Bird on the Road

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The signs were there, only Da Wei did not put two and two together. But, months later, he would think about it and realise they were warnings.

By now, even the strange calling sounds of wild animals or birds (he couldn't be sure which) in the nights cannot jar him. He is a man who has walked to the abyss.

A short slim man, he moves with grace in his garden pulling weeds and tidying his plants.

Da Wei does not condemn others for evil; he only wonders that they dare to – in their naiveté or innocent courage – summon the presence of evil into their lives.

He pauses in his snippings. Take his neighbour. A man whose moral sensibilities are worn down like old soles, much like the pair Da Wei has upon his feet. This man would never understand if he tries to explain his fears. Such a man shrugs off death and pain. But it is right; it suits the world he lives in. His neighbour is a manager in a real estate firm. No wonder for he is pragmatic, tough – he does not hesitate to be cruel or to make decisions concerning the jobs of those below him.

I can look a man in the eye and tell him he's fired. No problem, he smirks in an over-the-fence conversation.

Da Wei stops to scrape some mud from his shoe onto the grass. Perched on his left leg, like a crane, Da Wei thinks of himself as a one-legged man, incomplete.

His neighbour is the only man he knows who paints his name upon his wheelie bin. Humphrey. Just above the number of his residence. His neighbour comes home on the nights he isn't away to his steak or sausage and two veges cooked by a kind wife whom he lies to.

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Da Wei knows he lies because his neighbour cannot resist boasting to him, and later Da Wei would compare versions of tales told by his neighbour's wife to his wife in their over-the-fence conversations.

Passing his neighbour's place, the smell is rank. Part of his neighbour's garden is blocked by a warped and rusty wire fence almost completely covered by a hedge of creepers, and dark green coniferous trees, and it is behind this enclosure the smell seems to come.

Da Wei suspects the birds his neighbour encages. He has never set foot inside his neighbour's place for his neighbour has never invited him in, but through the foliage he sees what looks like a huge cage, and, several times, he glimpses a white parrot with a yellow crest which is squawking and calling out something indecipherable. From time to time, he sees birds of other variety fluttering inside. The smell is so bad he wonders if some of the birds are lying dead at the bottom of the cage and whether he should report it to a bird protection society. Da Wei cannot bear the idea of birds in cages. He thinks they should be free to fly wherever they pleased – what was the use of their wings if the Active Principle (God, Creator, Nature, Life Force) did not mean them to enjoy the blue sky?

Sparks of glowing sunlight bounce off the cage, accompanied by raucous screeching.

Da Wei thinks angrily, That man fattens on his plentiful food, and the fat he eats is so thick it wraps around his soul until the day he suffocates.

Walking home on the road one day, Da Wei bears testament to a depraved death – of a bird that is lying right in his path.

A very dead bird. Without a head.

Because it is a warm day in the middle of summer, flies land upon the bird as men in a boat jump onto land. For a moment Da Wei's eyes cancel out the sight of the bird, and returns to a previous picture composed of green lines, shadows of scarred and peeling paperbarks, shrubs and plants twining themselves onto wooden fences. The road peters out into a blue horizon of hills.

His daughter's face drifts into his mind momentarily. It is the bird or seeing it dead that has done it: trigger off an emotion in him that he barely recognises.

He closes his eyes.

It had been his gift. A gift no one knew he possessed because he had himself half-forgotten: to blow upon dead butterflies and to see them swell and float gently into the blue distance. He had tried it on birds and he loved the way their feathers filled. Their pneumatic presence surrounded his head. He had felt close to the root of the divine.

But Dead Birds. Lying upon their backs, wings outstretched, their black feathers clearly defined upon the asphalt, and headless. He wonders why they should be decapitated. Was it the work of a pervert? Or a predatory animal that had

stolen the heads? What would they want with the dead head of a bird – cold and stiff with such hard beaks attached? Da Wei guesses that after today he would avoid taking this road down, he doesn't want to pass the dead bird, but it is not the first or only one he will see this summer.

Da Wei finds his wife, Mui Hoon, in the kitchen preparing the evening meal. She wears a T-shirt that says across the front: Look But Don't Touch. She is perspiring.

Home already? Anything happen? she says.

Any letters? he says.

On the table, you can see for yourself.

His wife invariably asks how his day went and he believes she expects him to have something new to tell her. For her, everyday, there are new encounters to recollect, bits of gossip she has heard from her friends or at the shops to recount, but as for him, it seemed trivial to mention what the bus driver said to the old woman who had boarded without paying or how rude the checkout girl was at the supermarket, so he almost always replies, Okay, and Nothing interesting.

