



# Robin

*Peter Reason*

An overcast autumn day, deeply still, on the hills to the south of Bath, England. Nothing, nothing at all seems to move. Then a lone magpie flies past, marking a shallow arc across the dark sky. All is quiet, save the twittering of small birds, the caw of a crow, the metallic cries of jackdaws: on this early Sunday morning few humans are about. Drops of moisture hang from the trees and pick out the structure of spiders' webs hanging between the espaliered branches of an apple tree. A tiny draught of wind flutters the

webs and, almost imperceptibly, stirs leaves and grasses.

The orchard is setting toward winter. The leaves have mostly fallen, although the old Bramley carries a last scattering on the top branches, the oak tree wears a golden halo, while a last few hang on the cherry trees like damp prayer flags. I have scythed the meadow grass and picked all the fruit; the squirrels have stripped the nuts from the hazel tree. All is bare, save a handful of autumn raspberries, shrivelled blackberries

and one or two sloes on the bush outside the gate.

And yet this is not yet time for winter work. I have tidied up a bit—cut back the hollyhocks that flowered so spectacularly along the stone wall, taken down the netting from the roof of the fruit cage, given the grass a final cut. But it is too early to prune the apple trees and currant bushes—this must wait till they are properly dormant in January or February. No point in rushing. I must learn to take my time from the rhythm of the year.





Just one task has been on my to-do list for weeks: turning over the compost.

I am not very scientific about compost: I have two slatted wooden bins; one holds maturing compost, while in the other I pile cuttings, rotten apples and grass as they are available, scrupulously avoiding adding pernicious weeds like convolvulus and dandelion. Maybe twice a year I dig out the older compost and turn the accumulated pile into the newly emptied bin, mixing it up as I do so. It seems to work.

I had already emptied the bin full of finished compost, sieving the crumbly humus into the wheelbarrow before shovelling it into sacks. I hesitated about turning over the other pile—it's a task too often postponed, one I expect to be more arduous than

it actually is. Today, once started, I wanted to finish. Soon I was forking the half-composted mass from one bin to another: stick the fork in, bend knees to lift, ease it off the tines into the empty container and mix it up.

Completely absorbed in this work, I was arrested by a quiet flurry of wings. Pausing, looking around, there was nothing to see, so I carried on digging. Then again, another flurry, even closer. I leaned on the fork to rest, and there ki<sup>1</sup> was, Robin, perched no more than eighteen inches away from me, kis delicate little legs poised ready to launch back into the air, head on one side with one shiny black eye holding me in kis gaze, and of course, neat brown feathers and red breast (a European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*, of course). It was quite clear ki knew what I was doing, or rather knew that whatever it was, I was turning up worms and insects that ki would be able to grab. It is possible that robins, like some other species, evolved in a symbiotic relationship with large animals such as wild boar, which turn up the ground and bring insects to the surface—just as do gardeners.

I carried on with my work, and Robin came and went, perching on the wooden edge of the bin or on the overhanging hazel tree. Finally, I dug out the bottom layer of well-composted humus and spread it evenly on top of the newly turned heap. As I soon as I stood back, ki darted down to pick up and consume an insect, then another. I was not

able to make out kis targets in the dark soil, but ki seemed to spot them immediately and moved to pick them with speed and precision

I intended to cover the heap with a plastic sheet to keep the rain off, but it seemed unfair not to let Robin have kis fill, so I left it open to finish another time. I took the shovel and fork and hung them up in their places in the shed. When I returned, ki was still on the heap, picking out the bugs.

I was very happy to have this encounter, turning it over in my mind as I walked back to the house. It seems to represent something exemplary about the relationship between me and the wider, more-than-human world. It wasn't just that I appreciated seeing Robin, even I cared about ki. But as I went about my own interests in making good compost, I was also contributing to the process of growth and decay, and I was actively creating an opportunity for Robin to find food. My entirely self-centred activities were replenishing the local ecosystem of the orchard, serving Robin and other beings. Even the bugs have a life in the compost before they are gobbled up! As Robin Wall Kimmerer suggests in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, fruitful land is created through the alchemy of gift exchange between beings, including humans. And in gift relationship and emotional bond is formed.

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*Peter Reason is currently engaged in a series of experiential and co-operative inquiries exploring living cosmos panpsychism. His most recent publication (with Sarah Gillespie) is On Sentience <http://peterreason.net/OnSentience.html>*

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As botanist and Potawatomi plant woman Robin Wall Kimmerer has pointed out, to refer to sentient beings using the pronoun 'it' is not only odd, it is disrespectful, de-animating. Yet standard English offers no alternative. Following Kimmerer's prompt, rather than 'it', I have taken to using 'ki' singular and 'kin' plural; 'kis' and 'their' possessive. I also capitalise the names of beings with whom I am in particular relation. This may feel awkward to read; it is difficult to be consistent; but the awkwardness in itself alerts us to our habitual objectification of the world around us. Kimmerer, R. W. (2017). *Speaking of Nature: Finding language that affirms our kinship with the natural world*. Orion, March/April. Retrieved from <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/>

