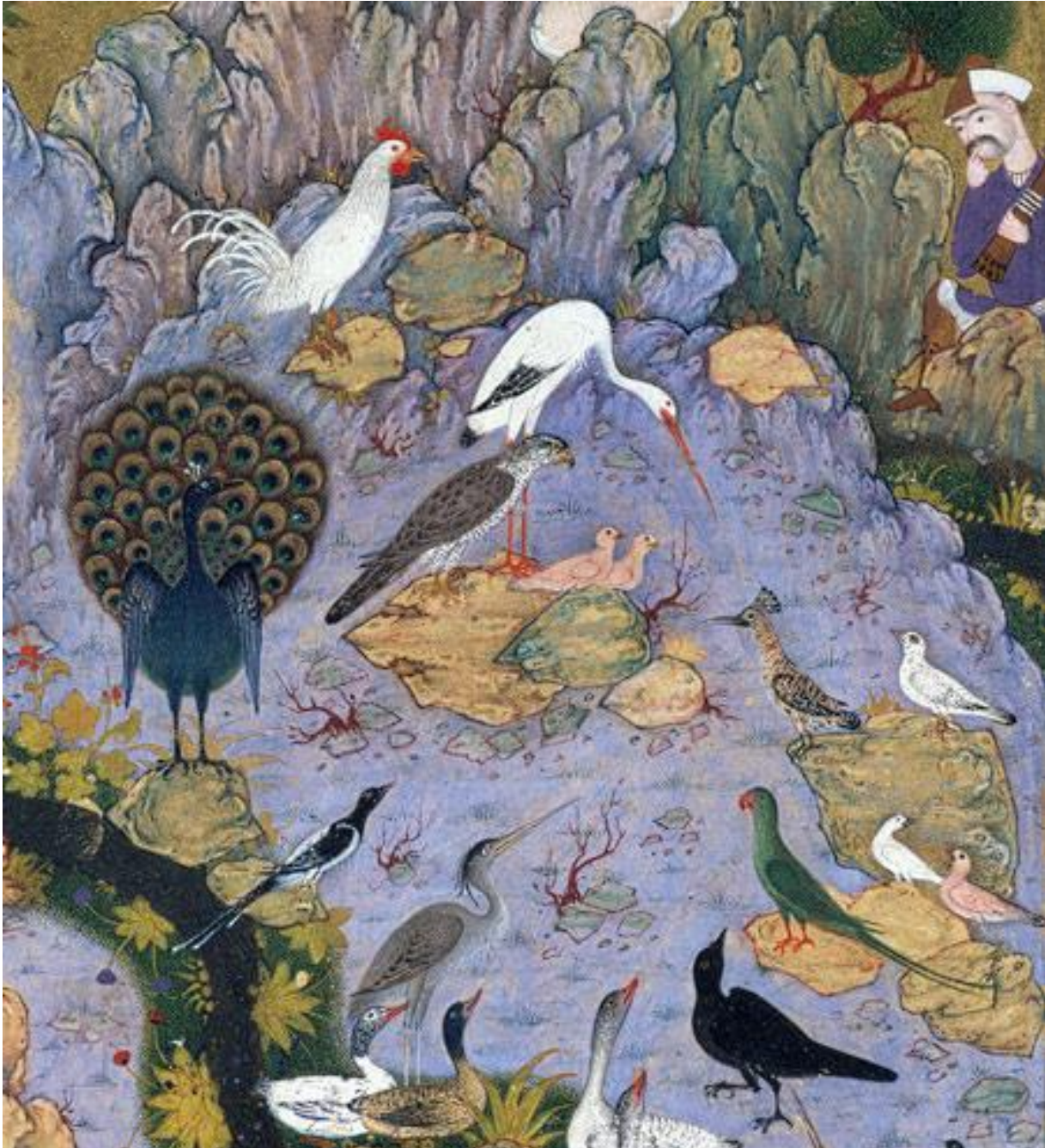


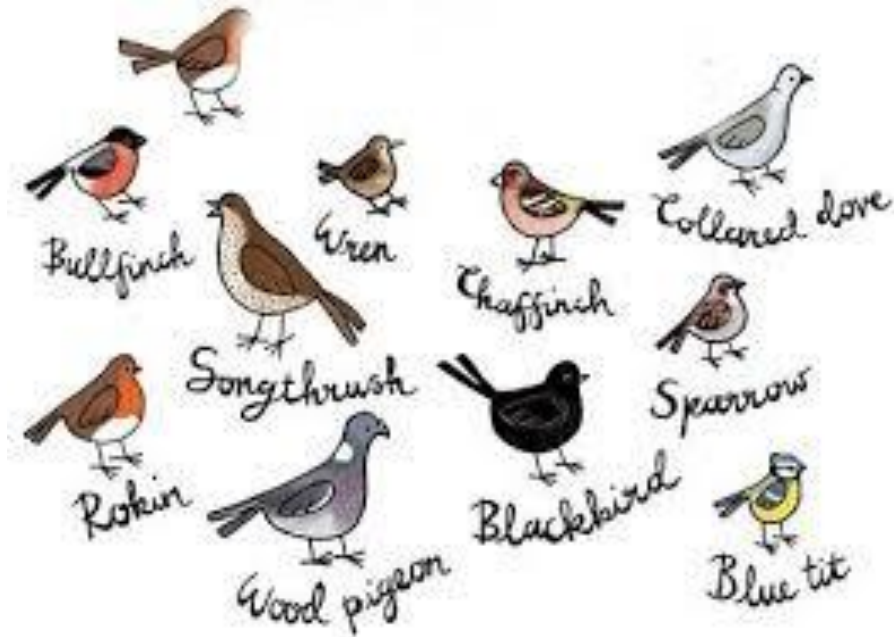
OCTANE NEWSLETTER 6:**©ASIA HALEEM 2017***The aim of OCTANE Newsletters is to follow spiritual journeys or experiences - and explore moral questions.****A NEW CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS***

Along with ʿUmar Khayyām's *RUBĀYĀT* and the stories of the *THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS*, Farid ud-Din Attar's *MANTIQ UT-TAIR* (*The Conference of the Birds*), is one of the most familiar works of near-eastern literature known in the West, beautifully illustrated in Persian miniatures such as the 16C detail below by Iranian artist Habibullah of Sava. It describes how the birds (each revealing its own personality) gather to debate moral and spiritual issues.



As an allegory of the dilemmas of modern government, on a humbler scale I want to tell a short tale about the birds in my own small garden in Britain and how they behave towards each other - leaving it to the

reader to come to their own conclusions (and perhaps mentally add their own examples). The focus is on those birds commonly found in any English garden:



The story is very simple. I decided to feed the birds in my garden regularly since some of them (amazingly even sparrows) are in urban centres and even the countryside under threat of disappearing altogether if not supported.



Sparrow

THE DESERVING

Of course I had in mind the core population of my garden when I decided to actively support them, starting with the industrious little Jenny Wren with little upright tail scurrying about in the undergrowth picking off all the aphids on my rose bushes as well as enjoying any snacks that I put down. Shy, but throaty.



Wren

What garden does not have its friendly Robin and perky little Bluetits – mine certainly counts them amongst the most active and vocal of the residents, each one as small as a ping-pong ball but so plucky.



Bluetit and Robin

Then roughly between November and May the same blackbird couple has been coming back to the UK from Scandinavia for the past five years at least in order to have a new set of chicks (they reckon my garden is the best hotel in town). They have a particular way of picking up the suet pellets in the pagoda bird-feeder that



Blackbird

is measured – even parsimonious – always leaving something over for a later visit. If other birds visit they do not assert themselves, but fly off and wait for their turn – husband and wife are good-mannered to each other, encouraging their partner to feed once finished.

