

A small natural event, a mildly disturbing one, witnessed the previous evening and still somewhere at the back of my mind probably made it unwise for me to listen to the Minister of the Environment on the radio next morning. He was defending changes in the regulations concerning the erection of advertising billboards in the country. He said there were now places protected from such intrusions which no longer qualify as "country" at all. But, I thought crossly, if advertisers want more billboards, why should the Government ease their way? What's in it for the Government? Besides, his chief defence during his interview was that there would in fact be no changes at all. In which case, why change the regulations? The whole business sounded like a con-trick, especially when he ended by passionately telling us we had no need to fear, that he, as much as anyone, wanted "the countryside to remain as beautiful and tranquil as we know it is".

Perhaps it was that small happening the previous evening, an event that doubtless takes place all the time, but was never before seen by me, that made me react to the Minister's passionate affirmation of the beauty and tranquillity of "the countryside". Towns can be beautiful too, or should be, and that farmland is not "tranquil" is a commonplace. These words are being written in a room that is between two fields: the one to the east is being chain-harrowed with attendant tractor-roars and clankings; the one to the west is being sprayed by what looks like an aeroplane trying to take off, the tractor its fuselage, the vast spray-bars behind it, on either side, its wings. What is de-tranquillizing about the country is not its agricultural busyness but sudden natural events.

For some days now a fledgling blackbird, full-grown but still the light-brown fledgling colour, has been nonchalantly hopping and pecking about the place. What is surprising about this bird is the way it does not startle. You can almost walk up to it before it moves, and then it only does a couple of hops and stays watching you, its head to one side.