Without a job, Da Wei feels like a cripple. He never actually does anything, anything worthwhile, that is: value being equated to economics nowadays.

Nothing much going at Centrelink, he says.

Da Wei goes there once a week to check on the computer for jobs.

His wife clatters plates onto the dining table.

Braised pork, she says, in reply to his question. She wipes her wet hands on her T-shirt because she doesn't possess an apron.

His wife is a dark thin woman and although she is in common T-shirt and jeans, is looking wonderful because the T-shirt enhances her breasts and she has the kind of breasts he admires – like the shape and size of champagne glasses – and the jeans curve over an inviting bottom. She makes him think of the early years when they had lain in bed until noon making love.

Until there was Kim.

From his readings, Da Wei can compare his feelings to the ones Dejanira, the wife of the half-god, Hercules, must have felt when she presented the devious centaur's shirt to him as a gift so he would love her forever, only to see the man she loved writhing and dying.

Da Wei had presented baby Kim to his wife after two years of marriage as a gift to bind them forever, but Kim proved a false gift, and she went, taking the passion of love with her, and his wife's pain and his pain only drove them apart. He watched her love become passive and finally he hardly knew himself what he should do.

Da Wei takes the newspapers to his favourite armchair to read.

Okay. You want to eat? She stands before him, tucking her damp hair behind her ears.

He tips the last bit of rice in his bowl into his mouth. Standing at the sink, he stares out of the window at the heads of azaleas, at the profusion of white and red. He sighs and runs water into the sink. It is difficult washing dishes in one small sink.

He looks up from soapsuds to the huge crows hopping about his garden, dominating it. They have stripped the bottlebrush tree of all its beauty. The tree looks sad with those empty drooping heads.

There wasn't much point waiting for the kookaburras to return. Nothing is left for them in the garden; and he has loved the kookaburras' comical quizzical heads and weighted bodies that look too heavy for flight.

He says, as he carefully places the last dish in the rack:

I saw a dead bird today.

She does not look up from her sewing. Coloured threads, different sizes of needles and boxes of buttons are scattered on a small table next to her chair.

The bird – it was on the road? she bites off a piece of thread.

Yes.

Must be some driver. Some of them are very careless. The other day I crossed the exitway at the petrol station and the driver didn't stop. I had a full bag of groceries and I dropped it because a car came out screeching.

He blinks at her. He sits down.

His wife is his bulwark against the forces he fears. What these forces are he finds it hard to identify. Always, he senses something strange about the world and people. Perhaps these fears have come to the fore because of all the leisure time he has. He has been unemployed for almost eight years.

It seems to him that his newfound country is a good one, that is what he tells everyone, in all the letters he writes home, but it requires him to be a vegetable. Sit and rot is about all they want from him. No one wanted his experience or his abilities. From time to time, he did casual work as a cleaner. He tried lawn mowing for his neighbours, assisting a friend in plumbing jobs, and applying to be a waiter – that wasn't much good because they wanted someone young so as to pay them less.

When he tried to enrol at a university for a teaching degree, he was told by the woman on the phone that coming from a Non-English Speaking Country, it was unlikely the Board of Teachers' Registration would allow him to teach English in Australia. He tried to tell her she was mistaken, that his country had a good programme of languages and he had a Master's in English Literature. He had been disgusted with her presumption and ignorance. It was convenient for her to dismiss him.

Sometimes he feels disgusted with his chosen country of residence. It isn't a problem of survival: food is cheap, he can eat well and he has a roof over his head. It is the way he is sidelined that bugs him.

Into Da Wei's mind swims a memory of the dead bird. The sight of it has shaken him, more than he would allow. It has brought him perilously close to the edge where he turned his eyes away: what was the point of looking, he knew the view all too well.

The crows caw as he goes into the garden with the last rubbish bag of the day. He tosses the bag into the wheelie bin, and stands looking at them.

He remembers his neighbour telling him that in recent years there have been more and more crows coming into Brisbane.

His wife is on the phone when he returns.

It's mama, she announces, moving her mouth away from the receiver. She sends you her greetings.

She talked to her mother once a month and wrote frequently, enclosing snapshots.

Da Wei finds his mother-in-law domineering (she had been almost insane that time – the time his baby girl had been… calling every hour, and nagging his wife with unsolicited advice and admonitions, then when the time came to tell her, little Kim was dead, she had shrieked on and on till he had to hang up the phone) but at such a distance from them, and with nothing of urgency in their relations, he has nothing now but goodwill towards her.

Oh, say hello and give her all my good wishes, he says.

