

The Birds: Spring Walking East London

written by Guest Contributor | November 19, 2020



I go out only as instructed: once per day to move homebound muscles. When I hear the Yale lock click shut behind me, I reflexively pat my pockets; there's no one near to leave a spare key.

It's a few short blocks to the River Lea, passing the unregarded council estates and terraces and the cracking buds of a butter-yellow rosebush that reaches for me over a garden wall at sharp, willful angles. (Except they don't use the word 'blocks' here because it's not a grid and, according to a book I picked up about area trees, the locals pronounce it 'Lee.')

Across the water lies the marshes, a golden sea of straining stalks and buttercups set aflame in the late light of lengthening days. Cow parsley shoots up along the paths where I walk, spraying white doilies to a height that almost matches my own. After a strangely rare rain, when the sky clears out save for a few puffy unspent clouds with dark bellies, fat droplets huddle together on blades of grass like little peas in a pod, reflecting the endless sky. I reach out to pull a frond upright and the pea-drops slide down, mingle together, and give up the straining sun.

I haven't left the city, but the cows grazing in the unfettered plain of this swallowed village are enough to make me feel I have. It's a break from the ache of the vacant streets, the buildings holding their breath where inhabitants who can leave have left. The neighbourhood reshapes itself in front of me, but it's impossible to see what it is becoming from within the centre. (From a height, how we forget what it is to fall.)

In this spot that carries the name "sacred place that welcomes strangers," the river flows and the grasses hum as they always have, moving, unchanging. A train creaks and screeches over the railway bridge that young boys used to climb, carrying now only the memory of passengers and abandoned routines that once bookended days. Quiet rushes back in when it passes; the planes have been plucked from the sky and the sound of bird's wings drift in my ear.

I look up through recently bare branches now filled with Magnolia blossoms. Flashes of lime green feathers bristle as a loud, red-beaked chatter erupts. A pandemonium of parrots colonise the city. There are worries that they might one day pose a problem for the native woodpecker, edging them out early for

the best nesting sites. For now, the RSPB says they're alright. No one knows how they came to be here—whether they were set free or if they escaped, finding opportunities in the kind of storm that brings down wire cages. (Disasters can be useful in that way.)

The air is cool in my lungs and carries the scent of fire from the narrowboats moored in the still canal with names like Nomad, Resolute, and Pootle. A sign in elaborate script on the shut doors of one such boat advertises SHAMANIC SPA RITUAL: INQUIRE WITHIN. Hovering a few inches above the ground, little flags wave like bunting with hand-written messages to keep away, to stay home. A car with a loudspeaker on top passes by the edge of the park—the Shomrim giving warnings in Hebrew to keep within the bounds of certain streets.

Caution tape dresses the benches so I keep walking, dancing around strangers across two-metre divides, listening to them sing in Spanish, in Twi, in Arabic.

"It's a small risk," says someone in hushed tones as if coming back from a funeral.

"But still, a risk."

I try to meet the eyes of the faces I pass, but the atmosphere feels thick, muddy; they look away and bounce back as if repelled by a like magnetic pole. Even so, over the days they take on an odd familiarity through proximity.

I pass the street preacher with greying beard stood on the corner, rocking from one foot to the other, clutching a blue plastic bag. He's always stuck like a record needle skipping in an anxious mutter: "it's alright it's alright it's alright." I never know if he's telling himself or me; I nod but he looks past me. Then there's the bread man, dropping surplus bakery scraps in the pond next to the sign that says DO NOT FEED BREAD TO THE DUCKS. He's a subject of some speculation on the neighbourhood online forum. It's commercial negligence, say some. It's naive benevolence, defend others. Someone's boyfriend tried to reason with him once, only to have a Turkish loaf flung at his head.

Outside the Anchor and Hope, old punters sit next to chained-up picnic tables and a sandwich board chalked to urge distance. Somewhere at the bottom of a pint glass is a last memory of a hug, a parting touch a few months ago in a pub that felt like closing night, all regulars with shots flowing on both sides of the bar, the smell of whiskey and other bodies; a thought tinged now with irremediable craving.

A woman takes a swig from a can of Stella and asks, "how are her oxygen levels?"

Popping earphones in, I call Bethann.

"The house feels like the walls are closing in," she says as her partner yells in the background for one of the kids to get down from somewhere. Last year at her gentle suggestion that he needed more hobbies (and she, more

space), he had taken up boxing, but now the gym is closed.

I tell Bethann about the parakeets, how they were never meant to be here. Some say it was Jimi Hendrix who released them on Carnaby Street. Some say it was on a film set with Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart. Still other theories say it was the Great Storm of '87 that broke the aviaries. (And the birds, finding themselves free, what did they make of the sky opened up to them? They found each other; that was enough.)

