

The Octagon

by Paul j Rogers

We were moved to the garden because our custodian said we didn't like the air conditioner. Before the heat came, during the exploratory licks of spring, she'd asked her spouse, that model-making buffoon, to build us an aviary out of wood and metal. But the great oaf had complained he had much work to do (balsawood trimming and squeezing microscopic globules of adhesive from small tubes), so it was agreed that when the time came he'd lay some base slabs and fetch something from the pet shop in his wagon. Despite her chaff about our wellbeing, we, the Aves, knew her motives were murkier, for we'd comfortably survived the manufactured chill last summer; indeed, some of us, myself included, greatly preferred that cool filtered air to the odour of her burnt patties and the model maker's bovine flatulence. No, the only reason she'd moved us outside, as we all knew, was for her aggrandisement in the local community, of which she was a prominent member.

From the outset, security was tight. The aviary she'd purchased was an eight foot tall octagon, which the model maker mounted on concrete slabs placed near to the cherry tree that dwarfed their cheerful townhouse. Being larger birds, the Blue-and-yellow Macaws took the most desirable perch, so I, rather casually, acquired the horizontal perch beneath them as if that'd always been my preference. Simeon, a white Goffin's Cockatoo and the smallest of our quartet, took the modest perch adjacent to my own, which seemed logical to all. Our new abode gave us every confidence: after all, this stainless steel fortress was impregnable. No, we never once feared assassination by fox, cat or airborne cannibal.

The parrots—macaws, as they prefer—took to our new surroundings immediately. Webster, the larger of the two, declared that we'd finally arrived, that we'd made it to the big stage. As he shuffled along his beam, he pumped his saffron chest and spread his cape that glittered like a swimming pool glimpsed through the leaves of a banana tree. Fernando, his sibling with identical markings and an extrovert whose vanity could only be rivalled by his brother's (such egoists, like all parrots), seemed especially suited to our new life in the public eye. My take on all this was that the new set-up was an improvement in terms of space and facilities, and that being outside was more clement, but I'd reserve my full judgement until a reasonable time period had elapsed. Simeon, in his understated way, organised his water bowl and seed tray, adjusted his mirror to inspect his magnificent rockabilly quiff, and then mumbled that he was comfortable.

The local wildlife waited until dusk had sprinkled the garden with cocoa and burnt orange before they arrived to gawp at us. They appeared in the cherry tree at first, blackbirds and crows, and then gossiped amongst themselves because, after all, we looked completely different to them, the indigenous species. After a while, Webster invited them down to the lawn, which they accepted, one-by-one, and soon the parrots were regaling them with stories from afar (despite growing up in a pet shop not fifteen minutes' drive from here).

Over the following evenings their ranks swelled and, from time to time, I'd flash my understated plumage, perhaps yawn or toss a piece of fruit in their direction, and then make some off-hand remark about how boring living in this neighbourhood must be for them. Simeon, however, never got involved with chaff. He'd listen, politely, respond when pushed, but when the visiting throng retired to roost his relief was obvious. It was fun during those early days. We had a good time, together and with them. And then, in the second week of relocation, we belted out our first shanty at evensong.

When Simeon and I were purchased, we were housed in the living room adjacent to the parrots, albeit in separate cages. That was a year ago now, the parrots having arrived six months before us. At first, we'd exchanged witticisms to pass the time (Webster was the liveliest raconteur) until, one evening around midwinter, Simeon surprised us all with the suggestion that we should pass the time by making rhythms, and then, by way of demonstration, began to tap his mirror (his faultless pecking of the glass doubtless honed before we'd met). Instinctively the parrots harmonised and were soon duplicating melodies from The Lovin' Spoonful albums they'd heard our custodian spin on her ancient high fidelity system. After a little coercion, I began to twang my dextrous beak along the bars, and in no time at all I was producing pleasing rhythmic scales. Indeed, it was agreed by all that Simeon's tight percussive loops were greatly enhanced by my adventurous arpeggios. Our shanties delighted our custodian. We ate well. The seeds and berries flowed.

Even while living indoors we'd never pop a shanty until dusk and, out here in the garden, our visitors had been most numerous in the evenings—the octagon alive with inter-species banter—so it'd never crossed our minds to hammer out a ditty after dinner. But, by the second week of relocation, the locals had grown accustomed to our presence, and with nothing but a few starlings and wrens quivering in the cherry tree, Fernando announced it was time to shanty. We ambled into it, one-by-one, as we'd always done: first Simeon's percussion, then my rhythmic bars, and finally the parrots' harmonies. The small flock of assorted species that'd gathered in the boughs watched us in stunned silence.

