quickly appropriate every scrap of land, every piece of forest, every slope, scrub it bare and plant it with avocado, mango or olive trees, beneath which nothing can thrive.

The number of birds is decreasing noticeably, species are disappearing, animal life in and above the ground is dying a silent death. That's why, in this book, I have also looked beyond my valley, to places where the same humans are allowing nature a degree of space. This allowed me to see how much can be achieved, with minimal effort and a combination of knowledge and good will, to make it easier for birds and other species to settle, feel comfortable and reproduce. I was able to experience this myself by offering swallows and kestrels breeding grounds in the form of artificial nests, welcome help that they have eagerly used. So I do harbour some hope that in time these messages will not become a historical document, but will remain an ode to the beauty of nature in my valley and far beyond.

Casa Luna y Sol,
Cútar (Málaga)
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Spring

Returning from a dinner at 1 a.m. I see a flat stone lying on the road in the light of my car's headlights. I slow down and slowly the stone changes into a bird pressing itself into the tarmac. A nightjar! I stop two metres away. Never before have I had such a good look at a nightjar. The few times I've seen one, it flashed by in the twilight like a passing shadow. This one appears dead, but the rise and fall of his breast shows that he is breathing. His head is turned toward me. My car's headlights must be blinding.

The European nightjar is common in countries to the north but rare this far south. This must be a red-necked nightjar. Both types are very similar, except for some slight colour differences. With their brown, beige, grey and black-speckled plumage, they are perfectly camouflaged when resting on a branch during the day or among leaves on the ground where they nest. Their songs are very different, though. The common nightjar makes a rattling, almost mechanical sound at different pitches, like a two-speed moped. The song of the red-necked nightjar is described in bird books as a repeated cu-tóck or, more visually, like a knock on a hollow tree trunk – the signalman of the night. I have heard the sound before in the valley and yet it always takes me while to recognize it because it is so unbird-like.

And now I'm seeing one for the first time in full glory, no hide-and-seek possible, the white spot on his throat lights up like a reflector. Instinctively he plays dead. Or is he paralyzed by fear? I don't want to disturb him any longer and drive on slowly. Barely released from the net of my lights, he flies up off fast and disappears into the night.

The pair of common kestrels that raised four young in a nesting box here last spring have stayed around all winter. I had that nest box hung up two years ago when an extra electricity pole was placed about fifty metres from my writing cabin because the cable was practically sagging to the ground. At first I was furious and sad. The pole was bang smack in the middle of my view when I looked out of the window - it felt like a shaft being stuck into my eye. That same day I decided to make a virtue of necessity and asked my handy neighbour to make me a wooden box measuring forty by thirty by thirty centimetres, half open like a theatre box at the front. When I still lived in the Flemish countryside, I had hung a similar nest box in a tall ash tree and year after year kestrels had raised three to five young in it, until a pair of Egyptian geese conquered the box in a rather aggressive manner and chased away the original inhabitants for good.

There are hardly any high trees in the surrounding area, just a few eucalyptuses. The kestrels here mainly breed in crevices and burrows and on the ledges of cliffs, like the Peña de Hierro, where I had previously noticed a pair. I hadn't spotted nesting boxes for this species here – nor for any other for that matter. Although I didn't rate the chances that a mating pair would

choose a nesting box on an electricity pole in the open space of the campo, I still wanted to try it and when the technicians from the electricity company – a young man and an old man – returned the next day to attach the cable, I had the nesting box ready and waiting, along with some wire and long screws, at the base of the pole. In my still rudimentary Spanish, I explained my plan to them, and they looked at me with increasing amazement as if I were a slight idiot (the young man) or even a complete one (the old man). '*Para el cernícalo* – for the kestrel,' I repeated before leaving them to it.

Two hours later, the men had finished their work and were gathering together their equipment. The nesting box was still on the ground. I walked over to them and gestured from the box to high up the post. The old man showed no sign of willingness, but the young man put on his harness to climb back up the pole and, following my instructions, hung the box exactly where I wanted it, about six metres up, with its opening facing east – which coincidentally meant I could look straight at it from my window. Meanwhile, the old man was making all kinds of bird noises; *ruco ruco ruco*, he went, mocking the *abejaruco* - the bee-eater, I already knew that word. I kept my mouth shut, watched the young man attach the box, before giving him a generous tip when he'd finished, which the old man simply snatched right from him. That was towards the end of March, fairly late, perhaps the kestrels had long since chosen their nesting place.

The nesting box had been there for barely a week when one morning I heard a kestrel calling. And sure enough, a male kestrel was perched in the opening, loudly proclaiming 'first come, first served'. The following days, he stayed close to the box, sometimes inside it, sometimes on top of it. Until the end of April, when an olive farmer decided to burn his prunings on the adjacent property, creating a fire as high as a burning haystack with smoke that filled the entire valley, and that same week another farmer decided to fight the weeds between his trees with a tractor and a trailer loaded with poison, which he sprayed over the land in large clouds and which turned out to be so powerful that every single plant shrivelled up within the hour. A third farmer then started harrowing his fields again, with a caterpillar tractor to brave the slopes. His pre-war machine rattled, clattered and creaked. In short, there was movement and disturbance everywhere, and the kestrel went away. No brood that year.

