

Strangebird

We sit together amongst the branches of our afternoon tree. Below us cars pass and people mill. The world is loud. Winter's early days see our oak bare but for a few lonely wagging leaves, brown and dry. We perch exposed, visible to any who look upwards, yet secure and protected here in the chill breeze and low orange sunlight.

A grey squirrel darts up the trunk, in two or three quick bursts finding herself at our level. Many of us watch dispassionately, barely curious. She fixes one eye on us, within a moment running to the end of a distant limb. There's room here in our bower for other lives.

Our feathers begin to puff up against the rapidly cooling evening. We each edge closer to our neighbour.

And then our voices rise, echoing over the darkening street. First, one friend calls out. An answer skips back through the skeletal branches, then another. We are all singing together, our song an ode of defiance against the impending night.

Our morning tree is a towering plane in the centre of the park, casting its long, ragged shadow over the lawns and paths. The bramble lined brook cuts a dark, straight course behind one of the football goals. We can see past the tall wall, its bricks splintered by the years, bordering the ground, shielding the park from the High Street beyond.

And then I see him again. Strangebird. Black, perfect feathers smooth against his still body. The long, elegant beak, opening, closing, then stretching wide apart once more. Yet oddly a little too bright, a touch too languorous in its movement. And the eyes, never shining, just dark and dead, as silent and deep as the midnight windows of the houses in the streets below us. But the strangest thing of all, the one idiosyncrasy which had caught my attention to begin with, was that as we roosted in our dozens, our songs bouncing every which way among the branches, our friend remained resolutely dumb, the only silent one out of us all, voiceless and frightened. He did move; his head nodded, wings stretched. He would even attempt to hop a short distance along his perch. Yet, somehow, he was animated in a way which I did not recognise in any of the other birds we flocked with. A stranger amongst us, hidden and anonymous in our number. He soared with us. He descended to the ground with us. However, it seemed to me that while we scavenged, picking through the grass, ambling with our stilted gait, our odd interloper simply pecked distractedly, otherwise stock still, staring.

Sitting high above the palace, we watch the people crossing the quadrangle at its heart. We see the limousines arrive, regal figures alighting and walking in

pairs through tall doors which open before them. Soldiers stand like pegs among the fluted marble colonnades outside the building.

It has been a rainy morning. A cold wind blows, squally sprays of water peppering our bodies. The large carriage in the quad is built from pure gold, I swear it. One man steps out and holds a door open for another. I have never seen our weird new member fly alone, not following along with the rest of us. Yet now he strains at an invisible leash, every sense seemingly heightened, instantaneously becoming alert to the mundane machinations of a small group of people. He leaps. He becomes an arrow, swift and precisely aimed, unseen by the swarming dignitaries under their black umbrellas. The light blinds us. It is as if the sun itself has suddenly broken through, not from behind the clouds above, but out of the parade ground Strangebird had shot himself towards. The world turns white and then the hammer hits. We're knocked from the tree before there is time to even move a wing.

Pieces of the king, or whatever he had imagined himself to be, lie scattered and charred on the red shining sand, along with those of his entourage, his enablers and protectors.

Strangebird, vaporised, has fulfilled his destiny.

The hour had come. This technology finally lay in humankind's hands. What mechanical birds, spiders or flies would rise to murder us all, leaders first, then establishments' political opponents, until the day when only the world's nuclear arsenals remained to stop the relentless holocaust of assassination, reprisal and slow, ineluctable genocide?