

Nymph

Eley Williams

No books, Ma. This time I want a made-up story.

What would you like it to be about?

Birds.

You seem very sure about that.

What's wrong with a story about birds?

Nothing. Birds, got it. Do you want to be in it? Can I be in it?

Birds!

By a bus-stop on a road near an entirely ugly city there once stood our large horse-chestnut tree. This is a true story: the tree is on the drive to school. It is not the largest tree by the roadside nor the broadest and by appearances alone it might easily have been confused with any other horse-chestnut tree. Such misperception would be more than a little unfair, however, for this particular tree was once a woman. She had been the most beautiful woman in the whole wide world.

To answer your next question, she fell in with the wrong crowd.

Where are the birds?

Our horse-chestnut could make all kinds of tree-noises - hisses and moans and creaks and whistles - but all really human sounds were denied her. She had possessed such a sweet voice in her youth too - the sweetest song in the whole wide world. It was this that came as perhaps the greatest loss, that a stillness of tongue came with the stillness of her form.

We have been with her throughout the process and so have observed that she has become

increasingly stoical about her situation. For example she has allowed the pulses to stop beating quite so hotly within her ticking sap, stilled her silent weeping into the soil and come to understand there will be no more falling timbres to her voice. *Timbre* is a French word to do with sound; you spell it like a jumbled-up *timber*. ‘Le timbre de timber tombé’ is a meaningless French phrase that is fun to say, don’t you think? Our tree learned to present a wooden performance to the knottiest of problems. She accepted, as the years went on, to never go against the grain. Best leafed alone. To log out. These are just some of the little jokes our tree used to make with herself over the centuries; when the mood took her we found she could be passably funny. The mood took her fewer times the longer we knew her.

We are birds.

The story is being told by birds?

Will that work, do you think?

Go on, Ma.

Some of us are pretty, most of us lustily-lunged and a few of us from the ugly city have horrible ugly feet. These last ones had to cluck daily apologies for every scrape of stump and awkward scramble they found themselves enacting in her arms. Out of respect, we tried to be dignified when around her; we would not allow the magpies any hanky-panky in her branches, for example, nor let the cuckoos kick any eggs down from her hair.

What did you just say?

You know about cuckoos in other birds’ nests, don’t you?

No, what you said about the magpies.

You can ask Daddy about that. Mention birds. Mention bees.

Is it French? Like timbre?

Sometimes.

Magpies are unlucky. One for sorrow, two for joy.

Sit back now.

We birds sought only to sing and entertain our tree. We slowly became a chorus, we collared-doves and blackest of birds, committed to committing her tale to sound. We passed her history onto our chicks from throat to throat, blurting it out like food for our fledglings all the way down the generations.

We did not always know how far to believe her history, of course.

‘You can’t really be one thousand years old,’ a pigeon from the city objected one year, swaggering at the breast. ‘Horse-chestnut trees didn’t even exist in Britain back then.’ Around these parts, city pigeons are regarded as exceedingly pedantic. *Pedantic* means irritating. Ask Daddy about that too.

The tree explained that she had not always been in this exact tree-form. Whenever she addressed us it made our feathers pick up as if with cold.

‘A bower,’ she had said. ‘A bough, a dowry: do you know what that is? A dour arbour I have become, with my doughy flesh once plashy, then pliant, now barked and doughty.’

Is this a riddle?

We asked, ‘Is this a riddle?’

‘I am riddled,’ the tree answered. ‘And I am dappled.’

‘Right,’ we said.

‘A broken oak and a stunted beech. Ashen and elder and elderly was I,’ she said, ‘and now like this.’

She laughed then with a dry rattle of leaves. We indulged her whenever she spoke in this way because we knew she missed using words as she wished. In turn, she indulged our presence because we taught her all the new words we encountered and told her about all the new things to see in the world. She, sweetly, tried to seem interested in paving-slabs and balls of lard hung on window ledges, in heated rooftops and feral cats.

She had fallen in love: we understood at least that this lay at the root of her transformation. When the land was young and she still had her two legs, her two quick hands and

on her lips the sweetest song in the whole wide world she had fallen in love with a handsome young man. Almost as handsome as you, in fact, but a good deal taller.

That is, she fell in love with someone who *looked* like a man: someone who looked like the most handsome young man in the whole wide world.

As he had explained to her at their first meeting, he was not actually a man at all but made of earth and stars and godliness.

‘Hot stuff,’ said one of the city-pigeons. His feet were pink clawed blurs fizzled down by the ammonia of his droppings. He flew off to chase a toffee-wrapper dropped at the bus-stop.

‘This young man,’ continued our horse-chestnut tree, ‘lived in the woods and was as one with the woods and he was the Green Man, and he was immortal, which means he would live forever. He had fallen in love with me and would have me be his wife.’

She had said yes to him and they had held hands and so forth all summer long.

‘He loved me as deep as loam and as clear as rain,’ she had explained to us. We clapped our wings.

‘But when Autumn came he grew grave and told you that he had to leave?’ we supplied, we who knew the story well.

