

Robin, Again

I am watching a robin size up a spot for a nest in one of our young maples, and I am reminded of one basic difference between man and bird. Last year this same robin built a nest in the same place she is so busy assessing at the moment. And last year her decision to nest there bore no fruit because Fred, our cat, who is now lounging on the great musty brown chair in the living room, sent the all-mouths fuzziness of this busy mother to their doom in the grass below.

This bird of orange and gray doesn't seem to remember her plight of last year, only the attraction of a superb nesting place, like a child rediscovering an old toy and not recalling that it is broken. Odd, that an event so peripheral in our lives and so central to the birds should escape its attention and embed itself in our memory. Surely knowing what we know, if we were this bird, we would not nest there this year. Yet the robin in its southern wintering has lost the pain of last year's lost brood, forgotten the two hours of hopping from branch to branch around the disturbed nest, wailing its distress. Now it is all innocence again, brushing the triangle of limbs, nestling in the coziness, turning to different windows through the limbs, like a woman selecting her first fur coat.

It speaks to man's sensitivity to the world around him, not just that he recalls what the bird forgets but more that he knows his recollection would make him behave differently. It takes so little to influence him, and the little bits stay with him. All around, man is a being with the hawk's eye. So, why do we allow so many totally optional, musty cats to cause distress for both the robin and ourselves? Because the cat has a name, lives with us, depends on us, and cuddles in our lap, while the robin is a seasonal outsider. And like the cat, we are at root predators.

“Distance” invites predation and potential distress for all mothers – whether our memories are long or short, whether we are robins or human beings.

1971