

Owen Sheers

A bird in the hand

A late arrival in a new country. It was a pleasure he'd learnt as a child. Heavy with sleep in the backseat of his parents' car, or slumped in a coach, his forehead resting against the thrumming window. And then, as the suitcases were unloaded, dark cubist sculptures assembled on the cooling tarmac, he'd step out and look at their destination, unknown under night. In the distance, the pale promise of a beach. Nearer, a lighter patch of dark that may be a pool or perhaps a sandpit. The inky blocks of the buildings against a blue-black sky. Somewhere, the sound of the sea. It was these half-arrivals he'd enjoyed, incomplete until the morning when the landscape of his holiday would be revealed in all its honesty under a brilliant Mediterranean sun.

It's traces of this sensation he feels again now as he bunches the curtain pleats in his hand and looks out of the hotel's French windows, through the white balcony and into the square below. Early morning coffee drinkers sit under the plane trees, the gravel around them dappled by the sun through their leaves. Looking above these trees he can see a white clock tower against a blue sky, and beyond that, magnolia stucco houses, piling over each other up the hill. Without looking back down into the square, at the men's jumpers, the women's scarves, he knows the blue sky is cold. An Autumn morning, not a Summer one.

Still holding the curtain open with one hand he reaches for the handle with his other and presses down. The mechanism gives

with a thick clunk, and he pushes the door open, just enough to let a blade of air into the room and to allow the sound of the pigeons cooing and bubbling in the eaves above to filter down to him.

He turns to look at her. A shaft of sunlight is cutting across her back, over the puckered sheets, but her head is left in the dusk of the room and she is still asleep. It had been a week since he'd seen her when they met last night. He'd been away on business and she'd been working in London. They'd both been busy and over the seven days apart the phone calls grew tauter down the line. So perhaps it was no surprise he'd been disappointed. Not to look at her, he was never disappointed in that way, and as usual, he'd admired her as she walked through the airport bustle, her dark hair tied back from her face, the way he liked it, allowing her tendon-carved neck room to breathe.

He'd watched her make her way towards him, looking for him, and he'd seen again how other men's eyes caught on her. But then she had seen him, and he had known, right away, he was going to be disappointed. And already he was steeling himself, hoping her first words would be kind, that she would offer him her lips. But they were not and she had not, and like a glass palace erected on the slightest of foundations he'd felt the weekend fissure on this fragile beginning. It was a fault of his, he knew that now, but he couldn't help it. Beginnings were important to him. First words, opening sentences. The potential they held. They laid down patterns, forged intricate resonances which he couldn't

shake, like fine hairs growing inside his body that he could feel, but never touch.

He's looking at her. She can tell he is, something in the fabric of his sounds. The pause in movement. A streak of sunlight is falling across her back but its band of warmth feels like his eyes, looking at her. She knows what he'll be thinking too. Last night. She was tired, had to cut her last meeting short. The tube and train were packed, a press of flesh and the smell of offices. He'd forgotten to tell her the flight number. She couldn't find the right check-in desk. She didn't trust him.

Then there'd been the flight. No seat allocation and a re-painted plane that was obviously too old, flip-up ashtrays in the arms of the seats. The turbulence unnerved her, as he knew it always did, but still, she knows he won't be thinking about any of that.

She stirs, partly to disrupt this chain of thought and partly to show him she's awake. She feels his weight on the edge of the bed, his hand, still cold from the window, on her shoulder.

'What time is it?' She speaks into the pillow, quietly, eyes closed.

'Just past eight'

'You're up early'

'I thought I'd take a walk, find a paper'

'Mmm, that'd be nice. What's it like out?'

'Nice. Cold I think. I won't be long.'

'OK'

His fingers slide away. 'Love you'

'Mmm, you too.'

She listens to his steps over the carpet, the rustle of his coat

off the back of the chair and the click, sweep, click of the door, opening and closing. The sound of him fades down the stairway, and she turns over, sighing, shifting her head down the pillow until the sunbeam catches her face and she feels its heat, sudden and sparkling under her closed eyes.