‘I’m telling this, aren’t I?’ she said and flicked us gently with her twig-ends. ‘But yes. His beard became hazy with thorns as the days grew shorter and his eyes mottled over with orange and brown sadness. I cried into my lovely hair and covered his face with tears and tried to pull the crown of twine from his head so that he might stay.’

‘And then?’

‘And then, when I knew he truly had to leave, I promised I would remain constant to him until he returned for me.’

‘And then it happened?’ we asked. ‘Then you changed into a tree?’

There was a shrugging hiss from some of her higher branches.

‘Was it magic?’ asked a blue jay, enthralled.

‘When will the Green Man be back?’ asked a coal tit, aghast.

‘What a bastard,’ said a motherly thrush. ‘Let me tell you, love, if I ever see him around these parts, I swear I’ll go right for the eyes.’

Ma!

Birds can be very rude sometimes, I'm afraid.

Not a thrush, though!

We all muttered in loyal agreement with the rude-but-fair thrush. We could get no more from the tree on that particular day; we had heard it all before, of course, so did not press the point. We demurred. We roosted in her shaking shoulders and chirruped our lullabies into the folds of her flesh.

Fungi pouted out from her trunk over the following years and her skin grew a trifle deeper a grey. Sometimes she fell silent for decades on end and we wondered whether she had forgotten how to communicate and was in fact trapped, standing, shut-up and mute inside her bark. She passed into myth amongst our chicks with her silence and they took to calling her a nymph in their first squeaked, tonic triads.

'Do you miss him?' we would ask her, at least once a decade. Individually we lived and we died, but there were always birds of some sort alongside her.

She would pause and then say, carefully, 'I stayed up drinking the darkest water, whittled by wind alone upon a bank-side.'

'That's a yes, then?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I miss him all the time.'

'You're very patient.'

'I suppose so.'

We huddled closer together and murmured to her, tentatively, 'And you're sure he is worth the wait?'

'Of course! And it's not all so bad. I can feel heartbeats in my arms every day, for example. I never could before – there are five starlings, today, and a sparrow?'

'Quite right!' we said after a headcount, delighted.

'I miss having teeth,' she added after a while.

'Teeth are rubbish,' we say, immediately, to comfort her. We are a little biased in this of course.

‘They were painful to lose, I mean. That’s all.’ She meant, we think, that one should always look after one’s teeth and brush them before bed-time.

On another day we would ask her, ‘Will you ever forget him?’

‘Impossible,’ she said, and a smile busied itself about her core deep within her. ‘You see, we two were the first to understand that hands can hold other hands and that eyes can meet other eyes; the very first to understand the importance of hands not touching hands, too. Of eyes not meeting eyes. You cannot just forget things like that.’

‘That’s what every person in love thinks,’ said a city-pigeon. We tutted and fretted and drowned out his voice with a hasty dawn-chorus.

We mentioned earlier that from the outside our tree might easily be confused with any other large horse-chestnut. Let us emphasise the size of her; she stood so broad and proud we sometimes wondered whether the clouds might be one day snagged upon her fingers. It was not just birds and clouds that gathered to our tree. Other plants, for instance, often vied with us in our efforts to distract her: every June, dandelions swapped jokes with her until they grew fuzzy-faced and their heads exploded. Daisies played with her rootlets until their faces were snatched away for necklaces by children. Mistletoe came in the winter to warm her outstretched arms with mufflers - this struck us as a particularly nice touch. Other creatures also took an interest in her, too, with yearly deer rubbing the velvet from their head-twigs against her legs while red and then grey squirrels chased one another in spirals about her waist. They tickled her with their claw-nicks and gossiped with her about the new world.

We also remember centuries later when the road was newly trickled in tar beside her roots and a boy climbed up into her arms. He was wearing a shirt and a purple sleeveless jumper over his chest that was not made of sheep or cow or cotton but a new material that had come with the new world. He had small sticks in his pocket that he chewed upon, blowing them out of his mouth into tacky pink circles. Our horse-chestnut tree had never seen such a thing and leaned in a little closer over his head to watch.

He had a box filled with paper. Paper always got her attention; we jumped up and down

as he approached with the box, whooping, teasing her: ‘Your filleted, pressed sisters, sitting sliced-up in his hands!’

Swinging up into her lower branches, the boy began to read aloud from these papers in his halting boy’s voice. He looked at a photograph, then the boy shut up the box and cried. Our horse-chestnut tree stroked his face with her softest leaves and cried too, for the youth of him. After a while the boy squeezed his face dry and read a comic.

He stayed up with her all afternoon and we could have sworn her foliage turned a brighter green because of his company for those few hours.

This boy grew up and became a graphic designer for a boring company in the ugly city, catching the bus every week to get to his office.

Like Dad!

Yes, I’m afraid my imagination is only up to so much.

You’re not doing too badly. Dad’s stories have more lasers, but birds are cool too.

Thank you, sweetheart.