A woodchat shrike has just impaled a thick caterpillar on the sharp tip of an agave leaf so that it can eat it in chunks. This happens right in front of the window of my writing cabin. Using its hooked beak, it pulls apart the caterpillar into long, thin, slimy strands. It looks like it's eating macaroni cheese. The caterpillar regularly shoots loose and the shrike pricks it back again. Halfway through the meal, the shrike stops, flies away, and returns barely a minute later with a cricket, which it impales through the thin section between the head and body of another agave spike. Then it gets back to its fat main course again, the cracknel is apparently being saved for dessert.
A skylark climbs and climbs, higher and higher into the sky, shrieking loudly, the cheeriest song ever. Such a creature must experience untold pleasure. Or am I mistaken and is it all hard work for a paltry salary?

The woodchat shrike has torn apart a grasshopper in front of my eyes and now flies in with a thrashing orangey-red centipede that must be ten centimetres long. Without a moment's hesitation, it relentlessly impales its victim on the tip of an agave leaf, right through the middle segment, leaving the centipede hanging like a sock on a clothesline. Then the bird flies away, its prey convulses a bit and dies. No, I'm mistaken. When the shrike returns and pecks at the back part of the centipede, it suddenly starts thrashing wildly again. The poison fangs on its head grab at the assailant in vain. The bird pulls and pulls until the centipede's elongated body tears into two. It flies to another agave leaf with the back end, stabs it on and starts eating. It is as though I've got stuck on a horror movie while zapping.

You don't need much imagination to see an executioner's cap in the red crown and neck markings of the red-headed shrike, a characteristic missing from young birds – their crowns and

necks are speckled with brown and grey. It is as though it were a trophy awarded after tests of courage and fearlessness, just as a paratrooper must earn his red beret.

As soon as I roll up the shutters, I see the new prey the woodchat shrike has impaled: a young mouse. The tip of the agave leaf has gone right through its throat. The limp body swings back and forth in the wind, its long back legs dangling like those of a hanged man. From a distance, it looks like a voodoo ritual with a doll. Or perhaps it's a warning to the unsuspecting walker? Turn back! Nevertheless I go outside to take a picture of the victim. Disaster tourism. I've barely turned to the agave when the perpetrator emits an alarm call from an olive tree. I feel caught out, quickly take the photo and go back inside. That's the last I see or hear of the woodchat shrike; when I leave my cabin hours later the mouse is still hanging there.

The next morning it's disappeared all the same. There's no prey on any of the spikes and for the rest of the week it remains this way. It's not that I was caught out by the shrike, he must have felt caught out himself. An unwanted witness to his lynchings. He has probably already picked another agave, or the spines of a cactus, a pomegranate bush or a citrus tree – there are enough deadly spikes in this valley.

It is now official : it's been the driest winter in over a century. In Málaga, barely 11 millimetres of water per square meter fell in three months, here in the valley it must have been even less. I remember just one rainy day and one shower. As far as drought is concerned, we've been used to it in recent years, but earlier winters still had occasional rain and wind in store, rain that often fell in downpours from bursts in the cloud cover, and a wind from the interior that could lash out viciously – the dreaded *terral*, bitterly cold in winter, bone-dry and hot in the summer, and always incredibly strong. There was none of that this winter. Steel-blue skies during the day, turning to soft green to deep orange and blood-red at nightfall, the occasional lone cloud like a tuft of cotton in the sky.

I rarely come across an Andalusian who knows anything about birds. Recently, however, I had a painter in his late twenties work on my cabin, and we soon started chatting. He loved birds, he said, and to prove it he showed me some photos on his phone of his garage, where he'd erected a wall of cages, with a few zebra finches in each cage – he was breeding them. Successfully, he said, proud as a peacock, scrolling to show me pictures of nesting eggs and hatchlings – reminding me of the dying breed of pigeon fanciers and also of my grandfather who bred canaries in an aviary.

The conversation turned to the birds in the valley. He could identify a *cernícalo*, an *abejaruco* and oh, let's not forget a *jilguero* (goldfinch) which he was very fond of. Not to catch and to put in a cage though? I asked him immediately. No, he said, because that's no longer allowed, and I had no doubts about his sincerity. Then he mentioned the *zorzal* – I didn't know that word yet. I looked up the translation in my phone (song thrush) and showed him a picture. Yes, that's it, he confirmed, he hunted them every year in wintertime, because then it was allowed. I stared at him indignantly. You can hunt song thrushes? Is that allowed? Yes, but only on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays, he clarified. And again I had no doubts about his sincerity.

A small group of European serins moves from bush to bush. Yellow bursts everywhere, as though I've looked up at the sun for too long.