All these are the birds that were the original inhabitants of the garden, fitting its small size perfectly. I started to put out the food according to what I saw as their entitlement, earned.

But then came the gobblers.

THE GOBBLERS

First came the pigeons, who simply alighted on the bird-table and wiped it clean in one session.



Perhaps even worse were the starlings, with their raucous screeches. So handsome in their fine feathers, but with no previous input into the garden's life. First one or two came, then they told their friends, and eventually there were crowds of them, leaning in to the pagoda feeder and hovering up those tidy piles left aside for their next visit by the blackbirds. Either the blackbirds were actually pushed out of the pagoda, or



Starlings

they would arrive at their next appointed time to find everything gone – to their puzzlement. The magpie was no better than the starlings, doing acrobatics clinging on to the pagoda in order just to fit his head in and get to the goods, wolfing down the pellets in twos and threes.



Magpie

So I started a separate table just for the pigeons where I left a handful of peanuts every day. This is the point at which the jackdaws joined in. Not being able to climb into the pagodas had kept them away, but the peanuts were fair game. Now it was the turn of the pigeons to turn up and find all the peanuts gone.



Jackdaws

ESCALATION OF COST AND CONSUMPTION - AND POVERTY OF THE DESERVING

What is the position today? I have a small bird-seed feeder for the small birds mentioned first in my story – they have their own feeding source (though they still like to make the odd raid on the suet pellets and peanuts) – but at least the big birds can't perch on the seed feeder.

I only put suet pellets in the pagoda early in the morning and from late afternoon, when there is a higher likelihood of the gobblers having moved on – but it still means the blackbirds don't get all that they fully need – whatever they leave is still attacked by the gobblers on their marauding flights. I have to spend so



Raven

much time running in and out and juggling resources so that the deserving are not left out. In the end no bird is on a full stomach because I can't afford to put out double the food.

Do I really have to leave it in the hands of the sparrowhawk to control the food question?



Sparrow-hawk

CODA

Dear reader, I must quickly add two more metaphors - prompted by reading the 30 Dec 2017 *Spectator* Christmas/New Year bumper issue (six weeks late), since they matched my garden birds experience:

Aidan Hartley has a slot near the back of the magazine entitled *Wild Life*. He runs a cattle ranch in Kenya but over the past two years drought in the surrounding countryside prompted wild game to invade it. As he put it, 'Many arrived on the farm so desperate that they smashed through walls and fences to get in to where it was safe. I let them stay'. Animals as large as elephants barged in – let alone a host of antelope – coming and going as they pleased. However, it was the zebra (a bit like the starlings) who seeped in through the breaks in the fences – and never left, reproducing and shaving all the grass maintained for cattle rumination down to a stubble in no time. Then comes the dilemma: 'Sadly, a man has to make a living and by January our cattle will be starving if the zebra stay'. Since it is against the law to cull zebra, the only option is the onerous and continuous job of chasing them out – easier said than done – and even the local lioness is not lending a helping hand.

This made me think of an English woman living in London who married an Arab (quite a high-status academic, in fact). They bought a house in North London and all was fine until the relatives (the usual extended family, more like a tribe) started to come to London for the summer holidays so they could shop in Oxford Street and escape the extreme heat of the desert further south. The English wife, used to preparing roast beef and two veg for Sunday lunch, was gradually ousted from the kitchen as aunts and grannies took over to cook Middle Eastern fare – *falafel* and *tahini* ruled the menu (and no glass of wine with meals). The male menfolk lounged around in their pyjamas all day. Christmas passed without the slightest bauble in sight and no celebration at the turning of the light (let alone the birth of Christ). Friends of friends were invited to take lodging in the spare room and she was surrounded, in her own home, by people chattering away whose language she did not understand. Yet who did the home belong to – the original couple, or the invaders?

Reader, she admitted defeat – and left. But in the process the upkeep of her own culture and her own right to run it won the day.