

The Poor City Tom

By Cornelia Parkes

In the winter of 2020-21, the first covid19 winter, we put up a bird feeder in the back yard to give us something entertaining to watch. We hung it in the grape arbor so that I could see it from the dining room window which was next to my computer desk where I worked. All winter we were visited by hordes of little brown jobs, sparrows, black capped chickadees, and juncos. I needed binoculars to tell them apart. I joked that we had attracted all the little birds that used to hang out at the T station in the square below now that fewer and fewer people were riding the T.

Then April came. The days were either sunny, windy, and cold or cloudy, rainy, and chilly or sunny, warm, and bright with glowing forsythia. These days came in random order without a pattern or trend. The rain was never enough. There were too many days with low humidity and high winds that prompted warnings of elevated fire potential.

One fine warm afternoon in late April they came casually walking through the always open gate to the back yard, a tom and two hens. When I looked out at the bird feeder, I saw this enormous bird pecking at the sunflower seeds scattered on the ground. I don't need binoculars to identify a turkey. The tom was flexing his full plumage and strutting. The hens meandered to the back of the yard and settled in a plot of dirt behind our still unplanted raised garden bed. It was a secluded spot surrounded on three sides by the fence and garage. The tom continued to strut, show his beautiful plumage, and call. It took him almost an hour to cover the 20 feet between the bird feeder and the raised garden bed. Meanwhile the hens lay quietly in the plot of dirt.

As I watched the unfolding drama with the turkeys, more birds started flocking to the feeder: two cardinals, two blue jays, one robin, and three doves. The doves were bickering a bit. I guess they were still figuring things out. A crow, doing its job as part of nature's surveillance system, landed on a bare branch overlooking the garden. All of us were pregnant with joyful expectation.

The tom paused at the edge of the garden bed a mere six feet from the hens and turned around. He wandered back to the bird feeder to nibble another seed. The crow flew away 10 seconds before the tom turned. Did it see the doubt before we did? The other birds departed. The hens got up, fluttered their wings, and began walking toward the gate. They casually passed the tom pretending not to notice his masculinity. The tom watched mutely. Was this supposed to happen? Once out of the back yard the hens disappeared. The tom called and called, but they did not return.

Every day for the next week the tom haunted our back yard. He would call and call and stand looking at the place in the plot of dirt where the hens had rested. Then he would call some more, but no one came.

Things change rapidly in the spring. The stores ran out of bird seed, so we had to take the bird feeder down. We planted the plot of dirt with an oregano bush that had survived the winter, a new tall butterfly bush, and some daisies and then mulched the area. It must have been confusing. The tom sometimes went into the neighbor's back yard.

He is probably young. Under ordinary circumstances he could expect to mate next year, but for a turkey in the city there is no assurance that he could survive a year. It's like that in the inner city where the black and brown residents also have no assurance of a full life.

It's now May. The days and nights are warmer. The trees have leaves. The forsythia has passed. Our tom still wanders the neighborhood, calling at all hours, and sitting in our back yard waiting. Poor tom.



Postscript June 3, 2021. This morning at 7:30am when Alana went out to water the oregano in that plot of dirt behind the raised garden bed, she disturbed a hen and saw tiny, tiny chicks under her wings. Perhaps our tom was not as clueless as we thought....