**Requiem for a Blackbird**

The sun got up joyously enough, but, this being England, he almost immediately went back to bed again, the inevitable rain threatening to despoil yet another supposed summer’s day, to ruin not only a tenth birthday, but also the opportunity to try out the gift I’d been whining about for a full six months.

“Please, please, can’t I have one? All my friends do—even Jimmy Green, and he’s only eight!”

Quite why I’d wanted the thing so desperately, apart from the overwhelming need to maintain status with my friends, I don’t really know. It wasn’t as if we were landed gentry, ran a farm, or were poachers or anything like that—folks actually *needing* such a thing as a matter of course. And, there were no real life-or-death issues that we were faced with in our bucolic seclusion—far from it, not in 1950s rural Lincolnshire, a good two hundred miles north of London, where barely an angry word was heard, let alone said. I don’t even think I even knew what a life-or-death issue might have looked like anyway. My dad drove buses and my mum kept house, for Chrissakes, and we kids roamed the lanes and woods as carefree and unthreatened as you could imagine. True, we lived in the countryside, but I was about as much a true country boy—a dirt-in-my-fingernails type of guy—as I was the cowboy I used to fantasize about. I loved the *Lone Ranger*, and all the other American Westerns that I devotedly watched on our recently acquired black-and-white TV, but I was no Dick West, all-American boy, riding sidekick to my hero, Range Rider. Sure, I rode along with them in the great American West straddled across one arm of our sofa, but even as I joined in with them, mimicking their every move, ridding the world of bad guys, it was a fantasy that gave me no clue as to what they were really engaged in—not really, at the end of the innocent, naive day that was usually mine.

Nonetheless, I wanted it so bad, and at last I had it! “Happy birthday, son,” my dad had said. “Be careful with it. And remember everything I told you.”

But, shortly after my dad went to work and my mum went to the shops, the clouds suddenly broke, releasing the sun’s rays for the first time in almost two weeks. I almost whooped with joy. I picked up my newly-opened gift from its torn packaging and rushed outside into our large backyard.

“Let’s see, what can I practice on?”

I scoured the yard, sweeping right to left as I’d seen Range Rider do so many times when he was on one of his do-gooder missions looking for some heinous perpetrator of a foul injustice.

“Umph!” Nothing seemed worthy of consideration. Nothing but vegetables growing in the garden; a flowering bush here and there, too, breaking up the monotony. Too sissy. “What else? Has to be something.” But, the day was quiet, as if it was nervously waiting for something to happen, perhaps the rainstorm that had threatened earlier, but that now lay in abeyance waiting for God’s command to unleash its fury just when we didn’t want it to. Not a breath of air, not a stirring leaf. All was calm, just like the mill pond in late August when the harvest comes in and grain has to be milled, have the life crushed out of it between the two great grinding millstones. “Shit!” Then, I saw one of the steel posts that held up my mum’s washing line. “Not perfect, but I guess it’ll just have to do—at least for now.”

I squinted at the post, tried to keep my arms and hands as steady as I could, and flexed my finger, pumping away and juicing on the power. One, two, three, four. *Ping, ping, ting, ping!* Better than I’d anticipated—a Range Rider already, and on my very first go, no less!

But, some thirty or forty *pings* later, I was already frustrated, disappointed at the ease with which I was executing my task. “A post!” *Too sissy, too.* I dropped my arms to my side, less a man than I wanted to be. Then, miracle of miracles—my prayers were answered, yet again.

I focused intently on a branch of the lone apple tree that stood in the far corner of our yard. This was going to be a good deal more challenging than the post, what with the gentle swaying and the extra distance involved, but it was just what the doctor had ordered. It was an opportunity just *too* good to pass up. The apple hanging there was tempting target, but the feathery ball picking at it was, for some inexplicable—yet somehow compelling—reason, even juicier.

I went through the motions again, executing the drill that my dad had shown me, but until I saw the ball of feathers explode into the air, I didn’t really know what I had done or why. I gawped at the falling body as it plummeted to the ground, a speck of sticky crimson between the torso and the neck. After the crack I heard no sound until the sickening *thump* of a dead bird meeting head on with the earth. I felt numb and nauseous at the same time. *Had I really done such a thing? Had it really been me? What had* possessed *me?* I didn’t know. But as I looked at the shotgun that was hanging limply in my hands and felt the heat of the barrel, I knew the verdict was as sure as if God himself had just pronounced it.

Of course, I had known sin before—a ripe plum plucked from a neighbor’s tree when he wasn’t home, an extra piece of candy purloined while the store clerk wasn’t looking, a withholding of the whole truth when it seemed to my advantage to do so—but *this*, this was a transgression like no other. I felt like a different person—nay, creature—now, or at least like one who had just recklessly succeeded in tapping into an otherwise latent behavioral trait of the species, many a year before I should have. At ten years old, I had mentally masturbated myself into becoming a murderer, or at least let myself be seduced by the unexpected opportunity for perverse self-gratification.

Another decade later, I came home on leave from the navy. My old shotgun was still where I had angrily stashed it on the day of the blackbird’s execution. Buried deep under a pile of bric-à-brac in the garden shed, the barrel was rusted and bent, the stock Swiss-cheesed by woodworm and about to finally give up the ghost. It hadn’t been fired in ten years, racking Dostoyevskian guilt having rendered it repugnant and offensive. Naturally enough, I’d learned some marksmanship in the navy, but in all the years I had served I had never fired a shot in anger—never had to, just like I hadn’t had to on that fateful day when the blackbird drew his last breath.

And so, I suffered the loss of innocence as I carelessly, perhaps wantonly, extinguished the life of another living being for no apparent good reason, perhaps because I couldn’t help myself, “marked” somehow by my “species-instinct” to do such a thing.

