

The Boy, The Bird

681 Words

It was a sultry, suffocating, sordid sort of evening; the sun felt its age as it sunk down into the beckoning armchair of the night.

Unconsciously, the sky began to sweat in heavy, warm droplets. The grassland - with its sweet rotting stench - flinched, but did not cry out. All was quiet in the prairie, but for the wind, which could not be silenced. Petulant, it hissed its disapproval through the grasses until the sky gave a rumble of admonishment; unwillingly, it fell into a sulky murmur.

Several weeks ago, a farmer had come with a mower, drunk, and massacred a strip of bare land into the grass. With a sigh of self-satisfaction, he allowed himself a cigarette in his tiny, newfound kingdom; when night came he went away and took his mower with him. The insects had wept, and the distant mountains cried. Both were powerless.

Now, on this forsaken scar of brutalised soil, a bird was dying.

It was a young bird, which could have hatched four or five days ago. Its wing was broken: bleeding and twisted irredeemably out of shape, as if an animal had sunk its teeth into it and held on. It was cawing, softly, for its mother.

The night surveyed the scene, hesitated, and decided to wait.

Mother, cried the bird, Mother.

The wind stilled in pre-emptive mourning, but did not intervene.

Mother. Mother.

The sun sunk lower with a sigh of resignation. Somewhere in the grassland, an insect wailed in grief.

Mother. Help me, mother.

The horizon wavered a little, then took pity and with hazy sculpture formed a silhouette.

Stumbling slightly, the boy crested the hill and began, haphazard, to walk towards the scar. He was nearly seven, and ought really to have been able to walk without tripping, but he was hindered in his present course by the fact he only wore one shoe, and also by the fact he was bleeding. Unfeeling, he wiped away a little blood as it trailed from the open cut on his shin, grimaced precociously and cleaned his hand on the crisp wipe uniformity of his best shirt. He scorned best shirts, and shorts, and the now-torn stockings which were turning grey with mud and sweat as he walked. Halfway to the scar, his shoe twisted off his foot in overt rebellion, and he abandoned it.

Three days before, his hair had been described as similar to his brother's. Resenting the comparison, he had stolen scissors from the draw and cut it short enough that you could no longer tell the colour - he had been happy with the result, though his mother hadn't. The overall effect gave him a wide eyed, beseeching look of a half-drowned kitten. A raindrop flung itself from his forehead to the sharp line of his collarbone. He did not notice.

Reaching the scar, he sat down with a hollow thump and tried ineffectively to rub ash from his shorts. Smoke - he could still smell it, clinging like a leech to the fabric of his shirt and the raw back of his throat and the unexplored corners of his mind. He hated smoke.

It occurred to him that he should cry.

With overdue fear, the chick gave a squeal of futile hysteria.

Mother. There's a monster, mother.

The monster started. Silver eyes darted up, left, right and to the ground, then paused unreadably on the bird. It twisted to bring its face closer.

Mother. screamed the bird, Mother!

A sticky, blood-stained hand clamped around the limpid, chirping frame. The bird screeched limply and struggled against its grip. It held fast.

The bird felt it being itself being lifted from the ground. The monster opened its mouth.

The bird flailed its head. The monster did not notice.

Oh God, thought the bird, I'm going to die.

It felt the cool swish of the air against its newly formed eyes...

"Hello bird", said the boy, "My name is Xavier."

The bird did not reply.

"Look" said the boy, thrusting the bird towards the horizon, matter-of-factly, "My house is burning."