The man passed by our horse-chestnut tree twice a day and it did not take long before she recognised him. It was at around this time that we became aware of a change about her; the lines in her skin plumped out by degrees and black liver-spots upon some of her fingers fell away to be replaced with thicker, fresher surfaces.

‘I do so wish that I might speak again,’ she sighed one morning as the man’s bus drew away from her. ‘But my chords are scaled over with lichen, my lungs tasselled with fronds.’

‘We think it suits you,’ we would say.

‘But I miss how I used to be.’

We said, ‘You look beautiful.’

‘Do you really think so?’ She shook out some loose leaves. ‘Am I really beautiful, still?’

‘Yes. And we love you,’ we said, but she did not seem to hear us.

We caught her paddling at the man's bald head with her outermost leaves when he waited for the bus every morning. She shaded his eyes; she allowed spiders cinch down their flossy gut-trails into his coat pockets; she let children catch her fallen hair to burn on bonfires so that the motes of her ash might hit the sides of his tongue and trap inside his nose in the winter breeze.

'Do you see how his ears glow in the cold when the light is behind him?' she asked us one day.

'Like stained-glass windows made of skin,' we said, craning our necks to see.

'You'll never know how much you miss the chill and the glow of your ears until they have gone.'

'Is that right?' We, forever earless, were annoyed that she did not acknowledge our attempt at poetry. We sulked a little and fluffed-up against the wind.

'He runs past me on the weekends. Have you noticed?' she went on. 'His ears are banging with little wires coming out, like rhizoids.'

She sounded concerned; we all felt a tremor run up her trunk.

'Mankind do that nowadays,' we told her. 'In the same way seagulls glide up and down the currents just for the hell of it, people choose to jog around in circles with wires in their heads.'

'Just for the hell of it!' she whispered. Her leaves flushed a shade redder.

And we recall how later that month the man stumbled towards her in the night in quite a departure from his normal routine. We could see he was drunk and we did not like the way he was waving that bottle so close to our dear horse-chestnut tree.

He was chattering into his phone, the little plastic box with the bright green face that sings in imitation of us. He was staggering about and giggling, and our horse-chestnut tree laughed with joy to see him alone and so happy. He reached out and steadied himself with one hand against her. The touch of him made the heartwood of her thrum; one of us, an owl, felt the power of it through his feet.

The man broke the bottle he was holding on the metal of the bus shelter. As our owl

watched, the man turned face-on to her trunk. The man burst into song and, using a large piece of glass, he carved some initials right into our horse-chestnut tree's skin.

Our owl screeched.

Too drunk to hear, the man nodded at his handiwork then stamped his way back home. He was blowing on his fingers and singing to the moon.

Did he hurt the tree?

'It must have hurt?' we asked her, the morning after.

She ignored the question. 'What does it say? What did he write?'

'We cannot read,' we said, and cooed apologies.

'Maybe it's the name of that woman he lives with,' suggested one of the urban pigeons, a pigeon with the ugliest pair of feet we had ever seen.

'What woman?'

'I flew back with him to his house one evening,' the pigeon went on. He preened himself, neck shining with surprising greens and violets. 'He lives with a lady who leaves out top-notch bread for me and my friends. They eat organic stuff with sesame seeds from Marks & Spencer's, and I think he loves her very much.'

One of our bulkiest crows head-butted the pigeon from her branches before he could say any more but already we could sense an alteration inside her. It might have been jealousy, it might have been loss: we are just birds, and we do not know.

'I must see her,' we heard our tree say, quietly.

The rest is painful for us to remember. She regularly unsettled us every November when she became unrecognisable and Argus-eyed with fruit. Argus was a big giant with lots and lots of eyes that lived in Greece a long time ago. This year, however, she let the transformation come upon her far earlier than usual. Her eyelashes swelled and became green and spiked, drooping in their hundreds all about us.

As the man sat down in his usual place at the bus-stop, she flung one of the fattest of

these eyes down from its socket into his lap. He jumped and picked it up. He smoothed the cream of its setting away. We all watched him feel the cool of the eye's gloss against his cheek. He put the eye in his pocket.

'They dry out fast, those conkers,' a squirrel-neighbour told us in hushed tones, watching alongside. 'They crack up and become dust within a month.'

We press-ganged the city pigeons to follow the man home again as soon as we could; they reported back that the man had kept the conker on his desk at home until the woman he lived with had thrown it out. It had begun to crumble away into nothing.

Whatever our horse-chestnut tree saw of them from her eye's position on his desk she would not say.

'I will keep their initials fresh on me,' was all she would whisper when we asked her directly. 'I can do that now, the way that I am. Keep things fresh for others.'

'Your Green Man would be proud to know you were doing this while you waited for him,' we said encouragingly.

'It's the least I can do,' she said. Then she fell silent, and she never spoke to us again.

The End.

I think I prefer Dad's stories.

I'm sorry I couldn't work in more lasers.

You make things up better than him, though. His eyes go all rolling-up when he has to think up new characters.

That's very nice of you to say. Come here. Now, good night.

Maths test tomorrow.

I remember.

I love you.

Can you leave the door open?

And the corridor light on. Of course.