The taking of innocent life wantonly, as if we had a death wish, is, of course, depressingly familiar to any student of the human condition. Genocides, mass murders, indiscriminate killings in a wide variety of guises continue to stain human history with a deep and pervasive crimson that seems impossible to expunge. Even in 2014 the world is steeped in gore from the killing of thousands of children in Syria to the brutal beheading of James Foley in Iraq, amongst many other instances. Humans have committed this sin, this barbaric atrocity, billions of times, but still new episodes trundle on, relentlessly so, as if no amount of moral awareness or divine will can stop them. In this sense, my “coming of age,” my confrontation with my own bestial roots, really was in a sense an “Requiem,” the death of my innocence and the morbid birth of my own true nature, one that if not manifest every day nonetheless lies waiting within me ready to explode, just like it did for thousands of Hutus in Rwanda in 1994, one day kindly friends of their Tutsi neighbors, the next day their wanton slayers.

Even though I had “only” slaughtered a common blackbird, the emotional impact was immense. It is now more than a half-century since the shooting took place, but the episode still, obviously, haunts me. True, no doubt as a ten-year-old boy I had taken some forms of innocent life before—swatting flies, stomping on trails of ants—but they were minute creatures, insects, altogether different (one couldn’t imagine blood coursing through their tiny bodies) from homo sapiens and his fellow avian, mammalian friends. What was so emotionally devastating, therefore, was the willful, careless killing of a creature I could empathetically relate to, at least in some significant measure. Of course, that is one of the things that makes genocide so shocking; and, it is often proposed that it is when people are somehow stripped of their empathy for others (government propaganda, stereotyping in the media, scaremongering by political opportunists) that they become capable of literal barbarism, of exterminating the “vermin”—the “cockroaches”—in their midsts.

I never fired the gun again; the episode was that traumatizing. It is perhaps curious, then, that I later joined the military. It suggests that I had not become an out-and-out pacifist, but I had and I still am one, at least when it comes to what I am *personally* prepared to do. Moreover, I joined the navy not to fight (to me, it seemed no more dangerous than joining the Boy Scouts at the time), but to pursue relative economic opportunity. And, in the end, I trained as a hydrographic surveyor; the only “weapon” I pointed at anything or anybody being a hand-held sextant. No guns are in my possession now; I’m in this sense an un-American American. I remain totally confused by my adopted country’s obsession with firearms, even the most devastating kind, and the country’s seeming willingness to “accept” indiscriminate murder all in the name of personal freedom, the freedom at some point most probably to do what I did over a half-century ago, except to a beloved relative or a friend most likely rather than a real threat to their property, life, or limb.

As to “rational understanding,” therefore, what can I say? Western civilization prizes rational thought (or at least it claims it does), but in practice rationality seems rather less present than irrationality, our species’ tendency to behave far too often like a Curious George (an egocentric big-brained ape careening around the planet looking for titillation of various sorts) with an Uzi submachine gun (all the disruptive technological innovations we’ve gotten to “play” with to the biosphere’s expense). Of course, what’s rational (or irrational) is an immensely difficult thing to decipher. But, the least I can attest to is that *Requiem* certainly suggests that even when we are engrossed in what looks like rational thought (What’s a good target to aim at?), seeming irrationality is not far below the surface (the bird may well have been a good target on which to test one’s marksmanship, but did it make any moral sense at all to have done so?) Most depressingly, it may be the case that rationality and irrationality are quite often part-and-parcel of the same cognitive process, another Dostoyevskian burden for humanity to be saddled with.

*Requiem* seems to parallel Alice Walker’s *The Flowers* quite closely, although there are some important differences as well. In both stories, young children unexpectedly come across some form of indiscriminate killing—murder no less. That’s obvious in *Requiem*, perhaps less so in *Flowers*, although I think most readers would assume the dead man was an innocent, having been brutally lynched for no more than being black man in a thoroughly racist, white supremacist society. In both instances, too, an otherwise beautiful, innocently playful summer’s day is brought to a shocking, transformational end; indeed, in *Flowers* a whole season is shut down, buried under the tragic burden of the human condition, not just one day, although that single day turns out to be just as consequential in the long run. But, whereas *Flowers* leaves those consequences unspecified, *Requiem* relatively explicitly lays them bare. We can “guess” the effects on Myop in the case of *Flowers*; we are informed of them in *Requiem.* Does that make the latter too didactic, too explicit? Depends upon one’s aesthetic taste, it seems to me.

One key difference between the two stories is that Myop does not carry out the execution whereas the protagonist in *Requiem* does. I don’t know that this matters all that much: the trauma of both episodes may well have had similar outcomes for those subjected to them, although not entirely—Myop may have want revenge at some point beyond the story’s end, whereas *Requiem’s* protagonist did not. Moreover, Myop may not be quite the innocent we might suppose her to be. Even in one of her joyous moments, Myop “struck out at random at chickens she liked,” and she also picked a significant quantity of flowers, consigning them at least to a premature death. Not perhaps murder, but, arguably, the taking of some sort of innocent life nonetheless. Would it be too much to say that Walker recognizes, at least to a degree, the dialectic of sin and innocence, of rationality and irrationality, as *Requiem* does? A bit of a stretch, but there’s something of a parallel at work here, even if it is not a perfect one.

In the end, what died in *me* on that fateful summer’s day was, I think, a good thing. If there’s anything of a fitting requiem for the blackbird it is this: in his death he made me aware for the first time of the potential beast that lay within me, within all of us I fear. And, since that day I have never engaged in any form of physical violence again. So, as searing as the memory of his demise is, his birdsong even in death keeps singing to me, reminding me, keeping me as humane as I can possibly be.

[Does the title give too much away?]