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DIARY OF A YOUNG NATURALIST

DARA McANULTY



LITTLE TOLLER

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Prologue

This diary chronicles the turning of my world, from spring to winter, at home, in the wild, in my head. It travels from the west of Northern Ireland in County Fermanagh to the east in County Down. It records the uprooting of a home, a change of county and landscape, and at times the de-rooting of my senses and my mind. I'm Dara, a boy, an acorn. Mum used to call me lon dubh (which is Irish for blackbird) when I was a baby, and sometimes she still does. I have the heart of a naturalist, the head of a would-be scientist, and bones of someone who is already wearied by the apathy and destruction wielded against the natural world. The outpourings on these pages express my connection to wildlife, try to explain the way I see the world, and describe how we weather the storms as a family.

I started to write in a very plain bungalow surrounded by families who kept their children behind closed doors, and empty-nesters who manicured their gardens and lawns with scissors – yes, I actually witnessed this. This is where sentences first began to form, where wonder grappled with frustration on the page, and where our garden (unlike any other in the cul-de-sac) became a meadow during the spring and summer months, with wildflowers and insects and a sign that read 'Bee and Bee' staked in the long grasses, and where our family spent hours and hours observing the

abundance that other gardens lacked, all of us gloriously indifferent to the raised eyebrows of neighbours that appeared from behind curtains from time to time.

We've moved on since then, crossed the country to make another home, and not for the first time. We've lived in many places during my short life, in a kind of nomadic existence. But wherever we settle, our home is crammed with books, skulls, feathers, politics, unbridled debates, tears, laughter and joy. Some people believe that roots grow from bricks and mortar, but ours spread like mycelium networks, connected to a well of life lived together, so that wherever we go we stay rooted.

My parents, both from working-class backgrounds, were the first generation of university-goers and graduates in their families, and they are still fresh with ideals for making the world a better place. This means that we're not rich materially, but as Mum says 'we are rich in many other ways'. Dad is – and always has been – a scientist (marine and now conservation). He's brought alive the secrets and knowledge that wild places hold and explained the mysteries of nature to us all. Mum's career path resembles the way she crosses a stream: never in a straight line. Music journalist, voluntary sector, academic – she still does a little of all these things as well as teaching my nine-year-old sister, Bláthnaid, at home. Bláthnaid's name means 'blossoming one', and at the moment she's a fairy expert who can give you a multitude of insect facts, keeps pet snails and also fixes all the electrical equipment in the house (which Mum boggles over). I also have a brother called Lorcan – 'fierce one' – who is thirteen. Lorcan is a self-taught musician and never fails to rouse in us sheer wonder and confusion all at once. He's also an adrenaline junkie – think running down mountains, jumping off cliffs into the sea, and generally going through life with the energy of a neutron star. Then

there's Rosie, a rescue greyhound with severe flatulence and a brindle coat, whom we adopted in 2014. She's our tiger-dog. We call her the living cushion, and she's a wonderful companion and stress reliever. Me, well, I'm the pensive one, always with dirty hands and pockets stuffed with dead things and (sometimes) animal scat.

Before I sat down to write this diary, I had also been writing an online blog. A good few people enjoyed it and said more than once I should write a book. Which is quite amazing really, as a teacher once told my parents 'Your son will never be able to complete a comprehension, never mind string a paragraph together.' Yet here we are. My voice is bubbling up, volcano-like, and all my frustrations and passions may just explode into the world as I write.

Not only is our family bound together by blood, we are all autistic, all except Dad – he's the odd one out, and he's also the one we rely on to deconstruct the mysteries of not just the natural world but the human one too. Together, we make for an eccentric and chaotic bunch. We're pretty formidable, apparently. We're as close as otters, and huddled together, we make our way in the world.



Spring

In the darkness my dreams are interrupted. I'm somewhere between swimming to the surface and coming up for air when the flute catches my consciousness. The bedroom walls disappear. The space between my bed and the garden narrows, becomes one. I rise without moving, pinned by the heaviness of sleep. The notes keep falling on my chest. Now I can see the blackbird in my mind, its testosterone arrows flying as the territorial sonatas spread across the dawn. Engrossed in this symphony, awake and thinking, the whirring of my brain begins.

Spring varies from space to space, but for me it's the sights and sounds swirling around my everyday, from sky to roots, that hold the most magic. Spring is the frog that crossed our path at the beginning of our time in this house – our first encounter was a splodge of spawn left quickly on the road, its invisible pathway intruded upon by modernity. Upset, we dug out a watery sanctuary with hope: a small bucket of water buried and filled with broken clay pots, pebbles, plants and some sticks for the entrance and exit. We didn't really know if it would work. (Anything deeper would've needed a digger to break through the boulder clay that we're blessed with in our suburban Enniskillen garden.) But there was another meeting, the following year, when our amphibian friend danced a jig on the grass and was joined by another, leaving us a gift of frogspawn in the bucket-refuge. We were exultant, and our whoops of excitement could be

heard from the bottom of the hill, drowning out for a moment the sound of cars travelling to Sligo or Dublin, and even rallying against the background noise of the concrete factory nearby.

