

UnPredatør

Janet Turpin Myers

“Till the end of time,
long as stars are in the blue,
long as there’s a spring of birds who sing
I’ll go on loving you
till the wells run dry
and each mountain disappears
I’ll be there for you
and care for you
through laughter and through tears.”

— *song by Buddy Kaye and Ted Mossman*

Occupy Sanctuary

2154

Beckett was breaking. Heart. Mind. Cells. Soul if he still had one. He was on his knees, hunched around a dying campfire, flames lobbing leggy shadows at him. In his palm he held something barely heavier than air, thinking, after *all* that had happened, was this little thing the one little thing that would finish him?

Stayer, I'm so goddamned fucking sorry.

Stayer was a bird, a cardinal, dull red feathers. The last bird, at least as far as Beckett knew, and now here it was, dead, in the palm of his hand. Beckett and the other Occupiers had been nursing Stayer for two days, twenty-four seven, dripping water off a soaked strand of wool into the bird's mouth, mooshing liquid into its frantic beak along with coos of encouragement and panic.

But no one had a clue as to what birds ate. It had been years since anyone had so much as heard a peep. Anywhere. Winter said she believed birds ate slugs. That was the kind of thing Winter would know. She owned a rare late-nineteenth century book, *Studer's Popular Ornithology of North American Birds*, though she hardly ever looked at it because, as she put it, it made her weep to look at the pictures of all the birds gone for good. Winter was a poet; though that wasn't something she spread around. But you could tell. All you had to do was listen to her talk. She was always saying poetic shit, using words like weep.

In any case, Winter had remembered reading that bird's bones were hollow, filled only with air. So they can fly. And they sang—the males that is—to attract females. Beckett hadn't heard a bird sing since he was a teenager himself, scrawny and flighty, struggling to attract girls at the age of fourteen. He was twenty five now. The way things were going fourteen would probably turn out to be his middle age.

And whose fault was that? Not his, that was for damned sure. If he was boss of the world...

There was a saying as old as the hills, the one about a straw breaking the camel's back, that people still repeated even though the last camel had petered out sixty years ago, give or take. Which was crazy ironic, Beckett thought, that camels had extincted so early on in the game. During the second half of the 21st century when Earth had started to flood-and-heat-up-and-dry-out, and the pathetic, panicked, mass migrations away from the coasts and towards the poles had begun, you'd have thought that the camels would've had a leg up; after all, wasn't the Sahara Desert (in those days) already unrolling its scratching silence northwards, eventually smothering a third of France beneath sand? Beckett thought—didn't camels *do* sand? But no. The camels hadn't made it. Starving folks will eat everything.

Beckett stuffed his hand beneath his garbage bag poncho, thumbing his ribs. He wondered— when was it that humans had begun their devolution from citizens into consumers? Second half of the 20th century if he was remembering his history correctly, during those days when coal plants were burping poisons, electricity still sizzled through switches, and the earth still bled its oil. That's when we became eaters of the planet, consuming everything, until we consumed ourselves.

And so here we are. Barely.

In any case, a few years before the birds had stopped chirping they had paradoxically increased the intensity of their singing, warbling like maniacs. This had gone on for ten years or so if he remembered rightly, though generally he avoided remembering anything—like picking scabs off, that was the past. At the time this fact, that the birds were singing more, had given people hope. Even the most myopic bottom-liners had voiced support for birdsong, admitting that it had probably turned out to be priceless.

But as it turned out, the male birds were singing more only because there were less females. They were singing out of desperation, like sailors on a sinking ship yelling for help. Something all the Occupiers understood—fuck, everybody who was left, wherever they were, understood. Eventually the male birds had stopped singing all together. *They simply gave up*—Winter had whispered this to him one lucky time when they were alone, when the others were off doing things. That whisper of hers had breathed into his hope, wherever his hope was hiding, however battered and coughing and afraid his hope in its hiding place was.

After the boy birds had given up, dawn and dusk no longer bubbled with whistles and chirps but instead descended quiet and weird like the dreams Beckett had some mornings. And after another while, the birds had stopped existing. Or so they had thought, until Stayer came along. Beckett had been the one to find the little fellow blinking in a nook in the wood-stack, heaped like a tiny feathering of dust.

But Winter, hunting in the dead dirt of the sanctuary, had failed to find slugs for Stayer. No kidding. He could've told her not to bother; but she was so beautiful, her blue eyes fierce with mother instincts, hair bright like love, scrabbling with a stick for slugs. She would've made some mother, but she and Captain Obvious had been unable to conceive. Just-as-well-all-

things-considered, which was what Captain Obvious always declared about Winter's childless state, shrugging, offering no further clarification.

In any case, the sanctuary was a deceased place, an ugly quarry pit with gouged walls and winds that staggered like homeless drunks. No greens. No soft roundness of life. No breezes breathing waves through grasses the way lungs breathe waves through bodies; instead, there was only collapsed machinery and a bone field of fallen hydro towers, like the skeletons of slain giants, scattered willy-nilly across the wide, flat bottom of the pit, forsaken. The entire site was eco-carrion, abandoned after the non-national mining company had scraped off the soil and the critters and the nematodes, then blasted the belly out of the earth below. If Beckett had said it once, he'd said it a thousand times: once it's gone, it's gone. You can't rehabilitate nothing—and those fuckers knew it.