While engrossed in a shanty, it'd always been my habit to focus upon Simeon as we lost ourselves in mesmeric oscillations, sometimes oblivious to the parrots, other times all interacting together in our cacophony. But that evening I was only focused on the cherry tree; we all were, and between the four of us energy surged. As our tempo hummed, the chattering garden birds grew bolder and began to warble to the beat. It was wonderful to let loose again: we'd all felt the pressure of relocation to some extent, and to be appreciated like this was a delight. My eyeballs swivelled from my colleagues, back to the cherry tree, and I noticed gum seeping from the trunk as if a wound were trying to scab.

When Simeon ended the ditty so we could take water, much to our amazement, the small flock that'd gathered in the cherry tree went completely bonkers. Oh yes, boughs bounced and leaves shook. We quenched our thirst efficiently to resume the show and, while we thrashed and clanged, I glimpsed Fernando's zebra-marked face assume the seriousness of pure elation. As I angled my beak towards Webster, the larger macaw began to gyrate wildly on his swing, admiring his profile in one of the mirrors as he crooned. During the final canto, Simeon caught my eye as he ducked for water, and the glance that passed between us confirmed that things had changed forever.

It wasn't just the Aves that were interested in us: humans would stop to ogle on their way into the town. This delighted our custodian so much that our meals improved accordingly. She'd always taken good care of us, but during the third week of relocation our meals became more opulent. Whereas she used to serve us grains for breakfast, we now got exotic nuts—cashews, pecans, macadamia. Previous luncheons of squash seed, delicious as they were, were replaced by garden vegetables, and for our evening meal she'd serve whatever fruit happened to be in season, perhaps topped with celeriac or carrot and garnished with guava, flax and poppy seeds. These incredible banquets made the grains we'd been eating previously seem like prison gruel. However Simeon, I noticed, was going off his food.

In addition to these great nutritious carousels of colour, our grooming became more rigorous as our custodian began to mist us daily with a solution of water and eucalyptus oil to encourage us to work our feathers. The parrots, of course, squabbled for her attention, and she'd smile and scold them playfully while her flabby arms lavished lacquer to give their

feathers sheen. Once the macaws had been placated, she'd reload her spray bottle to saturate me and Simeon, and neither of us cared in the slightest who she squirted first. These incredible spreads and luxurious preening sessions became great spectacles much talked about amongst the local species, and the macaws savoured each mouthful of our newfound celebrity as if it were the finest Trumpet Honeysuckle nectar.

Our shows were getting bigger. Typically at dusk the cherry tree would fill with wrens and blackbirds, and as the last peach clouds of evensong tantalized above, the larger birds would arrive and evict the smaller species, banishing them to the lawn. Being at ground level was precarious as cats would lurk. Nightly there were fatalities, and wings would beat in panic as the crowd scattered. After an attack by one of those murderous barbarians, we'd restart the shanty at a slow tempo to eulogise the passing of one of our dear fans, and then, following the lead of one of the parrots (usually Fernando) we'd whip things up until we reached a crescendo of taps and scratching wilder than any that'd gone before. At our mesmerising best, sparrows would faint, whole flocks of them, mostly females, but not all, and whole companies of gannets would gobble themselves hoarse. It was around this time that I first noticed Simeon's plumage was looking thinner, this unnatural moulting confirmed by the curled quills littering the aviary floor.

One morning, in the early hours, a month or so after relocation, I awoke to the sound of Simeon muttering. Webster and Fernando were sleeping, Webster, as usual, upon one leg. It'd been a particularly exciting day as a murder of crows had entered the aviary during grooming and made off with our dung as souvenirs (which they'd later begun to merchandise to smaller species in exchange for worms and crickets). As Simeon rocked and murmured, his back was turned on me, the parrots, and the cherry tree, as was his habit. His candyfloss plumage appeared to be shaking. He didn't seem aware that I was cognizant.

"Having trouble sleeping?" I said to my friend.

"Always do," said Simeon.

A few moments passed as we exchanged trifles, and then my friend, the great percussionist and Goffin's Cockatoo, dropped a shoulder and pivoted to face me on his perch.

"Can't handle this much longer," Simeon said with a shiver to his voice.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Just can't take another day of it, that's all."

I knew exactly what he meant, of course, yet irritated by his navel gazing I snapped that I couldn't understand him, that these were halcyon days, salad days in fact, and our salads were first-class, gourmet, and organic.

"Feel like I'm cornered by cats and my wings are made of lead," he said.

"Surely you mean cornered by females who adore you," I said with a sneer.

When I rolled my eyes up from the cage slabs, Simeon's black irises had already swivelled to the eaves: "Explain yourself, Simeon," I said. "If we can't communicate then all this has no meaning."

But Simeon wouldn't explain himself. Simeon had slunk his neck into his wispy collar and was now scowling, in profile, towards the townhouse.

