

# Noises

*by* Grant Bailie

It was midnight. I was outside the cottage, digging another row of star-shaped holes for the shrubbery. The last holes had been too shallow, so the shrubs only whistled instead of actually singing like they were supposed to—like it said they would on the package. On particularly dry days they only hummed. I did not mind the whistling or humming so much—any kind of noise seemed to me a pretty impressive feat for a plant, but to my wife it was a source of some annoyance. She would look out the kitchen window and sigh in that special way she had, as if a weight was descending slowly upon her, forcing the air from her body. I had a vinyl E-Z chair that used to make that same sound whenever I sat in it; she made me get rid of it.

“We paid a lot of money for singing shrubs,” she said, staring out the window. Right then they were whistling “You Are My Sunshine.” One of them might have been a little off key. “Singing shrubs, not whistling shrubs...or humming shrubs. If we wanted whistling we could have got a bird.”

“We could have got a parrot. That might have actually sung too.”

“The package said they would sing,” she said and that was the end of it.

So midnight and there I was. Beneath a full moon with the sanctified shovel, and a plastic watering can shaped like an elephant and filled with the blood of a lamb. The lamb blood was part of the directions on the package. As was midnight and the star-shaped hole. The plastic watering can shaped like an elephant just happened to be on sale.

I dug the holes deeper this time. Much deeper and it was nearly dawn by the time I finished. I could hear the birds making their usual pre-morning racket. It sounded to me like arguing, like the birds were waking up irritable, with bird-hangovers and unfinished bird-fights to continue. I imagined the sort of common dramas that

might have taken place at a bird cocktail party the night before, with the husband bird spending too much time at the drink table with the sister of the host—an attractive bird with impressive plumage and a brightly colored chest. And the next morning all the nervous hopping from branch to branch and the feeble chirping explanations.

When I was done replanting the shrubs I watered them with the lamb's blood, then squirted them a bit with the garden hose for good measure. I stood in the yard for a moment, waiting to see if they would favor me with a tune. The sun was rising above the trees now, and the birds had proceeded to the part where they silently went on with their business and avoided each other's eyes.

No song from the shrubs though. It was still too soon after the trauma of replanting; it is an unpleasant thing, I am told, to be uprooted and moved.

I went inside, stripped off my clothes and crawled into bed smelling of blood and soil and sweat. My wife stirred a little, rolled over to give me a few inches space on the mattress. I lay on top of the covers staring up at the ceiling. The sun was too bright for me to sleep now, so I just waited till the time when I knew I could give up, and would go to the kitchen, make coffee, wait for whatever would happen that day to happen.

And right here I wanted to have the shrubbery start to sing something. Something sad and poignant in soft green voices that would drift across the lawn and come in like a breeze through the bedroom screen as I lay there on the bed, my wife softly snoring and the sun moving higher in the sky, its light growing thin and hot. It would have been a nice way to end, I think, but it is still too soon.