So Winter, who broke his heart with her hope, had suggested they pulverize weeds and try feeding that to Stayer. Like grass pabulum, she had said, not kissing him as he fantasized she someday might, lips to lips, letting him taste her breath, but only handing him a scrawny rat tail of weeds for feeding the bird. Now, with Stayer lying limp in the palm of his hand, weighing no more than a breath, Beckett was thinking, sadly, soggy weeds were no substitute for slugs. Or kisses.

Check this out, fellow Earthians—what was a guy supposed to do with his desires? That was *the* question of these, the end-times of the human race. First mistake, Beckett thought, was calling it a race. A race meant more losers than winners. Screw that. If he was boss of the world, here's how things would've gone down: humans would've lived, not as if they were running a crazy-guy race to some random finish line, but instead, as if they were dancing, moving and grooving to the wind whooshing leaves and the sea scribbling across sand.

He had described this idea to Winter only last week. She had kissed him then, though not a lover-kiss – no taste of breath which he imagined was fresh like salad, but rather the safe brush of a sister—and declared him a poet.

He had kept it light—No way José, that’s your territory, Win. But all the while he’d been thinking he would try to be a poet if that’s what it took to get her to kiss him again.

And now Stayer was dead—no nirvana for the little guy—his hollow bones caving in like empty straws. Beckett shifted, feeling the heat of the fire against his cheek, the bite of smoke at the edges of his nose. The bite of failure at the edges of everything else. Stayer was dead, and he had failed to save him. It was an historical failure, he realized, symbolic. He held Stayer over the flames, wondering if he should drop him in. The little guy would flare and be gone in seconds, so dry, his feathers, and those hollow bones. Beckett pulled his hand back, puffing a soft breath across Stayer’s body. I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry. If I was the boss of everything...

Beckett slumped back on his heels, pushed there by a memory. No one else knew, not even Winter, and he had been telling her everything these past six months in the Sanctuary. No one else knew about the horses. About what happened because of the drinking. He was clean now. Anyway, even if he wanted to drink—which for sure he did not—his drinking days were long gone. But what a drunken fucking idiot he’d been. They would call him murderer if they knew the truth—that on that terrible night when the barn had burned and they had lost the horses, he had been passed out on Amen’s homemade vegetable booze when he should’ve been keeping an eye on things. But nothing they could call him would sound worse than the screams of the horses that still burned in his memory as they had burned in the barn on that night when he had failed them. A sound human and inhuman, it had surely come from hell if hell was

surely somewhere. There'd been smoke, too—smoke that had galloped panic that had pounded his lungs; and following that, twisting in the smoke, the sound of hooves frantic to run; then spears of fire that had skewered the horses as if they were meat-bits on a spit; and his love screaming, too, and his eyes screaming tears, not seeing because the smoke was stinging-blinding and the fire spears, impossible to pass; while all along, in his mind a nightmare reared, of those dear deep brown eyes, electric with fear, shocked by his betrayal.

Beckett sniffed. Cried. He was alone. The others were sleeping. No one was watching.

Luca

Epoch of Wisdoms 507

But Bau was—Bau was watching. Watching Beckett—watching through the ancient screen that glowed squarely as if it were a cut-out portal through the dimness of her workplace, and listening through the language decryptor on the desk beside her. She was alone in the Forensic Analysis department of the Archaic Devices Depository, watching the one with the bird, and listening to the sharp crinkle of his coat as he shifted. So unlike a Lucan he was, and yet, so alike. Though he wore bleak colours that no Lucan could bear; and that odd coat—was it a black sack? —and that peculiar tight hat tugged down over his forehead; why did he wear such woeful clothes? It must be cold where he was, she thought. She tapped the glassy surface of the screen with one finger. Are you cold my poor sad one? And tired? Myself, the same. Bau said this out loud, the sound of her own voice in the empty workplace a small shock, though this was hardly the first time she had addressed Beckett as if he might actually answer her. Hungry, too? she continued out loud. Bau herself had never been hungry, not grindingly, wrenchingly hungry, but nonetheless she could see that hunger was unmistakably there in the dull, deep dreariness of the one with the bird.

Bau picked up the old keyboard and rattled it, then hit keys to zoom in on Beckett's face. She thought, clearly this antique thing pre-dated both bio-mimetic engineering and quantum computing. It was so crude, so digital, with its clunky on-off constraints—amazing, when you considered that these things were once touted as state of the art. Bau smiled to herself—these

archaic devices were as awkward as first love. First love? Bau blushed, glanced over her shoulder. One never knew when one might accidentally share something one didn't care to share. But she was fully alone with the sad one and so her blush dropped down to the place where it had begun. Turning back to the screen, she tap-typed on her embedded hand interface, writing a note which printed immediately on the perma-tape feed beside the language decryptor.

Subject. Beckett. Today, sadness...no...despair, palpable. Situation, grim. But is it hopeless????

