

Paulo da Costa

FIGS AND WINGS

On the tip of his toes, the father crossed the lake of splattered figs surrounding the tree. He approached the cage cradled on the lower branches. The son tucked away his duffle bag under the double swinging chair and joined him at bird cage.

“Father, is the blackbird happy?”

“Anything sheltered from this braising sun should be happy.”

The father returned his attention to the bowl of seeds. With care, he sifted the seeds, ensuring only the very best reached his captive bird.

“Can’t trust commercial feeds any longer. In business to swing a buck. No love for the creatures.”

The father squeezed his hand into the cage, nestled the seed bowl in the far corner against the mesh wire. He changed the bird’s water while the son collected a handful of figs from the tree.

Together, father and son strolled a few steps away to the double swinging chair under the persimmon’s foliage admiring the coal-like shine on the blackbird’s plumage, its bright orange beak.

“Only birds pluck their feathers to provide offspring with the comfort of a nest!” The father’s words hung suspended between them.

The figs, fermenting on the ground, perfumed the air. The son whistled the blackbird’s song. The bird responded.

The father smiled.

Father and son listened to the blackbird’s canto, perhaps its last before changing to winter plumage and falling silent.

“If you opened up the door to the blackbird, would it choose to stay?” the son asked, he parted a ripe fig in half and dug into the flesh with his teeth. Succulent nectars dripped from the corner of his lips.

“Can’t invite trouble, my son. Such a cruel thing to do. So many cats and ospreys around. Wouldn’t last a day in my count.”

“What about those? They seem happy.” The son pointed to three blackbirds circling them from above.

“Not blackie, my son. Raised in the luxury of captivity, he has never known the outside of a cage. No safer place than a cage where nothing can torment him. It’s a dangerous world out there.”

The three blackbirds landed on the enclosure’s railing. Worms wriggled from their beaks. In shifts they flew back and forth, convoys of aid.

“They don’t trust us to feed their own. Could never tame those used to freedom.” He interrupted his words, his dull eyes wandered the sky. After a long pause he concluded. “Impossible to fit the wild ones into a cage. I’ve tried. Their wings broken after endless days banging their bodies against the wire. Bone against metal. Blood running from their beaks. They soon die. Their last breath, one last run at the wire and happy to depart. Their souls escaped through the tiny holes in the mesh, and again crossed the skies, I suppose.”

Father and son followed the undulating flight of the three blackbirds across the blue. The birds vanished and their gaze returned to the caged bird.

“Birds grow used to anything father, as long as they aren’t offered a taste of the broader world. They are almost happy, hopping from swing to swing inside the cage, running up and down the miniature ladder, up and down as if it was the best thing in the entire sky. In a way, they are right, it is the best thing in their tamed horizon.”

The son whistled. The blackbird did not respond this time.

“Our family carries the love of birds in our veins. Your grandfather raised turtle-doves. Smooth and warm as a mother’s bosom. The cooing always near and sweet. Can’t cuddle them in the skies. Tell me now, what sort of birds will you keep?”

A gust of wind plucked a few leaves from the fig tree. The son wanted to voice something about the changing weather, the changing times but his father continued.

“It would break my heart to see a family tradition die, son.”

The leaves still swirled in mid-air when a second gust lifted and carried the leaves over the rooftop. The son stood up. He reached under the chair, swung

the duffle bag over his shoulder and stepped toward the iron gate. At the gate he stopped, turning for a last glance at the silent blackbird. The bird stretched its beak through the mesh wire for a peck at a fig splattered on the branch supporting the cage.

“I’ll write,” the son waved and strolled into the luminous morning, nibbling on the flesh of a ripe fig.