Bethann's voice goes muffled as she yells to the kids to listen to their dad.

The hoardings surrounding the hall under construction on the local common read WE GRIEVE in large black lettering. I read the pages of A4 stuck to the boards. The bus driver from the 394. The father and son cobblers running the local shoe repair from one generation to the next. The Human rights lawyer who played bass guitar with David Bowie. The nurses. The doctor. The Windrush woman from Jamaica who raised two sons in Hackney.

A young man with a guitar strung on his back comes up beside me and asks me for change.

I shake my head, sorry mate.

"Is that what you always say?"

I focus on the FCK BORIS graffiti on the wall behind him and consider the self-censorship of the artist.

"What did you say?" Bethann, back in my ear.

I read out loud a notice tied to a post in front of the new and now-shut wood-fired sourdough pizza joint. HEY HANDSOME MAN WITH STILISH GLASSESS WHO ASKED ME IF I WAS OK... SOMETHING TELLS ME I SHOULD'VE REPLIED. GIRL IN SHORTS WALKING A BIKE proposes meeting in the same place at the same time on the same day next week. I wonder if he'll show.

"Who knows?" says Bethann.

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For days I watch out for GIRL IN SHORTS waiting on that spot of the pavement for HANDSOME MAN to show up. I pictured her typing out the notice in all caps, ignoring the squiggly lines under the misspellings, printing it, having it laminated, finding ties to affix it, standing back to check if it was noticeable from the vantage point of a passerby. And then I picture her cutting it down with a pair of scissors and tossing it into a nearby bin and appearing, to a stranger's glance, not ok.

The Spring days seed into one another. The pink and white tinged petals flutter from the trees and susurrate underfoot with littered blue masks and police tape torn from the tire swing. A newspaper's front-page gets stuck under my shoe with the headline RECORD ECONOMIC BLOW. The butter-yellow rosebuds split open, peeling outward from their centre. The cow parsley is

fading, ageing like yellowing lace as it turns to fluff, releasing spores picked up by rising currents and twilight-pieces of confetti that drift around me in search of a new place to land, to grip, to take root. Above, the pandemonium of parrots murmurs from one canopy to the next as a solitary crowd of dark-winged, sharp-tailed silhouettes on their daily migration from the river to the cemetery forest and back again.

I kick off shoes, brush bare toes in the grass and look up at the cloudless sky from my back. Lovers lie head to belly, stretched out on blankets for hours. Friends laugh in wide circles as they share jugs of draught beer from the local pub.

"His dog is vegan now," says one.

"His dog is vegan now? But-." Two.

"He says it makes him calmer."

"Him or the dog?"

"The dog, I think."

"I mean... He's probably depressed?"

"Him or the dog?"

Someone sprays FIGHT SYSTEMIC RACISM on a wall along the towpath. It's painted over twice, over days where I notice it there and then not there. It's redone a third time in a stylistic font of billowing, overlapping lettering with a peace sign in the I of racism. A truce is tacitly declared.

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I lock myself out of my flat. I don't want to call a locksmith until I can get back into the building, but I think someone will be by soon enough—it's the end of the day. No one comes or exits for the next hour. I dial random flat numbers. I hold my breath while it rings. It only takes three flats before a male voice picks up. I say I've locked myself out. I assume he'll ask questions or be suspicious; "Oh, shit," he says and immediately buzzes me in.

In the hall I press the letterbox up with a squeak and can see my cat staring up at me helplessly. I call the locksmith and then Bethann while I wait.

"It must be so hard being on your own," she says.

"You try not to look at it directly." My disconsolate cat meows through the door.

I tell Bethann I've been reading more about the parrots, how they can lose their green colour when they're in captivity, how they stop expressing the yellow gene and turn blue. Bethann helps one of the kids with a video on the iPad. I pay the locksmith £300 to drill a hole in the internal mechanism of

the lock and replace it.

Characters in the park juggle machetes while balancing on a low tightrope they've strung between two trees. A little boy passing on a bicycle turns to ask his father if they're close to the secret staircase yet. A cyclist dodges pedestrians with a speaker playing house music from his backpack.

Crossing over the river at the footbridge, I stare down into the clear shallows where insects dot tiny circles into the glass-still surface of the water. Swathes of seaweed drift in the direction of the current, reaching and growing longer in distance rather than height. I want to nudge someone beside me to point out how beautiful it is that they allow themselves to be pulled by forces outside their control, to grow through them rather than resist. I take a photo on my phone, but it looks like a murky dark smudge out of context. I send it to Bethann. She sends a sparkly star emoji back.

I listen for the birds. They seem louder these days, but they aren't really; it's just that what we call silence allows nature's voices to come through.

