

The Birds

We were late, as usual. The woman allows the man to put his hand around her waist.

I can't believe I said yes to him again. He never seems to get me anywhere on time. Although—she gives the man a brief, appraising glance—at least I got to see you dance. I *am* sorry I missed the first piece. He smiles at her, steers her firmly to the line of cabs.

You can't imagine how embarrassed I felt, running up the stairs of the opera house in *this*. Even in the streetlights, the dancer can see the heat rising in her chest. He opens the door for her, leans forward to give the driver an address. So where *are* we going?

It is a kind of dance theatre, he explains, inside an old warehouse. It is sort of a maze, sort of a game—and very hard to get into. I know some of the performers. But we don't have to stay long. Now she sees the lines of hunger in the corner of his eyes. She thinks of her date's apologetic grin, his stumbling rush, their last dinner where they couldn't seem to meet. She turns in the blurring cab.

That sounds perfect.

Although it is soft, the singer's voice can carry through the bar. Warm and confident, it glides like her gaze over heads, past the stairway to the street, somewhere out into the night. Sitting at a corner booth, there was only one face not mid-conversation, not slurping a drink. He rests his face in one hand, oblivious to everything, even to the moonlight slipping through the window overhead. He stopped thinking—revising the long list of ways his evening had gone wrong—as soon as she stepped on stage. Now he basks in her voice.

The singer bows to her pianist and then the bar at large. She vanishes from the small stage, appears a few moments later in the space behind him. I didn't think that you could make it. Weren't you going to that dance?

She invited me last week, he lies, but how could I miss this? I came straight here. Besides, he added, she left with one of the dancers. She knew him through a friend. She didn't! The singer tries to mask the lightning in her eyes, that is so like her.

The man sighs, I should have listened to you. But you would have loved the second dance. A man and a woman stood alone on the stage, in a loose black suit and a thin black dress, with two blank walls forming a 'V' behind them. Through windows cut into each wall, next to a door, you could see a bald man, and a woman in a white dress. Soft piano music started, hesitant and sparse, I think it was Satie – you know Satie – but with strong notes ringing through occasionally, building very gradually, and the man and woman began to dance.

He holds the singer's gaze. In the dark of the basement, her pale features, wide and sweeping, start to shine.

When the taxi stops, and the dancer leans across to pay the driver, she braces herself before she steps outside. Then she savours the night air, the feeling of being lost. The dancer motions with his head towards a line of people further down the street. His arm pulls her past the queue, to a service entrance in the warehouse's side. She ignores the glares they draw while the dancer whispers in the usher's ear.

They pass through a wood-panelled waiting room, a long concrete stairwell running the length of the building, rising up so gradually she is not sure how high it goes. Unseen speakers crackle.

Tonight is a chance to see nature inside out. All that we ask of you in return is that you leave yourself at the door. If you come with a fellow traveller, leave them there too. There is a safe haven at the centre of this labyrinth, where you can recollect yourself, and think back on what you have seen. But until then, look, listen, wander.

Two women dressed in black stand behind a desk piled up with emerald masks in the shape of birds. Heavy with their long curved beaks, they cover the eyes and nose, transforming the woman and the dancer into strangers. The dancer whispers, let's meet up at the bar in the centre, after we have had a taste.

Around the corner, two birds wait. They usher the woman and the dancer into elevators. Inside, there are no buttons. Suddenly alone, the woman feels the tightness of the mask around her face, the heaviness of the beak, the chill of the empty building rush around her.

Ahead: a room of shadows, deep purples, blues, and black. Her eyes take time to adjust but, using her hands, she guides herself around the room. The walls billow with some kind of fabric. She discovers tables, cabinets, and chairs, all hard, black wood. Then she starts—a bird emerges from a wall beside her, hands peeling apart fabric to reveal long, curved beak and empty eyes. Pushing through the heavy drapes herself, she feels them brush against her arms and legs.

Three more birds with gleaming beaks move around the room. She feels curious. The audience, or some of the performers? She is alert to everything. In one corner there is a long trestle table, set with plates and cutlery. She watches two men enter, start to dine. Sensing another portal, she leans one shoulder in and plunges.

