



PARADISE

THE BIRDS WATCH US, but not only us – they watch everything.

What do they make of us? What do we make of them?

Some kinds you never ever see again. Some birds are here part-time: off, wintering in Senegal... There's always fewer live here, or visit ... all gangsters anyway, and raucous. Feathers, wattles, end up grey and black, they started brilliant.

Don't you wish...? You have the urge to leave, but you never do. I know you can't fly, but the desire for somewhere else, it surely doesn't fade, although it's hot here all the year, hot as Tunisia. Dates and olives. You won't escape something, wouldn't find anything. Just hot, all over.

We, the permanent, look uprooted, as if we slid on to another atlas page, as if some hitch – the digitals? – had given someone else our colour, had given us tribal bosses, a regime imposed by people dressed strange, billowy, bright, and talking dialects we'd looked down on. Spying on us with new inventions.

It's all quite different, but we go on as if it is the same, just some anomalies. No conclusion – not about people in general: – it'd be pretentious and vapid.

'It isn't temperatures,' Blanchine says. 'Those have changed for almost everyone. The greenery, the animals – all adapted, or transferred. Or disappeared. We just wait for info and for help. That's how we humans are.'

'It's like a movie, where we're transmogrified; it's magic, and the future: both. Except there's no makeup or costumes, and no end,' I say.

'No music,' Blanchine says, 'or the wrong sort. Not mine. Even – not yours.'

'As for tomorrow, when your man is here....' I prompt.

'Of course,' she says, 'I'll cancel every trace of you. As if you don't exist, were never here. Take your name from out my mouth, chop down your family tree and burn it to fine ash, eliminate your taste, your tastes....' She laughs.

'I can do likewise, but it's different,' I say. 'You won't be here.'

'Yes, I'll be here,' she says. 'It's you that won't, that won't be anywhere.'

Being here, alive, I take as punishment, my punishment for all the faulty arguments I've used, torture excused, executions passed over, imprisonments ignored. Poverty condoned. Punishment doesn't mean you can defect, escape, move to some other position, recant, publicly confess. No, it's just punishment, deserved or not. There is a reason underneath it, even if that's not why it carries on. It's not caused, maintained, by reason.

Anyway, you can't avoid it. Perhaps it's merited. Perhaps one day it stops, but what you did is done, indelible, unpardonable. The punishment's just a stretch, a by-blow for the past; there's no one to complain to, no judge, no law. It's good there's no one who might relent for you, turn soft – they wouldn't understand; they'd let you off to protect their own sensibilities: sheer narcissism. Besides, life that wasn't punishment wouldn't be a wonder, a pleasure to go through, invite people in, like it was my library, my park, my bed. Life would still be hard and short; even if it's not a punishment.

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'There should be stories,' I tell Kaunis. 'Everything that is, exists, should have its picture, a history, even a joke, attached. Reality can be, should be, fabulous – a tale. But, everything starts anew. Fresh and awaiting obsolescence. Scurries away, like water.

'We're free to roam, like animals without their clan: thrust out and homeless.'

'I know about Red Riding Coat,' he says. 'Where I come from, it's full of wolves. Could be, it's only stories: you don't see the creatures, ever. Blanchine's wolf – where does he go while you take over from him? Maybe he keeps a bar – in Gabon, maybe?' He laughs.

'Oh no,' I say, 'he's in a mine. The gold. At sea. Or driving, driving rigs.... all night. He comes here to spend his cash, romance Blanchine.'

'Don't try to take his place,' says Kaunis. 'He'll pull out your eyes.'

'Blanchine doesn't feel that way for me: defensive,' I say. 'She protects him, not me. With me, all is convenience, proximity. She stands by; like me. I'm her spare part.'

I don't know what she thinks, she doesn't ever say and I don't ever ask. We're perfectly alike.

'There's work for you,' says Kaunis.

His job is finding work for me – 'Half a day,' he says. 'Except it starts early on – at four, and ends at eight. The heat....'

'It should pay more,' I say, 'but then *you*'d take more, and for sure, it's lifting....'

'You load the truck, but there'll be help,' he says.

'I don't need help,' I say. 'My pay goes down if there is help.... My money goes to you, and everyone around ... that's where I need the help.'

'I get you known,' he says: 'Without me, you don't know how to ask.'

'I could work direct for you, Kaunis, give you what I'm paid, and you could feed and clothe me. Like your dog,' I say.

'No,' he says. 'I'm not a manager. I don't organise the guys I help.'

'It's primitive,' I say. 'Our relation. I'm for ever at a beginning, and you're my parasite for always.'

‘No,’ says Kaunis, ‘you’re wrong. You think because we wear the same skin overalls, that we’re both brave little soldiers, same fatigues, same war. It isn’t so. You’re not my dog, you’re my dog’s flea, and I am someone’s dog, but I am lovely, brushed, and you are not. My boss is boss because his father was. He knew – they knew – who they had to know; they had the work they had to have to be the boss. I am your boss, it’s true, but a real boss wouldn’t recognise me as a boss like him. I salute *my* boss, I kneel, and crawl. I brush the flies off his dead face, his dead eyes don’t see, don’t care. He and I, we know the same jokes, worship the same false gods, but....’

‘I get it, Kaunis,’ I say. ‘I’ve always known it, but it takes courage to admit, and then you know that courage isn’t part of it, not in the slightest. Submit. Say it’s just tactics. Better not to have too much, of courage, as it can kill you and then you won’t be there to serve....’

