

The Birds: Grounded

written by Guest Contributor | May 11, 2021



A pair of ravens rattles in a cage near the Polar Bear exhibit at the Maryland Zoo. You admire the sheen of their feathers, the sleekness of their preening. Visitors stream by, cellphones in hand, downloading a colorful compendium of facts about *Corvus corax*, the actual creatures behind the bars who hold only a faint resemblance to the fierce emblems of the local football team. The web offers an up-close look: polished beak, gleaming eye a globe reflecting thin clouds and distance. In real life, where BrewFest bands warm up and crowds raise their cell phones to a frenzy of friendly penguins, the ravens rarely meet your eye.

Their cage is bifurcated by a branch the width of a telephone pole—it's a space more suited to small sorties than extended flights. The pair take turns hopping across it; helicoptering, occasionally, one after the other, to the upper limits of their space. Ravens can live up to two decades in captivity, though less is known about their longevity in the wild. You don't need to wonder what it's like to live behind a cage. In the adjacent exhibit, a brown bear shuffles back and forth, paws looping a path in the shape of the symbol for infinity, dust drifting in its wake.

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A few weeks after lockdown takes effect, masked neighbors take to their porches, sharing news from a distance, speaking in terms of infinity—the time since this, the time since that: the miles clocked, the loaves of sourdough made. Days stretching like taffy, the bars of the calendar bending. Above all, a shared chorus of complaints about crows, the murder whose pre-dawn assembly calls outshine the hootenannies of starlings, robins, and sparrows—a ratcheting that fills the emptied streets. The air has a metallic chill and the daffodils that blazed forth before Valentine's day are suddenly set to pause, the maple and oak crowns in slow reveal.

You spend a good deal of your time looking out the window of your second-floor study or watching the tiles of faces assemble—workshops to teach, meetings to attend. Framed by the white-painted muntins, the cool air and fog outside put you in mind of the year you lived in the UK, strange exile under a scrim of clouds and rain. You were carrying a child, felt the physical heft of exhaustion. In your present kitchen, the holes you've poked in bread dough

rising in its oiled bowl evoke unexpected memories: the coin holes carved in a stone at the boundary of the plague village in the Derbyshire Dales, strange eyeholes staring back into history. 1665-1666: the villagers, unusually, self-isolated to avoid spreading the pestilence. Avoiding direct contact, they left coins, soaking in vinegar, in exchange for the supplies left by neighboring townspeople. The rubber rat your ex bought in the museum shop swung like a daft pendulum on the rearview window of the Mini-Metro as you descended the hairpin turns along the High Peaks. The swag you bought—a switch of lavender, rosemary, rue—slid off the back seat.

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In this, the seventh month of the year of our contagion, Google offers up a range of Plague Doctor costumes, a “steampunk special” for Halloween, variously sized for man, woman, or child. It’s the uncanny image you spotted on the walls of a tiny boutique off Piazza San Marco—Paul Fürst’s etching of Dr. Schnabel (or Dr. Beak), an Italian plague doctor, decked out with an herb-stuffed beaked mask, black cloak, and long-fingered gloves—seventeenth century PPE. Masks that copies the eerie depiction were hung in small squared frames, floating among the elaborate papier-mâché faces with deep eyeholes, scarlet ribbons dripping across clean, white walls. The Plague Medic is one of many popular costumes for Carnevale—a persona that can be adopted for festive amusement, its archetypal resonance cast off when the masquerade’s over and the garments are put away. A disease lies dormant until it doesn’t. That summer—three years into the new century—you wandered the maze-like Venetian streets, the plague that year not just an eerie possibility to be pushed aside. At the airport you’d ordered a panino and wine, awaiting your connection. Travelers from beyond Europe’s borders passed by, their faces masked against a zoonotic respiratory virus—SARS—and a reminder of all that flourishes beyond the visible realm.

In early spring during England’s COVID-19 lockdown, police in Hellesdon, near Essex, received reports of strange sightings. A person was spotted walking around a neighborhood in uncanny regalia: black cloak, long fingered gloves, and bird-beak mask, cane swinging from his belt as he strode across the village green. His presence frightened many; seemed prankish to others. A historian noted the prankster’s attention to detail, praising “the smart-looking costume.” The real plague doctors were only marginally therapeutic: authoring wills, conducting autopsies or counting victims, their canes kept close at hand to distance them from afflicted bodies or to be wielded like a cosh against contagious

victims encountered along contaminated streets. Sailing up to the top of your news feed, the story reminds you of the grim Scottish ballad, “Twa Corbies” which recounts the exchange of two carrion crows who muse over the meal they’ll make of a knight. The ballad ends when they imagine the scene after their work is done: wind blowing over the moors and over wind-whitened bones. A pandemic offers cures the living would rather not think about. When the plague imposter—he turned out to be a teenage boy—was finally unmasked, he was “given advice” by the local police, officials no doubt worn down by responding to a host of complaints—illegal fireworks, supply hoarding, super-spreader parties, and other forms of what some call “covidiochy.”

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Biscuits soaked in the blood of rabbits or lambs are the special treat given to ravens at the Tower of London, heraldic holdovers of myth, a cohort with clipped wings who otherwise dine on mice and assorted meats. Since the days of the Blitz, they have been charged with the weight of keeping a kingdom afloat, watched over by a Ravenmaster who guards the small fabled flock lest their flight, according to legend, signal their nation's fall. The superstition goes back in time to Charles II, who decreed six ravens be kept at the Tower at all times, though the raven is even more deeply emblematic, hearkening back to Arthurian times and associated with the Celtic god Bran who was figured as a raven or crow.

You remember the ruff of feathers around the ravens' necks, their small hops over the pavement, shiny wings lucent as the royal gemstones kept on display. You found their antics a relief after touring Beauchamp Tower where royal prisoners were kept—slashes carved on the wall marking their passage, the alphabet of their prayers and curses flying off through time.

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Off-Kilter Ale: the super-malty, full-bodied Scottish-style brew you ordered on dollar Wednesdays in a midwestern Main Street pub. In parking lots of apartments where university students lived, crows gathered, making quick work of dropped potato chip bags.

One night you watched the corvids gather on the high ledge of a building, in a stand of sycamore, their spring roost a strange symphony. When you roll down the window to capture the image, it opens onto the memory of days spent in a hotel near Heathrow—your plane grounded by a labour union strike, you and the other unaccompanied minors fluttering in the hallways and elevator bays, biding your time under the eyes of British Airways attendants. It took days for the delays to be resolved, for the news of their eight-year-old daughter to reach your family, but eventually you boarded your flight, felt the uptake of engines as the plane took to the skies. These days, you sometimes think, your whole life you've been preparing for quarantine.

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