Bau glanced at her note, regretting the extra question marks. One ought to be professional at all times, blah blah blah.

Bau patted the top of the screen as if it were her pet. Awkward as these old things were, she loved them with an almost unreasonable intensity for the secrets they fisted within, like seeds in time-pods, which when tended with diligence and patience would bloom glowing red secrets from the distant past.

Beckett was one of those, one of Bau's secret of secrets. She *would* tell the others about him, wouldn't she? She WOULD. But from the second she had first discovered him—this despondent, distant one—she had kept him to herself, pressing him to her chest like a dried flower. She deserved this, didn't she? After all she had to put up with, what with people talking behind her back about her work. Pretending to respect it, but all the while...to heck with that. She could darn well do as she pleased. He was her discovery, wasn't he? At least for the time being.

Why, though? What was it with him? Ridiculous. Ludicrous. But there was something in those eyes. A connection. Something she had tried to put into words on the perma-tape without

sounding, well, let's call it less than professional; like a defenceless romantic, was likely how Chrysor would put it. But she sensed it, believed in this—this unanticipated connection between a he and a she across an unthinkable vast expanse of absolutely everything. And the eyes. There was something in the eyes. The colour was spectacular, imagine! green. At first Bau had not believed this...this... certainly it *was* a colour but surely it was more than that—surely it was a luminescence, this colour which she had seen in water, in leaves, and some varieties of gemstones, but never in eyes. Lucan eyes were brown. And hair, brown, straight. Skin, brown, too. But this, this distant, primitive though strangely compelling sad one, had skin the colour of cereal and hair that was a rampant outbursting of white and yellow and amber.

Bau zoomed out until she could see the whole scene: the wobbling campfire, a rough rocky terrain looming behind, and this strong, abandoned, helpless, sad one crying over the dead bird in his palm. Bau watched him cry, and along with him cried too, wanting, wishing that she might reach her hand through the ancient glowing screen, press his cheek damp with tears, and whisper to him in a way she had never dared whisper to any Lucan—hush, hush, there are still places in this universe where birds do sing at dawn.

*Palingensia**Now Always*

Geep sent a thought-beat to the red bird. First things first— always approach the simpler beings with a compliment which was, as Galloping Troii repeatedly admonished, the basic etiquette of telepathy.

“Your feathers are exceptionally bright, today,” Geep said. “Reminds one of the petals of a Lanli-bew.”

The red bird cocked its head. Geep noticed that its Life-Energy-Ring eased from green to pink. Geep whinnied, satisfied. Clearly the little dear was cuckoo for Lanli-bews. Geep sensed an image of a Lanli-bew forming in the bird’s mind: red petals glowing, pulsing, opening and closing, quivering with light like orbs flaring. Red birds loved to sit amidst the Lanli-bews’s glowing flowers and warm their dainty bodies on brisk mornings. Geep knew this; knew also that the red bird would be flattered by the comparison.

“If it’s not too much trouble,” Geep went on sending thought-beats, “would you mind picking this burr out of my mane. Just there.” Geep tossed her head, flicked an ear backwards to indicate the spot half-way down her neck, and nickered for good measure; though given the clarity of her thought-beats it was hardly necessary to produce audible sounds. Still, the simpler creatures preferred to listen with their ears, and nickering also kept the vocal chords in shape for singing.

“There’s a Festival of Merry Song tonight,” Geep continued, wanting the bird to understand that there was a good reason why the burr was a problem. “I need to look my best.” Geep pawed the ground with one hoof. Galloping Troii had warned her about the shallowness of vanity, but as far as her mane was concerned, how could she help it?

Geep conveyed this to the red bird, even though the simpler creatures did not always understand abstract concepts. “I’m sure you’ll agree,” she said, “that my mane is exceptional. I take after my mother. At least, I’m going to, when I’m fully mature.”

Geep’s mother, Robiin Mare, had a mane admired by all: an opalescent peachy-white flow of fine silk threads—like dawn kissing lake ice, some said—that shimmered the entire length of her spine, and over her haunches, before falling in a cascade of gracefulness to nearly sweep the ground. Admired, Geep had observed, despite the fact that Galloping Troii went on and on about pride being as useful as snowflakes falling in the sea.

Red Bird puffed its wings and flew between Geep’s ears. The pickley toes of the bird tickled; Geep nearly shivered it off.

“Carry on,” Geep said, cheerfully.

The bird tickled its way along Geep’s neck, until it reached the burr. Then it began to pick at it, its beak digging and tugging and tweaking.

“Much obliged,” Geep thought-beated when the burr was out. “Can I give you a lift, to the lake perhaps?” Geep knew that there was hardly anything birds enjoyed more than hooking their little feet into the mane of an obliging Palingensian and going for a thundering gallop, hanging on for dear life, chirping all the while, simply for the crazy mad thrill of it. Geep went on—“the Lanli-bew’s are in full bloom there. Why, the berries must be perfectly ripe for eating. Take one. Leave one. You’ll die of happiness there.”

The red bird's Life-Energy-Ring flashed bright violet. Clearly, it was also cuckoo for Lanli-bew berries.