

## The Birds: Of The Dreams Yet To Come

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The brush slipped across the surface of the egg with the slightest whisper. Fine hairs trailing a crimson line in their wake. A comet, perhaps, burnt against an indigo sky.

Olivier dipped the brush in his worn ceramic dish, dabbing the edges to let the colours fade. He ran his hands over wooden bench worn smooth and waxy. Long ago his daughter Jessa had caught her finger on a rare splinter here, leaving tears and a little drop of blood. He had led her to the rectory and bought two cookies. Dough-stars, each with a dollop of raspberry jam in the centre.

Beneath the jacarandas in the courtyard she had asked if there were any colours yet to discover. He had led her back to the chamber and she helped him paint an egg, one eye squeezed tight and the tip of her tongue held out. As the hues mixed together, he told her how the dreams were brought into being. He could still feel those small fingers within his, guiding her imagination along the shell.

“That will be your last one, eh?”

Mala's voice came warm and kind. She stood beside him, wrapped in her Dreamcrafter's robes, peering over half-rimmed glasses.

“Seems to be so,” said Olivier faintly, his thoughts still honed onto paint speckled hands.

“It's a beauty,” said Mala as she leaned in to peer at the egg.

“I can't imagine how many I've painted,” he said, reaching out to seal the vial. He was always telling off apprentices who left them open.

“Oh my. Thousands,” laughed Mala as she shuffled back to her workbench. She sat slowly and raised two vials, looking from one to the other before selecting the darker shade.

“Tens of thousands,” she said and began to paint.

Olivier plucked at his brush, twisting it slowly. He carefully dipped the tip into the gold dust ink for the final coat. His hands trembled and he left a splotch of yellow on the egg. It was so unlike him.

He stood and made his way to the southern window. The evening shone ochre calm and vast, great clouds etched in the distance. Far below the Jacarandas sighed in the breeze. Their leaves were young and broad. Purple shrouded boughs covered the sight of the fountain beneath, but not the sound of tumbling water.

How could it have been so long ago? Sitting there with his wife watching their daughters. Meticulous Kyla taking her own brush to a paper egg while Jessa splashed and squealed and kicked the water.

Now Kyla had a family of her own. She worked at the tower, painting dreams just as she'd always wanted. She was the only one that stayed, neither taken away nor gone of her own free will.

The noise of a shell crunching brought him back to the moment. There was a ruffle of feathers and a chirp. Apprentice Jaquuen's dreams. They always brought brilliant little birds. With a swoosh the tiny thing was cast from the tower.

"I'm off mate," said the tall young man ambling over from the north window. He extended a paint splattered hand.

"Thanks for everything," he said and left leaving just Olivier and Mala in the chamber.

Thirty-three years, distilled down to a few final minutes. It was time to finish up. He passed floor-to-ceiling patterns of colour. So much knowledge, steeped in vials and beakers. Spilled and imbibed within stone floor and maple benchtops. Written into a feathers and bone and dreams flung far.

There was home to escape to. Kyla had told him not to come late. She no doubt had a fine meal prepared and the faculty had given him the lovely bottle of shiraz. He knew his grandchildren had baked a cake. Within a few hours he would be sitting by the brazier, sipping wine.

Olivier sat at his bench once more. Holding the brush firm, he traced a golden light of sunset along the peak of the egg. Turning it slowly, round and round until the colours were finished and glimmered through his tears.

Once there was a girl, bright eyed and filled with fire. The youngest. Not ready for a home suddenly silent. Perhaps Olivier had been insensitive. Too distracted by the endless need for dreams. There were arguments and screaming matches. A drawing in of seasons and long cold quiet months.

Then, she was gone.

The egg shuffled and Olivier heard a muffled peep. Taking it to the window he sensed a rhythm in his pulse, the potent magic slipping through and within. Outside the first stars shone, brilliant despite their distance.

He waited while the little thing broke its shell remembering back to Jesse's first bird. It was big and she had squealed with laughter as it hooted and honked its way free.

The egg cracked. Olivier tenderly helped the little bird push open the shell. Jet black eyes blinked as it sat wavering. He pulled the pieces away. Feathers began to dry and it transformed before his eyes, growing larger and stronger, drawing in its dream. Wings stretched out cerulean bright.

It shivered and shook away its last down feathers as it cried out. A lilting sound that echoed all around. Olivier held his hands up and the bird turned, drawn to the sky. It jumped once, flapped its wings and then leapt out. A cascading song fell away, gone in just a moment. He watched long after it had disappeared from sight.

Olivier gathered his things and glanced around the chamber. He cleaned his brushes and dish and left them to dry. He bade farewell to Mala and moved down the twisting stairs.

He wandered out into the warm embrace of night, making his way home. He held onto the sound of the bird's cries, imagining all the dreams he'd painted. Some remembered, some forgotten and some yet to come.

has been published in *Spelk*, *365 Tomorrows*, *Between Worlds* and others. Growing up in Australia, Paul traveled the world and now lives in Canada with his wife and two children. Paul spends his days working for an artificial intelligence company and his nights dreaming up stories. Follow him on Twitter @paulalexgray or visit [www.paulalexgray.com](http://www.paulalexgray.com).