When I was looking out of the kitchen window a few days ago, I noticed a large, dark spot on a hill on the other side of the valley. For a moment I thought it was the shadow of a cloud or burnt earth, until I realized with a shock that the bottom half of the ridge had been excavated. Peeling my eyes, I made out the excavators and bulldozers that had dug away the entire north side of the hill – several acres – and built terraces for an avocado plantation without my noticing. I felt a stab in the heart – yet another attack on the landscape in this region. I'd already written about it in *Andalusian Journal*: 'From the coast between Motril and Málaga, up to ten kilometres into the countryside, up to the frost-free height of two hundred metres, there are subtropical fruit plantations, thousands of hectares of them, with new plantations being added every month, every week.'

We are now two years further and the insane pace has not slowed down for a moment; on the contrary, the upper limit for planting frost-sensitive avocados, and mangoes, has risen to three hundred metres, as I can see across the valley. When I went to take a closer look at the damage yesterday, I was horrified to see that other mountain slopes had also been cleared on that side last winter, each the size of several football pitches. The price per kilo of avocado is so high today that farmers even use excavation machines to uproot olive trees, some of them centuries old, to be able to plant avocado trees instead.

A lot has changed above the three-hundred-metre line too, now that the financial crisis is subsiding. Large landowners are increasingly waving banknotes to buy up plots, some of which have been family-owned for generations. As a consequence tens of hectares of wasteland and unspoiled nature around me – I live at an altitude of three hundred and fifty metres – have been turned into vast cereal fields and uniform olive plantations, affording no other plants or shrubs the chance to grow. The birds are forced to look for new habitats. The pair of little owls that nested in a neighbour's olive tree for years has disappeared. I haven't heard their thin hoots in a long time. The eagle owls, which nested on the Peña de Hierro, have also moved on. Sometimes I can still hear one, a valley further, a cry that sounds like an echo from a distant past. Skylarks and crested larks: decimated in numbers. Turtle doves: just one mating pair this year, four years ago I counted four. Bee-eaters: other years there were more than thirty on the electricity wire in August, hunting bees and wasps, now I see about ten on an exceptional day. All of this in just four years' time. And no one cares, no one tries to stop the advance of agriculture, everything is about the economy here: newspapers publish jubilatory reports of the tens of thousands of tons of avocados and mangoes and olives that have been harvested this year. I'm literally crying out in the desert.

I take comfort in what can still be seen, such as yesterday, a motley cloud of goldfinches, which splattered from a group of thistles on the roadside as I drove past in the car, as if a paint bomb had exploded on the verge. There is a simple explanation for the fact they still survive here: the municipality has no money or personnel to mow the verges.

Swifts perform a ballet in the air. Graceful twists, long gliding flights, they slice the sky with their razor-sharp wings. I often see it whizzing by – an insect that resembles a bumblebee that has taken up bodybuilding. And yet its flight is light like that of a hummingbird. Its body has the shimmering, dark colours of a scarab – a beautiful mixture of deep blue and coal black – and its wings look like stained glass in the sun. This friendly giant bears the harmonious Latin name Xylocopa violacea, while in English it is called a violet carpenter bee. The Dutch call them *blauwzwarte houtbijen*, blue-black carpenter bees. They are one of the largest solitary bees in Europe. Rare in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK, I see them here every day in spring and summer. The female lays her eggs in the hollow reed stems on the roof of my terrace, she also burrows into rotten wood and beams. She makes tiny rooms, side by side, in her burrow, separated by wood pulp walls, one egg per room. In each room she leaves a food package of pollen and nectar for when the larva hatches. And then she can just leave them to it, no parenting necessary, their behaviour is pre-programmed in their genes.

In the spring of 1829, the North American diplomat, historian, and writer Washington Irving (author of *Rip van Winkle*) travelled from Seville to Granada, where he spent several weeks in the Alhambra, which was partly derelict and inhabited by outcasts and paupers at the time. His experiences resulted in the hugely popular *Tales of the Alhambra* – and a flood of tourists journeying in his footsteps.

During his stay in the monumental building, he saw boys sitting on top of the towers with fishing rods, as though they were 'collecting stars'. Until someone explained to him that there were flies on the hook to catch swifts and swallows, which nested in the towers, as they flew. Irving regarded this as entertainment, but I wouldn't be surprised if the boys made a little pocket money from it, because back then – and still today, though to a lesser extent - *pajaritos fritos* (fried birds) were a delicacy .

Last night an eagle-owl hooted by my bedroom window. Boo-ho. Boo-ho. I was wide awake in an instant. A few seconds later, from somewhere behind the house: ooh-yo ooh-yo. A thinner voice, higher. A female. Then for ten minutes: boo-ho boo-ho... ooh-yo ooh-yo... boo-ho boo-ho... ooh-yo ooh-yo. A duet in the night. I had to force myself to stay in bed and not disturb the lovers.