They see the bird as they are leaving the hotel. The day that had begun so coolly has found a ripe September warmth and the drinkers in the square at the front are in T-shirts and dresses now. But they are leaving by the rear entrance, through a pale walled courtyard and into a quiet narrow back street, bleached bright in the sun. Which is where they see the pigeon.

'Is it dead?'

As if it can hear her the bird lifts a wing from its side and makes a pathetic shuffle in the pale dust.

'It must have been hit by a car' he says, looking behind him, up the narrow slope between the white-washed houses. Further down, by the river, he can hear cars, can imagine their hot, sticky seats, their thick gasoline haze in this heat, but here, there are no cars.

She removes her sunglasses and goes towards the bird.

'I think its wing is broken.'

'And its leg by the look of it.'

The pigeon lies on its side, motionless in the dust but for the twitching of its grey wrinkled eye lids.

She looks at him.

'We should do something'

He looks down at the bird. The feathers round its neck are purple and blue, as if they've been glazed in a kiln.

'I don't know. I think it's pretty much dead.'

But still he bends and picks it up, surprised by how light it feels.

The bird does nothing and is limp in his hands as he carries it to the side of the road where rain from the night before has puddled in a shallow gutter.

'Maybe it just needs some water.'

He lays it within reach of the old rain, then stands. They both look at it for a moment. He notices the thinness of its red legs, the way its feathers overlap, a fan of greys and whites, the colours of a winter sea. He touches the small of her back.

'I think the shops might shut early on a Saturday here.'

They turn away from the bird and walk up the slope that will take them, via the back streets, into the centre of the small town. The sun is hot on the backs of their necks, and he squints in its glare while she settles her sunglasses back on the bridge of her nose.

He wants to have a picnic before the wedding. On his walk earlier he saw a spot on the far bank of the river that looked perfect.

Shaded, soft grass, unbleached by the heat. 'It's a perfect spot', he'd told her, 'perfect.'

When they return they are carrying plastic bags of shopping; cheese, sliced ham, fruit, a bottle of wine and two flaking baguettes. All the way down the slope towards the hotel he watches the motionless body of the pigeon.

'It's dead' he says, pushing open the gate into the courtyard.

'Yes,' she replies, a trace of relief in her voice, 'yes, it is.'

The grass by the river is not as soft as it had looked from the other bank, but patchy and surprisingly sharp and rigid. It sticks into their skin through his cotton trousers and her Summer skirt. The sun has risen higher since he saw the place earlier, and the generous blanket of shade has been reduced to dark scraps over the scuffed ground. The cork crumbles in the bottle and flies, drawn to the water, light again and again on their faces and necks. The air tastes of traffic.

He does not know it, but it's this grass that makes him doubt their love. It has unsettled his projection of what his life should be like. But instead of blaming the grass, or himself, he blames her. So, as they sit there in the still mid-afternoon heat, he finds himself imagining again, a parallel life, in which he is sitting here with another woman with whom the sharpness of the grass, the flies, the uncomfortable heat, the crumbled cork, would not matter. And as she lies back against him and he strokes the pale skin on the underside of her wrist, he decides, as he has done a hundred times before, that he will leave her, knowing, in the same seam of thought, that he will never have the courage to do so.

Lying there with her eyes closed, feeling the nail of his finger drag up and down her arm, she knows, once more, what he is thinking. She has come to recognise the patterns, the ebb and flow of his affection and over the years she has been able to chart these tides, cross referencing them against events. In this way she has become a cartographer of his emotions, but now the effort

of navigating them, of knowing the waters, is draining her. The give and the take. The becalmed threat of his love. Recently, it has made her think of an interview she once saw on television. A freed hostage on a breakfast show sofa, an inset photograph of him dishevelled and bearded above his now clean-shaven face. She'd sat on the edge of her bed, one leg of her tights pulled up to her thigh, the other rolled over her hand like a glove, as he described to the host how his guards took him out each morning, to execute him. It was the same pattern every day – blindfolded, hands tied, kneeling in the dusty courtyard, the metallic click and slide of the guns cocking behind his head. And then nothing, just the confused hum and scramble of distant downtown traffic. Everything building to an end that never came. Eventually, he explained, his desire swung on the fulcrum of that repeated moment, on those kinetic seconds, from life to death. And all he wanted after that was the end, no longer the potential of reprieve, just the end that never came.