‘Better get there at half-past three,’ says Kaunis, ‘or they might find another guy to take your place.’

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There’s lots of help, so much, each is a hindrance. We have beautiful clean pants, and a blouse with a name on – not ours, naturally, but the outfit’s ... like the outfit that we wear, clean and discreet. Our overalls are our fatigues, before we start we are exhausted. They are a uniform for everyone, except – there’s other uniforms to come. Those won’t be clothes, but accoutrements, special equipment not to be worn, except on ceremonies: on parade. To be kept clean, unpegged from a reality, as if the uniformity could be camouflage, or a talisman, a cloak of invisibility, so’s you’d not be singled out by field-marshal Death. What you would never choose to wear, if you were free. Clean, as if unworn, as if inside it you too were clean and uniform.

There’s trucks in thousands, in an expanse of mud – not General Winter, but a General Mire. We were men and women, now we’re soldiers, all of us, ganged up.

We’re all recruits. We’ve been called, not by God – ‘called up’. Temporary souls, each with its number. All to be soldiers, each worth its shilling. Who’s had that?

War ends the speculation about sex and gender, class – all put coldly under glass. Politics is ended – except if you get it wrong, they’ll shoot you: that’s the new politics.

Your side will torment you, starve and endanger you – but theirs will torture you. Love, affection – levels of passion – all will be exposed, in full view, best have nothing, no affect, no family, no regrets, no one to miss or miss you. Hunker down, and learn to crawl in different ways – it saves your life.

‘You see,’ says Harri, my helper from the truck. ‘How uncomplicated it all is. Being a simple soldier is the simplest of all. Life. In its essence. Win or lose. That matters, but much more matters what happens along the way. All the rest, all you’ve ever tried to make a poetry of – it’s gone, evaporated. Everything you might have loved – comes and goes, in an envelope. Mail. Addressed to your uniform. Delivered late. A message? That would be important ... a dear John ... “You were, you are not.”’

‘It wasn’t complicated before,’ I say. ‘Though it’s true: love and the family, their rules could break your legs. That was a hopscotch you won’t play now. Your reflections, moods and memories – best have had those a century ago. There’s only

modernism once – then it's old hat.... The best now is – go back to how it was before, all of us no younger, but alive...'

He doesn't grasp the terms. 'Memories, modernists'. It doesn't matter, not a bit. That's not why you need friends now.

Each simple soul here is in a lottery, a numbered ball. The generals have placed their bets – and will it be me who wins, and all the others are brought down, destroyed?

'Don't oversimplify,' says Harri. 'There's Propaganda: Intelligence. They're tricky, puzzling. But you're not right for those. Stick to what is simple, the simplest, if you can.'

'Who are we? Who are they?' I ask.

'You're a part of where you are,' he says. 'That is a principle of jurisprudence. The soil, your used body – those for ever belong to the state, to where and what you are. To the state, the nation, the culture, to history – it all works out the same.'

'Ephemera,' I say. 'Like the Greeks said. The only law is geometry... that's what we are, and all we carry with us. What they thought. It didn't save them.'

'No one expects it,' Harri says. 'To be saved. Or else we wouldn't fight.'

It makes good sense.

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'I thought this was a moving job,' I say: 'I find – it was recruitment: the boxes loaded – maybe they're our cots. And spades. Or stuff for R and R – karaoke – speakers. Home cinema....'

'I expected to be paid. What are we worth, Harri? Who's to decide? An army's costed out in dollars, and so each of us can have a price. We sit, we run, we dig, we die, we're put in prison – and we're paid. How, and why? What are we worth, in our strange state? You'd say we're in-between: our life, our death, our wounding, mutilation: defeat and victory. All to be decided....'

'No one can say,' he says. 'That's why there's bands, parades and flags.'

It doesn't satisfy, but I'm sure it's true. Not satisfactory.

'We're paid as if we're not alive, nor dead,' I say, and Harri nods.

'If we're dead, we have no worth,' I say. I weep, and Harri comforts me. We don't mention pay again.

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The leaflet says: 'Don't complain. Everything is changed. You all know scarcity of various kinds: maybe of sex or cash, or gratifications ... of recognitions, of fingers of God that touch your heart, of purity, of empire. Now you will all share the one scarcity, and your aim will be to achieve a plenitude for each. Fullness through suffering. There is no other way. You were all normal. None of you was normal. Normal means you know what it is to be it, likewise abnormality. Now, you must all be the one or – or the other. You were all wrong! If you were normal, it was because you knew what abnormality was. They co-exist, two horses pulling the same sledge.

‘The destination – can it be reached by violence? Scarcity – what you want, don’t have – reduced by violence? Could it work? Improbable. If all are thieves, there are no rich to steal from.

‘Now, you’re all in a group. Violence is done by all – or in the name of all. You personally – you probably won’t be violent, not at all, and if you are, it could be wrong, quite unavailing. Violence against the unarmed, the non-combatant, is futile. Violence is against scarcity, not individuals, not people. It’s supposed to bring more freedom, more resources, more esteem. It’s unlikely, but we always try. Now, you are all mustered. Violence is the purpose – you won’t feel it so. You’ll feel it as risk. All in, together, for ever. Fight the good fight, and don’t ask why.... Enough!’

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