His wife repeats what he has said, then laughs at something her mother says in reply. They go on talking.

Da Wei goes to his study and turns on the computer. He clicks on the folder marked Letters. He has a job application to prepare. He types at the top of the screen his name, which for the convenience of his prospective employers he changes to David.

David, he mutters. David, the giant slayer.

He feels his bile rise. He feels cheated, somehow, by someone. Even his name has to be compromised. He has to fit in. Of course, he loves the country, his new home, the lucky country, but try as he might, he is still excluded. He is not Anglo-Saxon, and although he knows of many of his countrymen who come here and by watching Rugby League and holding summer barbecues in their backyards congratulate themselves on having assimilated, he does not feel he would ever be fully accepted.

Too much of his country's history is inside him. How can it be otherwise?

He hears a tap on his study door. She looks pale.

I don't feel well. I have a pain here.

Maybe stomach ache, he consoles her. Lie down and you'll feel better. Do you want me to take you to the hospital?

No, not hospital. I'll lie down.

He continues typing and when he finishes an hour later enters the bedroom. She is lying in bed very still, her chest barely going up and down, her face very pale. Suddenly, he is afraid.

He cries out and takes her hand. She does not respond. His fear rises sharply. Without knowing what he is doing, he scrambles for his car keys, lifts her bodily, and stumbles out of the front door to reach the car. He installs her into the passenger seat like a parcel marked Fragile. He climbs in the other side and starts the engine with trembling hands.

He murmurs her name, as the road sways up and down before his eyes on his way to the Mater Hospital. The same route. The same mad driving as once before – he and his wife and their baby – how they had waited for Kim to emerge from the operating theatre – how he had sat – on a play area leading off the children's ward – upon a red plastic chair.

The fat starchy faced hospital nurse turns to him, I told your wife where you should wait when she is in the theatre.

Meanwhile, origami parrots rotate slowly from the white ceiling and in the opposite bed, a toddler boy with a deformed arm and slightly vacant cast of expression plays, smiling, with the toys scattered on the blanket. His incoherent mother, breathing heavily, turns to him to say, Told you… be back, didn't I? before lurching off, to be nowhere in sight.

The mattresses in the metal cots are high enough so he does not need to bend to reach for Kim.

The ward has an adjoining play area. Da Wei sits on a plastic chair and stares through see-through grilles that give onto the street below and the Princess Plaza across. He diddles with a plastic stove, turning the knobs, and moving the fry pans and saucepans and tiny plates. He looks across to where his wife sits inside the ward: the expression on her face hurts him.

If Kim was with him, he would place her fingers on the stove, teach her how to push buttons and turn knobs. In the corners are huge plastic pumpkins with a variety of toys inside. A toy house perches on a low table. The floor is littered with small chairs and cushions. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees his wife pick up New Idea and rifle through the magazine.

He selects a stuffed toy – a green dog that has a string attached to its head – and swings it absently; looking around quickly, no one is watching him, he pushes it into Kim's overnight bag. He takes as well a striped tiger cub with the sweetest expression, and a large grey mouse.

He looks up to see his wife standing before him. She says, We have to wait in the parents' room.

In the parents' room, they sit drinking hot coffee supplied freely from a machine, and smiling to the others in the room – sympathising smiles, genuine in their shared stress of having a child in the operating theatre. There are no strangers here because something greater than self is at work.

It is a long wait.

After one glance, he doesn't want to think about the face of the doctor who comes out of the operating theatre. He knows the woman does not care, that to her, a doctor, death is something inevitable. The sympathetic look and soft voice are merely for show or practice.

They return to the ward to pick up her things. He sits down again in the plastic chair and because his heart is stunned, he can only repeat in his mind, Kim, I got you the toys. You would have liked the toys. I got you the toys.

And it seems to him a terrible waste – the toys waiting in the bag and no one to play with them.

After a while, as though he is underwater, he faintly hears his wife's voice – it is unnaturally high – she makes a sound. Like glass scraping against glass.

But this time staggering down the corridor with his wife in his arms, this time, he will be waiting alone.

Go home, they say. She is in a stable condition.

They will run tests.

He goes home, and only on his way back does he remember that he has driven on the road that contains the dead bird he has seen earlier in the day, perhaps has even driven over it in his haste.

He swings his car sharply round. He would go home by another route.

It is two in the morning when he arrives home and hits the bed. He falls asleep almost instantly.

Why does it happen? He dreams of his wife who appears and disappears in a Never-Never Land in which he is lost. It is too silent in the bush. No animals. No birds.

He sits beside a wattle and feels, I am a failure. My life is a failure. Everything is taken away from me.