The ebb and flow of time punctuated by the familiar brings a cycle of wonder and discovery every year, just as if it's the first time. That rippling excitement never fades. The newness is always tender.

Dog violets push through first, just as the sparrows dig the moss from the guttering and the air is as puffed out as the robin's chest. Dandelions and buttercups emerge like sunbeams, signalling to bees that it's safe to come out now, finally. Spring is all about watching each resurgence. Bláthnaid celebrates by counting daisies every day, and when there's enough to make a crown she becomes the 'Queen of Spring' – if there's some left over, she makes a bracelet and matching ring to complete the trinity. At some point, like magic, there are enough daisies for a whole week's worth of trinkets and charms, so she leaves us all daisy gifts around the house.

I've been told more than once that I was an aurora baby, always awake at dawn. I was born in spring, and my first mornings were accompanied by the sonata of the male blackbird, nourishing a growing body and mind. Maybe its song was the first lure to the wild. My calling. I often think of St Kevin, Caoimhín, picture him standing with his outstretched hand, cradling a blackbird nest until the single chick has fledged. Caoimhín of Glendalough was a hermit who sought solace in nature. Gradually, as more people came to see the holy man, seeking out his advice and teaching, a monastic community grew.

I love the stories of Caoimhín, perhaps because Caoimhín is also the saint's name I took at my confirmation. Although I now feel that this experience

was more a 'coming of age', his name is still important to me, even more so now because his story shows that we just can't help intruding on wild places, and altering the balance between people and nature. Perhaps that's how Caoimhín felt, too, as more followers arrived.

The richness of the notes. I can pick them out, even from the most crowded air space. They are the start of it all, the awakening of so much. The song carries me further back: I'm three, and living either inside my head or amongst the creeping, crawling, fluttering, wild things. They all make sense to me, people just don't. I'm waiting for the dawn light to come into my parents' room. Lorcan is nestled between Mum and Dad. I'm listening for the notes, and they come just as the first slice of light reaches the curtain. Golden shadows unveil the shape I've been waiting for: the blackbird harking from the kitchen extension, a glorious messenger on the rooftop of the sleeping and waking.

When the blackbird came, I could breathe a sigh of relief. It meant the day had started like every other. There was a symmetry. Clockwork. And each morning I'd listen and touch the shadows, not wanting to open the curtains and wake everyone up. I never ever wanted to destroy the moment. I couldn't invite the rest of the world in, with its hustle and bustle, its noise, its confusion. So I listened and watched – the tiny movements of beak and body, the straight lines of the telephone wires, the thirty-second interval between verses.

I knew that 'my bird' was the male because once I'd crept downstairs, just once, to look out and up from the patio doors. It was stark and grey but he was there, and so he was always. I counted and remembered each beat, then crept upstairs again to watch the shadowplay on the curtain. The blackbird was the conductor of my day, every

day, for what seemed like a long time. Then it stopped and I thought my world would fall apart. I had to find a new way of awakening, and that's when I learnt to read. Books about birds first, and then all wildlife. The books had to have accurate illustrations and lots of information. The books helped bridge my blackbird dream. They connected me to the bird, physically. I learnt that only male blackbirds sing with such intensity, and that birds sing when they have a reason to, like defending territory or attracting a mate. They didn't sing for me, or anyone else. The loss of that song in autumn and winter was traumatic, but reading taught me that the blackbird would come back.

Spring does something to the inside of you. All things levitate. There's no choice but to move up and forwards. There's more light too, more time, more doing. Every past spring merges into a collage and it's so full of matter, all that matters. And that first memorable spring, so etched and vivid: it was the start of a fascination with the world outside of walls and windows. Everything in it pushed with a gentle force, it begged me to listen and to understand. The world became multidimensional, and for the first time I understood it. I began to feel every particle and could grow into it until there was no distinction between me and the space around me. If only it wasn't punctured by aeroplanes, cars, voices, orders, questions, changes of expression, fast chatter that I couldn't keep up with. I closed myself away from this noise and the world of people that made it; I opened up among trees, birds and small secluded spaces that my mum instinctively and regularly found for me in parks, forests, on beaches. It was in these places, apparently, that I would uncoil: face tilted with concentration, wearing a very serious expression, I absorbed the sights, the sounds.