Immediately, she can see a larger space ahead. A crowd of bird-faced figures cluster round another table. Edging closer, she can see a man and a woman, faces slick with sweat. They prowl around the wooden bench, swaying slightly. She wonders for a moment if they are friends of her date. Suddenly vaulting the table, the man pulls the woman to his chest, his hand clutching her shoulder. She pushes him backwards sharply, raking his face with one hand, then kicking his chest with the other. Sprawled on the table, the man shouts something indistinct, repeating what could be a name, clutching his red cheek.

The flock of birds follows them en-masse, and she joins in too, flittering from room to room, from floor to floor. Slowly, though, she lags. She is left behind.

Finally reaching a stairwell, she cannot see a single bird to follow. The ascending route is blocked, and so she makes her way down slowly. Passing one more bolted door, she guesses any minute now she'll find herself back where she started. But, wrists fluttering, she cannot find the doors, or any room that she's seen before. The birds she finds, in loose groups of twos and threes, are too small or fat to be the ones she'd been behind. She hears a noise above her, and she swiftly climbs.

She hears the curtains rustle first. A man rushes past her and, before an approaching flock of birds can block her way, she turns and chases after him. She can tell that there are more birds behind her, and she feels her heartbeat race. Up another flight of stairs, then through another shrouded room, until she almost walks into the man she had seen, now frozen near the

entrance of a wide and empty space. The noise of curtains tells her that other birds are there, but she does not turn to look.

Men in suits form a semi-circle round the unmasked man, each wearing a simple domino mask—black-and-white vigilantes holding wooden bats. In the middle stands a woman, impassive until at last she gives a short and slicing movement to her throat. With brutal strokes, they beat the man, knocking the wind out of him, crippling his knees. At length they toss aside the bats, kick him in the gut and groin. She looks around her, and cannot tell if she should clap or cry. Other bird heads twitch and sway.

Suddenly the woman in the centre draws a gun, pointed at the victim's head. On the verge of throwing up, she turns and runs.

The singer orders them some tea. I need to soothe my throat. They watch steam rising from the pot, and she asks, why did she leave you, after a dance like that?

It takes the man some time to answer. I don't think that she really paid any attention to the dance. I didn't say this before, but we were late, and when the dance had ended, and I turned to see her reaction, I could feel her frustration. It had been such a transporting experience for me, and to see her clenched, cut off like that—

I know exactly what you mean, the singer says, all you really wanted was to connect. Exactly. But it's her loss. Everything looks so different now. Fragile. They lock eyes through the fresh breath of steam.

Basking in the warm light of the bar, the dancer tilts his head, half closing his eyes, and sinks slightly deeper back into his seat. Around him, the room is alive with noise and laughter. Every now and then, new audience members walk in, hanging masks on hatstands, or leaving them propped on their foreheads, greeting friends across the room, ordering fresh drinks.

He had enjoyed it, mostly. Following a pair of lovers, he traced their story as they staked their fortunes on the man's career, and watched as it fell apart, catching glimpses of two other tales as he worked his way through the warehouse. It was easy enough to make his way to the bar at the centre, and looking at the clock, he wonders what is taking her so long.

One of the actors enters. They share words of mutual praise. He looks at the clock again.

It is getting late.

She tries to trace her steps back, frantically searching for a sign or symbol she can use to tell where she might be. Heading up one flight of steps, drumbeats in her ears, she tugs in desperation at a heavy, bolted door. To her surprise, it swings open. She twists herself in.

The crowd at the bar are starting to thin out now, and the tea is almost gone. Catching her pianist's eye, the singer stand. One more set. I'll stay a little longer. I don't need to rush. Is there something I can sing for you? How about something by Charlie Parker. Do you know *Lover Man*?

Without a word, she nods.

There are no walls here, no curtains, no chairs. No fabric to rustle, no gunshots in the air. She thinks she can just discern all four walls of the warehouse. It seems much larger than she had expected. Perhaps it is the trees.

Rising from the soft, damp ground, trees spread their arms in rich, bright leaves across the vast and empty space. Alone, her vision narrowed by her bird's eyes and beak, she wanders slowly, seeking the faint notes of birdsong at the edges of the space. Circling the broad trunks, she feels her heartbeat in her throat, her pulse in her wrists.