His wife was going to die. She would be laid out in a silk-lined coffin while the relatives passed around murmuring prayers.

I will hold my head in my hands and sit in a corner. When she is dead, I will shoot the crows in my garden, he thinks. I will buy a handgun.

His fear breaks like a dam. He lifts his hands to his eyes to cover them. Then he sleeps again and dreams he is in his garden and watering his tomatoes.

He realises he has developed an instinct, a self-preservation instinct to guard him against what he can only understand as horror.

They have kept it at bay for him: his parents, his wife, his job when he had a job. But his parents are ageing, his wife is dying, and work, he can barely find enough to do.

His wife had given him the comforting rituals, the home, her sound practical mind, these soothed and lined his world, which would otherwise crack like an egg.

What it is they all keep away from him he only glimpses in his dreams – the times he wakes sweating in bed.

It isn't death, although that figures largely in his consciousness. Perhaps more than most (although he cannot be certain, not having asked anyone else their feelings in this regard), he has an intense awareness of death. But it is not death that gives him this sense of horror.

What is it? Perhaps for want of a better word, he would say evil. But not evil as used in a religious sense. Perhaps destruction would be a better word. The easy, the casual destruction we wreck upon our lives and the lives of others, not to mention upon the animals and the plants.

The night blows chill air through the window. Da Wei wakes with his feet cramped with cold. He hears the wind hissing in the garden and thinks, How long can I hold off this knowledge? How long before the wave breaks and engulfs me?

He waits for the dawn because he can no longer sleep.

Da Wei is in the garden watering his plants when a butterfly darts from a leaf to the sky. A small speck of yellow, disappearing.

In that instant something in his heart tugs the way an almost forgotten balloon pulls at its moorings at the end of a carnival.

I wonder if I can, he says softly, excitedly. If I can still do it.

The power had been given to him on the day his grandmother died. She was a woman who had known the various medicinal herbs and cures and the secrets of what moved the earth: people called her, in a friendly way, a witchdoctor.

As a boy, he wandered the jungle with her, listening to her instructions and watching her prepare her medicines.

He had watched in awe as she brought birds back to life.

Start with a butterfly, she urged him, when he had pleaded for her knowledge.

Look, she said. This is Death following.

She pointed at a small white butterfly trailing somewhere to the left of a bigger butterfly.

They always go together, she said.

So he had tried.

After several years, he had slowly acquired her vast store of knowledge. Then she died. On the day she died, he blew upon a butterfly that was dead and watched it come to life. It was a pale yellow and its wings were spotted. He had thought they might possibly tear if he touched them. He saw it had died but that somehow its wings had become entangled in twigs so it was bound and could not drop to the ground. He leaned closer and felt an urge to see it alive.

He blew.

Thinking of his grandmother, he blew harder so that the wings fluttered into a semblance of life. The movement pleased him, so he gathered his breath and blew again. This breath taken consciously and with the intent of making the butterfly lift its wings gave him a heady sensation of power. The power coursed through his body and finally emerged. The butterfly moved. Its wings lifted and fluttered in an agitated fashion. He saw that the butterfly had become filled with his breath, it had grown in size and its wings had become pneumatic floats. That was the beginning. It made him feel like a god. But time was his enemy. His power waned. His belief in his power weakened. Why he could not say. He failed, repeatedly, to bring a bird, a butterfly, an animal back to life. By the time he married, he had lost something, something he could not have put a name to, something he knew he once had. The fear (born at the same moment as his conception) that had co-existed with his power increased as his power shrank. By the time he was a full-fledged adult ready to take his place in the world he was left with only his fear. He had no power. No, not even to save his daughter.

In another five minutes, he will be ready to drive to the hospital. When he called that morning, the nurse said Mui Hoon had passed a peaceful night, and was not in any danger. He wonders whether she is telling him the truth, and decides she must be.

He releases the brake and slides the car out of the driveway. He wants to go over as fast as he can and see her for himself. The car goes down his newly chosen route at high speed, and as the Vietnamese bakery, the Australia Post, the Woolworths and the pawn shops flash past, he finds himself thinking, Maybe this once.

The morning sun is melting into his bones.

Da Wei turns the wheel sharply to the right and bounces the car up the hospital driveway and into the carpark. In this landscape of sun and peace, a land he has been told that has never know invasion or war (if you except, as he has read, the successive waves of migratory tribes who came, killed and stayed or the intrusion of the British into so-called terra nullius), maybe he can relax this time, because for a little while – and he pushes the gears into parking position – the birds he sees are flying freely.

He hops out of his car.

In the ward they tell him.