I suddenly fade out and in, realising that it's light outside and the dawn chorus has stopped. The spell is broken. It's time for school. These days, it feels like things are changing. I'm here, on the cusp of my fourteenth year, and the blackbird, that conductor of my day, is just as important as it was when I was three. I still crave symmetry. Clockwork neediness. The only change is another kind of awakening: the need to write about my days, what I see, how I feel. Amongst this onslaught of life, exams, expectations (the highest of which are my own) come these outpourings, and they are becoming a cog in the cycle between waking and sleeping and the turning world.

Saturday, 21 March

The arrival of March is a time of emerging colour and warmth, but standing in my garden today is like being encased in a snow globe. The icy flakes bite and snatch away the brightness of yesterday. This cold snap brings with it a tough time for our garden birds. They're our extended family, so I rush out to buy more mealworms from the garden centre just down the road, to top up our feeders outside the kitchen window; the feeders are a good twelve feet away to draw a line between neighbourly privacy and invasion. Just a few days ago our blue tits were prospecting the nest boxes and the birdsong in the garden was a concerto of anticipation. And now this. Birds are resilient, but this dip in temperature has us all worried.

It's hard to believe that we felt the whispering of warmer days – only last week – while we were in the branches of an ancient oak at Castle Archdale Country Park, where Dad's office is based. Many people attribute my love of nature to him. He's definitely contributed deeply to my knowledge and appreciation, but I also feel the connection was forged while I was in Mum's womb, the umbilical still nourishing. Nature and nurture – it's got to be a mix of both. It may be innate, something I was born with, but without encouragement from parents and teachers and access to the wilder places, it can't bind to everyday life.

Dara, my name, means 'oak' in Irish, and sitting up in the branches of that majestic tree, feeling the pulse of a life that has been growing in Castle Archdale soil for nearly five

hundred years, I was clinging to my childhood by a twig.

I watch a chaffinch in the garden with confetti flecks on his silver crown. He rests on a branch of our cypress tree, an evergreen now turned powdery-white with snow. The chaffinch's peach-blushed chest puffs out as he's joined by a pair of siskins – one citrus-yellow and black, the other delicately flecked with pewter, a daintier yellow. The robin, as ever, is lording it about, pompously strutting to ward off any usurpers. Earlier, there was a four-males-and-one-female tussle of feathers and pecking heads – robins are so aggressive they're said to sever the neck of any opponent, but I wonder if they do that in gardens so full of seeds, nuts and fancy buggy nibbles. Plenty for all.

A song thrush plays hopscotch in the snow, scrabbling around for the seed we've scattered. The bright red of half-eaten apples is spotted: the thrush pecks, releases juice, I smile. The thrush comes at odd points in the seasons, which is the sort of unpredictability that would've caused me frustration and pain in the past. But now I've learnt to rationalise the unreliable thrush, and to appreciate all the encounters without ties or expectation. Well, sort of.

In the evening we celebrate Dad's birthday as though it's a winter Wassail: we all sing and dance and play our tin whistles (badly), shrieking notes and demanding the end of darker days, calling out for light. Mum has baked him a cake – Victoria sponge, his favourite.

Wednesday, 25 March

I find the tail end of winter frustrating, and all this waiting to travel through a portal into colour and warmth brings out my worst characteristic: impatience! Today, though, the heat of the air and the hum and buzz all around allay

my restlessness. At last, spring seems to be escaping the retreating shadows of winter.

This morning we're all off to one of our favourite places: Big Dog Forest, a sitka plantation close to the Irish border, about thirty minutes from home, high in the hills, with pockets of willow, alder, larch and bushes of bilberry in midsummer. Its two sandstone mounds – Little Dog and Big Dog – are said to be the result of a spell cast on Bran and Sceolan, the giant hounds of the legendary Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the hunter-warrior and last leader of the mythical Fianna people. While out hunting, so the story goes, Fionn's two dogs picked up the scent of the evil witch Mallacht, and gave chase. The witch fled and changed herself into a deer to stay ahead, but the hounds still snapped closer, so Mallacht cast a powerful spell that turned the dogs, little dog and big dog, into the two hills we see here today.

I love how these names tell stories about the land, and how telling these stories keeps the past alive. Equally, I'm fascinated by the scientific explanations that geologists blast this myth with: the sandstone of the hills is more robust than the surrounding limestone, and as this wore away through glacial erosion, it was the sandstone that remained, towering above the fallen rubble of the Ice Age.

I spy coltsfoot, bursts of sunshine from the disturbed ground. White-tailed bumblebees drink and collect hungrily. Dandelions and their allies in the daisy (or Asteraceae) family are often the first pollinating plants to flower in spring, and are incredibly important for biodiversity. I implore everyone I meet to leave a wild patch in their garden for these plants – it doesn't cost much and anybody can do it. As nature is pushed to the fringes of our built-up world, it's the small pockets of wild resistance that can help.

Sometimes, ideas and words feel trapped in my chest – even if they are heard and read, will anything change?