As well as losing their green, the parrots can get quiet if they're too alone. Blue and silent, when there's nowhere to go, no one left to impress, and no point to a pandemonium of one.

"Anyway," Bethann says to my diversions about the amnesia of yellow, "if you think being alone ends when you've met someone..." For a moment we both listen to Peppa Pig in the background. "Solitude can be good for the creative process, right? I think Hemingway said as much. Are you writing?"

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It grows warmer and still there is no characteristic rain; instead a static fills the air from ruptured breezes passing through parched brown needles. The cow parsley is dry and brittle, standing like ageing bones as new growth is given its time, tall feathered grasses that strum in the breeze like a whisper, reminding me I can't remember the last time I saw the it's alright man.

Blossoms give way to thick leaves. The petals of the butter-yellow roses curl back on themselves, seeking an edge past which there is no further left to open. I trace the mountain range of thorns on a stem with my index finger, slicing a thin line that pulses red.

Rounding the park, I see someone in the distance, lying back on a hill with an arm up overhead, bent at the elbow, fingertips tugging up on forehead at opposite eyebrow; the way someone recently made familiar once lay next to me, staring at the ceiling while I curved my body around his.

I know Bethann is trying to tell me that there's never any distance possible to being alone. I've certainly never arrived at not-alone. Not in an eight-year partnership, ended with the words "I never needed you" as he left for the woman who, three months prior, he found he did. And not in the years since, of seeking a place to call home, of anonymous moves into strange places and attempts to make myself welcome.

I loop the park to get a closer look at the figure on the hill, but by the time I get there the person is gone.

I've been more alone than this—strung days together wondering when it was I'd last spoken out loud to someone. (Did I say "thanks" when the cashier at the grocery store handed me my bags yesterday?) But it's also possible that I've been more lonely than this. Is there a different quality to the kind of aloneness not chosen? It's freeing, even, this collective separation. It takes the sting from the sense of feeling exposed, deficient, lonely. There's a permission in the choicelessness of this aloneness, even as I know the collective experience of it will end eventually while the individual experience of it will persist in the uncrossable distances.

Above, in the sky over the wide, flat meadow, a single contrail pulls a plane, marring the soft sunset like a lacerated canvas. Foragers emerge from a thicket with bags of ripe sweet blackberries. I can hear the its alright man somewhere in the distance and feel relief. He's muttering one of his other records, a kind of slurring that I think is "thank you thank you thank you."

And yet, despite this collective choicelessness, there is still the lack of remedy; no usual distractions, just endless need in apps full of people learning to be alone for the first time. It hits me sometimes when I see in from the outside; when I get a glimpse through a window at a couple making a meal together or a family watching a film. It's in the moments when I don't know when I'll be able to see my family again; can't predict where the next graze of a hand will come from. It rattles my cage, my anxious biology screaming: you are not meant to be this alone. Not meant to connect only through a screen, to scratch at a simulacrum of intimacy, everyone in constant reach yet ever out of touch.

I remind myself to not speculate about things like timescales and forever. Permanent is the enemy of resilient, I know that. And anyway, memory is as much a process of consolidation as it is recall of experience; I need time for the requisite distance to see things for what they were, to turn over the memory in my palm like an emerald I briefly thought a piece of sea glass.

Crossing the field, I see that the birds that were never meant to be here are on the move, taking it in turns to fly from one end of the field to the trees lining the other in their squawking groups. Scattered people hold camera phones up to capture the sweeping mini-migrations, the flashes of lime against the pastel sky.

I hold my own device up at a flock in the distance to poorly attempt a capture of their elegant swooping dives and their blundering cacophony. All at once, another flock comes up behind me, flying low all around me, close enough that I can feel the flutter of their wings on the bare skin of my arms. They part around me like water around a rock in a stream, reassembling in the invisible current in front of me.

I feel the beat of my heart slow after its quickening. I go to share the video with Bethann and realise that I'd dropped my hands in the moment and

captured only a blur of of the path.

I put my phone away and look up to the sky, spinning slowly in a circle, taking in the expanse of everything. I watch in all directions for these birds that, in the wilder parts of the city, found their wings and each other, re-learning together a forgotten song, the joy of expressing yellow.

I stop my reeling and look back at eye-level, locking eyes with an older woman a few metres away, also held in place by the spectacle of the parakeets. She doesn't look away. She smiles and the cracked lines around her eyes deepen.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I say.

"Perfect," she says.

I make my way home.



Carley Centen is a Canadian writer and immigrant to London. She is the author of *Meditations for Anxiety* and *The Book of Hope* (forthcoming), both published by Adams Media (Simon and Schuster).

featured photo (cropped from original) by Carley Centen