



YEAR OF WONDERS
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It is mid-July. The rain is whispering in the foliage outside my window, the first rain in many nights, and my local enactment of the pathetic fallacy: we're on the verge of departure from Wiko, and even the sky weeps.

For each of us, this year has been differently glorious, intense, challenging, productive. Even when difficult, this time at Wiko, this time in Berlin, has been a rare and precious gift. My gratitude overflows: to Joachim Nettelbeck, Luca Giuliani, and the entire board who afforded us this opportunity; to the extraordinary staff, whose solicitous care, boundless generosity, and unflagging goodwill have punctuated each day at the Kolleg with happinesses small and large; to my fellow Fellows, whose erudition, expansiveness,

imagination, and humor have reawakened me to wonder, to an ongoing exhilarating state of cerebral pyrotechnics that prompts me to believe, for the first time in years, that (to quote Emily Dickinson) I dwell in possibility.

I'm in a small minority at Wiko: not an academic, I am, rather, a novelist, a storyteller. I don't come to this community from the comfort (or discomfort) of another: I have no home institution, no department, I escape no administrative responsibilities. I enter this community from a solitary writer's world; and in so doing, I rediscover what it is to share knowledge, marveling, the way children share pebbles or marbles, at what it is to learn for the sheer joy of it.

This year I've repeatedly had the experience – as rare in life generally as the passing of a comet – of seeing the entire cosmos as intricately connected. Last week's colloquium will prove obliquely linked to this morning's breakfast conversation, which is in turn related to an article recommended by a fellow Fellow, which has itself a strange relation to a comment made at supper by my ten-year-old daughter ... Or, to give a more specific example: from a conversation with Beatrice Gruendler, I was led to a biography of Avicenna, which in turn drew me to the work of his contemporary and friend Ibn Tufail, author of the first Islamic novel of ideas – a book translated into English in 1708, upon which translation *Robinson Crusoe* is said in part to have been based. This novel subsequently became essential to one of the characters in the novel I have myself been writing – an illumination I could never have foreseen. And then, at the end of these many months in which Ibn Tufail has become important to me, I picked from the shelf in my apartment a Wiko yearbook several years old – in order to peruse the end-of-year letters of former Fellows – only to discover that one among them, Salman Bashier, had been, in 2008, writing a book on Ibn Tufail's novel.

How, then, not to feel that all Wiko conversations, past and future, across disciplines, across years, are in dialogue with one another, and that they reaffirm the necessity and vitality of intellectual discussion? How not to feel that this – so simple, and yet so rare – is, after all, what life is *for*? To find myself at a Thursday supper this spring, surrounded by a philosopher, a sociologist, and two literary scholars, engaged, not for minutes but for hours, in a fiercely passionate and wholly unaffected discussion of what love is, and of how it differs for Austen, Flaubert, and Proust – I couldn't have dreamed of a more satisfying or inspiring evening. I never thought I could be so lucky.

The blessing of so many words has been balanced by the blessing of silence. My beautiful ground floor office in the new building feels like a terrarium: its two large picture

windows give onto a riot of greenery, through which, if I am patient, I can witness the flit and scurry of birds, rodents, and insects. A vast family of brown-striped mice lives in the ivy alongside the stone path, but they dart out singly, anxiously, like comic actors making hasty appearances onstage. Often I've watched robins hop manically and puff their breasts, squabbling over a wriggling worm. One afternoon a falcon landed upon a low-hanging branch opposite my desk and rested there for a full minute, a glossy blackbird stiffening in its claws. I've listened to the sparrows chattering like gossiping housewives as they build their nests in the vines along my wall. These riveting adventures have been my only interruptions: day after day, I've sat bent over my manuscript, blissfully unaware of the passage of hours. There has been, here, a freedom to concentrate that in my "real" life is all but unimaginable. Like everyone else, I'm loath to relinquish it.

I'm loath, too, to leave this strange and fascinating city, with its grandiose, forlorn facades, its tormented histories, its vast, sleepy boulevards and surreptitious, bustling enclaves. From the meandering asylum compound in Beelitz to the Olympic Village at Elstal to the former US listening station in nearby Grunewald, there are everywhere abandoned, crumbling traces of the city – and the mores – that came before. There is much dark history even in a walk through this verdant and apparently placid neighborhood of villas and lakes, so abundantly flowered in the springtime, so crisply snow-covered in winter. Of course there are, too, the unparalleled museums and concert halls – and the delight that they, too, are almost as if abandoned. Should you want to hear Barenboim play the piano, you can find tickets on the day of the performance. Should you wish to visit Caravaggio's *Amor Vincit Omnia*, you can stand before him unmolested for a good twenty minutes on a Saturday morning and indulge the illusion that his impudent, suggestive smile is directed at you alone. Should you desire to attend a service (in English once a week, no less) at the Berliner Dom, you can slip into its enormous rococo insanity and, surrounded by empty pews, have the distinct impression that the priest is reciting for you.

Of course, part of the perfection of the Wiko year is its impermanence. Such a pitch of intensity and engagement is not, for any individual, indefinitely sustainable. The miracle is that the Kolleg manages to reproduce, year after year, infinite new variations upon this experience. Year upon year, outgoing Fellows record our versions of the Wiko sojourn, all somehow the same yet each somehow different; and year upon year, incoming Fellows disregard these records, only to arrive, ten or eleven months later, at a similar appreciation of what it has all meant.

I will return, now, to a writing room without colleagues, without conversation, without falcons or mice. I'm unlikely to have a three-course lunch for months to come; and alas, nobody will help me sort out my computer problems or my parking tickets. I may happen upon fascinating texts or revelatory images, but I won't have the chance to ask questions about them, to listen to the diverse wisdom of so many. I'll miss this haven greatly; but I'll carry with me – my precious booty – the discoveries made, the books and articles read (and still to read), the minds and characters I've been fortunate to encounter, the sights and textures and smells of it all. It is enough to sustain me for a long time.

And then? And then, like all old Fellows, I'll return for a visit, and marvel again.