It is as she's brushing sparks of grass from his back by the courtyard gate that they see the dead bird move. At first he thinks it's the wind, catching against the grain of its feathers. But then its wing twitches again, and when he goes over to it the wrinkled grey eyelids part across a tiny black pearl.

He bends to the bird, feeling the dampness of the sweat behind his knees.

'I should kill it' he says, not looking at her.

He listens to her steps through the courtyard, the opening and

closing of the hotel's door. And then it is quiet. It is the afternoon, the cars are parked beside the river and most of the town is asleep. The passageway where he crouches seems impossibly bright, the flat glare of the sun reflecting off the white-washed walls. He picks the pigeon up with his hands about its wings, and carries it to the other side of the street, putting it down where the wall is in shade and a creeping plant hangs down from a window box of Geraniums above.

He knows what to do. His grandfather showed him how to break chickens' necks when he was a boy, but still he looks at the bird for a long time, weighing its life in his mind. Eventually he goes to pick it up, but he is slow to close his hands around its wings, and the pigeon, that had been so limp before, flaps and struggles against him, sensing his intention. Surprised by its sudden energy, he drops it to the floor, where it tries to shuffle away from him, collapsing repeatedly on its broken leg and wing.

He reaches for it again, holding it with more resolve this time, so although he can feel its delicate muscles straining under his fingers, it is still, its head hanging limp over his knuckles. He places the forefinger of his right hand at its throat and the pad of his thumb against the back of its neck, his fingers sinking through the feathers until they are almost touching either side of the thin vertebrae. A tremor of breath runs under the finger at its throat as he places his other hand over its head, smothering its beak and eyes in a loose fist. Pressing down with his thumb, as if breaking a twig, he tightens his hand over the bird's head and pulls and twists. Its neck doesn't break and the bird struggles, opening its

beak inside his palm with a thin gasp. One panicked wing breaks free and as he gathers it back under his fingers he catches a glimpse of its wide open eyes. Closing his own, he tries again, pulling violently as he wrings the bird like a dishcloth. When he opens them again, he doesn't understand why his hands are so far apart until he looks down at the headless body and sees the thin gulping stream of blood spurting against the white paint of the wall.

He jerks back, opening his hands and dropping the decapitated pigeon. Its body flaps and convulses for several seconds, the tips of its wings writing in the dust. The head, lying in its own dark puddle, blinks twice, then opens its beak and lets out a long hiss, its thin pink and grey tongue appearing for a moment, then falling away again as the eyelids close and flatten.

Standing, he nudges the body, then the head, up against the wall with his shoe. He looks up the empty street, then turns and walks into the courtyard, holding his lightly spattered hands before him, like a man who has dipped his arms in acid and is afraid of burning himself with his own touch.

That evening they watch their friends marry at a small rural chateau. The bride wears a red silk dress she has made herself, and every time he looks at her he sees the splash of blood against the white wall. They sit together through the ceremony, holding hands, and with the priest's sermon as her backdrop, she decides to bring about the end herself. She is tired of waiting, and although she says nothing to him, he already knows. Just as the

bird sensed the difference between his killing and carrying hands, so he senses the change in her brief embrace. After dinner in the chateau's open courtyard, he sits at a deserted table, stunned in its resonance, while she dances in the opposite room. Waiters move about him, lighting candles, and the sun dips perfectly through the entrance archway, firing up the stain glass windows of the chapel. As he watches her spin and dance, appearing and disappearing between the windows and columns around the courtyard, the pigeons call to each other in the eaves and fly in scatterings across the square of darkening sky above him. He watches, and he marvels as he never has done before at what miracles they are. At the elegance of their swooping movements, and at the fragility of their common lives, held so precariously within those thin bone cages that break so easily.