

Myriadet.

a song by Emily Mackrell

or, a three-bird haibun:

1. Dustlark (in reverse) *and*
2. Boeing (in reverse) *and*
3. Sparrow (ever forward.)

—*smash!*

The sky is keening, and I dream I am awoken by a glistening crack from above me. Bare toes straining on damp rungs, I find embedded in my roof hatchings a shattered sunsquint-yellow array of crystalline brimstone, decorating what appeared to be a colossal talon shard, eight feet by two. Minutes later, amid the villagers' rabble, the scholar holds aloft a fist of keratin and sulphur and announces that a mythic bird, a dustlark, is finding its nest far above, up the high Steybeck—that river upturned flowing to us from Heaven. We and a hundred thousand generations to come shall live in its dust, and our lives will be gospels.

So I shall be a Saint.

One fortnight later I apply a final varnish to my mother's rowboat, upturned in the cart of the kindly fletcher, as we near the sacred pool that sources our village's water and acts as the Steybeck's foot—a motherbird feeding her child. Today I aim my boat to the Sun and row, row: row to and row through the vanishing point above us, touch the dustlark, touch Heaven, and become legend. The priest delivers unto me a sombre blessing. The chemist clutches my wrist in both of her hands, imploring me to lie with her and use the oars as our firewood tonight. One week later, I can barely see my village anymore.

It's a year now, and forty days if my count is right. The air's thick now, my shoulders shafts. The clouds have grown ever denser in recent weeks, writhing and wrapping on themselves, great meadows turning on themselves to become pillars. My elbows, crankshafts, beat. Today, for the first time, I see on the Heavenly horizon a sulphuric scar, a precise incision where before there were but bruises.

It begins as firmamental petechiæ, a sparse hail of brimstone shrapnel, and, wincing through battered eyelids and the slow storm that pricks them, I see it begin to coalesce into the point of a dagger, as viewed by its sleeping sandbag sufferer. It's only a couple of days before I reach the tip of the scar, all bloodied from hail and heaving amid this same air that congealed to stone around me. The Sun goes out as I row upstream and the scar passes overhead. I choke as the sulphur penetrates me, coils through my throat, squeezes. Peering into the indifferent face of this sheer rock ceiling, I wonder if its stare has touched eyes other than mine.

I am answered by a star: long beyond where the scar fades into Heaven, a wailing orb of fire falls, gracefully screaming towards me. Yet, despite its cries, it fizzles to dust long before it nears, rendering me once more silence. Like the light, not seen but the points it hits, this river has no banks with which to let out its roar. Its silence channels it, fibresonic, to its foot, its mouth, where its roar can realise as rain. There lies the Ground loop: wind on valley, froth on shore. The crackle; the tape hiss. Here I whistle on compact disc, noise floor as far below me as the world's.

My conduit gradually widens until almost stationary, banks beyond view, now letting me pause my strokes without plummeting. One day later up in the shadow of the scar, another orb descends towards me, far above, its cries barely stronger against the silence, its fire barely brighter against the shadow. It, too, shatters. Over many days I watch many stars, each falling a little further and each time having rowed a little higher, until we meet in the middle and in its final moments before bursting I see it: the tip of a talon. Each day I see another, ever more whole as I rise,

scraping down the scar like pencil lead till it renders them dust. From powder to claw, day by day I watch God mould the flesh of a fledgling—erosion in reverse. I watch over the months and years as my zoëtropic babe is built; I see the first hatchling mounted on the beginnings of legs, the first with a virgin wing, the first singlefile siblings with still-blind eyes.

A few months later, during my wordless exchange with the great scar above and surely half a day since the prior fallen fledgling, I notice in its path the beginning, or end, of a groove. A faint channel, etched sharply and extending smoothly and unwaveringly everupward. Resting my oars, letting my coble coast, I stand slowly, *en pointe*, a perfectly taut thread from toe to outstretched tip, and trace my finger up the groove. I am a stylus; the wailsong etched in stereo cascades through me, a membrane. My river an aerial, my boat a dish, I broadcast to the world, live in technicolour, the song: a ballad passed through countless generations, overdubbed by each to the same wax cylinder. Folklore made flesh. The sound of sulphur.

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The first verse is thus: *adagio, adagio*, a great bird rests. Battered wings' final beat brings her to the broad summit of a scar—her brimstone nest. She digs in her feet, splintering talons planted permanently, sending a sulphuric shower down below, and with a wail, a hail, and a crystalline vale, a new generation's cast to the gale. So begins the monophonic choir. Every day, an electron ray, fired from cathode to phosphor; a dot, a voice, a larkling's cry, alone without sisters to call for. But the coils ever shift, and the ray's ever swift, and the tube's an enchanting flicker; and in *presto* time, to our *largo* mind, the dots make sublimest picture.

The chorus (*so-no-ro!*) speaks of ecchymotic elegies and dropsical saints; cascading arpeggi of despots and sheikhs seep from vibrant harmonious welts, and all the while a hoarse refrain (renders grooves gravel) tells over, tells over, tells over, of the larkling cometh, a-bomb talons, whose downward deathward twirling yields such

perfect blinding self-annihilation its song bleeds through stone and leeches up through Heaven. *Gesamtkunstwerk für immer.*

Coda: *capo, capo*, a firstborn falls. The air her incubator, she hatches alone, amnion-addled, a shriek amid shrapnel, whirling, whirling. The circuit completes: an arc as flailing claw finds cliff face, desperately digging in to delay her descent and finding contact, scar tissue to scar tissue, through the stone to her mother once again—trading tempo for turbulence, pirouettes for powder. From claw to beak, the face erodes her everything, leaving but her essence: light and noise. “*al Fine.*”

Meanwhile, back in Alexandra Palace, the signal’s growing too strong. The groove’s growing greater, the gale’s a gill. These paths are older now, far more well-tread. The aria with which I started’s come to cacophonous chorus and I can’t hear you, Controller, I’m doing everything I can, and it’s all noise now, a hundred trillion children, *informare con brio e fuoco, educare con amore affetuoso, intrattenere con moto con spirito*, take my hand Controller let’s point our cameras to the Sun and broadcast broadcast trip its eternal light fantastic ‘til it burns our fucking eyes out and breathe don’t breathe we’re nearly at the top now the groove’s a galaxy jump in can’t swim dance tumble kiss coalesce throb hit bass hit bass hit—

I blink, noticing a young bird ascend past me. Her face strains as she adjusts to her first flight, never regarding me as instinct takes her higher than I can. *Coda.*

Rowing now through the silent days since, I count the myriad strokes until the next shooting star passes me. Two myriad more. None come. The flier was the final. Instead I watch the groove above me, mould of a mountain, the analogue, deepen—and, with just a few more decades, begin to consume the scar entirely. Then, introitus, comes the day: Sun peaks through, and scar is two. I find myself eventually at the riven summit, the immense sulphuric nib aimed from pit to Paradise. Atop: an almighty carcass, each of two skeletal claws still piercing each tine, eight-hundred yards apart. The nib is angled: the Steybeck penetrates the centre of this Rhodian rhombus, and I, a merchant, row in the shade of Colossus.

Nought remains of the dustlark, in the years since that perfect parthenogenetic matricide, but that rigid upstanding skeleton. I curse myself for not asking more from the scholar, not asking: *who named this thing?* The dustlark is before me, dead. The dustlark lives, her larklings organelles, her newest cycle now searching for another nest. The dustlark never lived, never died: the lark Eternal, a subsystem of this throbbing Earth.

So I am once again alone. The unspeaking face relatively above my head sits far absolutely below my back. My village, my all (no name, no Domesday) sits millennia underneath me, now a metropolis around the cathedral its citadel. Its apse is the focus of the world's amphitheatre, with each tier another century's canvas. Each panel viewed from the centre stands smooth, yet from a breath away is impossibly adorned with fingerprint-dense carvings reinterpreting the tales on tiers below. Cast of a chasm. Should Etemenanki fall. The digital. Someday, the towering amphitheatre will reach the tip of the scar, its canvasses now a mile tall, its centre the Speybeck, its radius its country—home to the scaffolded generations that will never see above or below their tier. How it will recount those legends thought to be depicted below! All of all will carve imagined aboves: holy chickenfeet; glorious gash; the sailing Saintess. But for now they lag. Evergrowing O Ziggurat.

But I'm not yet eternal, and so I climb. Etemenanki pursues through the thickening air, and when it reaches Rhodes they'll build on till the bird's long forgotten. Encasing and past the decay of that Colossal wreck, they'll still chase me, She who climbed Heaven's talon, and they'll venerate, venerate.

Oh, larkling: you yearn to etch the scar, to persist beyond your dust... know ye not that to etch is to destroy, that carvings bear rust? Even the thickest canvas can be punctured; all scars wear through. Falling is flight, my babe, only purpose separates the two. Retract your claws, beat that impotent beat, sing to the abyss, and, oh larkling, I'll do you one better, my larkling, I'll sing and I'll soar over that chasm darkling and I'll light it from above, my darling larkling, I'll outlive that Sun I'll be sparkling, sparkling, and you'll miss the grand finale, fragile larkling, but your

And so I fell. And so, tumbling, I reached out my claws and seized the scar. And so I raged, raged as I clung wildly on to scratch my refrain among every little larkling's. And so and so I drifted from the scar, to clutch so furiously at the absent banks of this forsaken river, screaming stop, stop, I have to get off, I have to stop, stop

—*saith woe*: "*Pass, go!*" Awaken.

I'm walking along the trail left by an air disaster. The usual dogyapping of the horseyfields is, this cockrow, perfectly calm as the screaming fuselage attracts the morningers to the police barriers or their television sets. It's a mile-long gutter leaking blood and dandelions and grief, and I wonder if the souls by the top wing, as they elegantly traced my favourite valley stream, heard the somas downstairs weep in its beauty, or if the great mechanical stylus beneath them etched in silence. As I follow backwards the path towards the initial crashpoint—that ohsobrief asymptotic caesura in which they knew, oh, they *knew*—my head is a gigantic metal orb. Lives are ending in reverse to my left. I'm feeling a slow sort of dizziness and I wonder what happened to handshakes and good firm integrity. I kick a dewy *Sarah Jane* lunchbox. What a fragile day.

*Press on, shunned sparrow,
Nor can watercolour sykes
Return to their brush.*