Of course, looking back, my reaction was erroneous as my friend had just needed me to listen. It was obvious how he'd been feeling yet, as selfish as this may sound, when you're having as much fun as I was, it's a terrible irritation to reset your dials and re-tune to someone else's frequency, someone on an altogether different wavelength. In an attempt to darn the holes in our rapport, I told Simeon I'd thought that he enjoyed the attention we received as we cranked out a shanty, but my friend didn't respond, pretending, instead, that he was sleeping. Assuming he would mellow, I nodded off to pleasant thoughts of fresh blueberries, pistachios and the delirious shrieks of female sparrows.

By midsummer, the crows had installed themselves as our security. This, we all felt, was a blessing as prior to that black ring of muscle around the octagon the smaller birds would rush at our abode. These demented charges seemed to bother Simeon greatly as he'd quiver on his perch with his beak buried into his now bedraggled chest. Although these surges could be disconcerting, we lived inside a fortress made of high-grade steel, and the parrots and I believed that his reaction was irrational and out of all proportion. Yet despite Simeon's anxiety, there was a new intensity to his mirror tapping. This supercharged playing style seemed at odds with his general disposition, and I began to wonder whether Simeon was enjoying our new lifestyle more than he cared to show.

Another change around this time was that the parrots had started sucking poppy seeds soaked in eucalyptus oil that they'd siphon off while grooming. This gave them an outrageous confidence, and they'd cavort throughout the aviary, from the cage slabs to the eaves, making lewd gestures at their legions of female fans. Yes, they lived for the evenings—and why not? After all, we looked great and sounded wonderful, and together we were having the times of our lives.

It'd been an especially wild night. First, the parrots had become embroiled in a fierce argument during the evening's first shanty (much to my great mirth), and then, while tension between them still simmered, the crows had pounced on a tomcat in great numbers and killed the beast right there on the lawn. This startling occurrence had raised the crowd to fever pitch, to which we'd responded with our most pulsating shanties ever.

Long after the locals had roosted, Webster, Fernando and I stayed up chaffing on the parrots' perch. It was an especially balmy night with the scent of pears and the glow of terrace lights. Simeon, as usual, was perched below with his back to everyone, perhaps sleeping, perhaps eyeballing the drains that run around the townhouse. Webster, the larger of the two macaws (who could be witty when he felt like it), entertained us with his observations about the leader of the crows, an Ave he lampooned as an illiterate hoodlum with a chronic head tic and an urban drawl. His impression of that vulgar raven was first-rate, and in our revelry we sucked on eucalyptus poppy seeds and tossed fruit around the octagon. It was our release from the lifestyle, you see, the constant pressure to perform, the continual observation, the whole shebang. At the height of our merriment, Fernando bounced around the aviary fornicating with adventurous locals through the bars.

Later that night, I awoke from a particularly perplexing dream to find that Simeon had pivoted on his perch and had his great black eyes swivelled in my direction. We hadn't spoken in a while, so it was a surprise to find him looking over.

"They think they know us," said Simeon.

I presumed he meant the locals.

"Look at all those," he said, lifting a wing in the direction of the grub corpses that'd been piled outside the aviary.

"We don't even look at them," he said.

"They're gifts," I said. "Just tokens of their appreciation."

"After a few days, the crows take them," said Simeon.

I nodded although I couldn't see the relevance of his remark.

"They think they know us but they don't," he said.

My mind felt ragged from our after-show party. This conversation grated.

Reluctantly, I angled my beak back towards the bedraggled Goffin's Cockatoo.

"Truth is, we don't even know ourselves," said Simeon.

But I was in no mood to grapple with the existential because, after all, I'd had a big night, so I told him to get some rest, and then I let my pink eyelids fold across my stinging eyeballs.

Around a week later, Simeon refused to tap his mirror to start the evening's shanty. It came as no great surprise because the parrots had been teasing him mercilessly about his alopecia. (Why hadn't our custodian done more? It was true that she'd brought in a veterinarian, but anyone could see that moving Simeon back indoors was all he needed.) Yet Simeon's refusal to play was more than just a protest at their bullying: no, he'd had enough of everything. Enraged by his defiance Webster hopped down onto Simeon's perch, towering above him, and demanded that the Goffin's Cockatoo begin to play. Simeon's head fell to one side, that once great rockabilly quiff of his dispirited and broken. Fernando bounced down to join his brother, but he had no need for words and led with his angry beak. Ignoring my protests, the two macaws began to give Simeon a terrible pasting.

Of course the indigenous species were riveted by the drama unfolding inside the octagon, with Simeon's (admittedly small) group of fans becoming hysterical as the parrots tore chunks out of their idol. Breaking free from the ball of bites and squawks for a moment, Simeon unhooked his mirror from its bracket and let it fall and shatter on the cage slabs. This just incensed the parrots further. Convinced that they would kill him (and I admit I should've acted sooner, but my reactions were blunted by the eucalyptus poppy I'd been sucking), I lunged at Fernando and clamped my claws around his throat, wings beating. The zebra markings on his face, reminiscent of tacky nightclub décor, were splattered with blood as if he'd rammed his head into the cherry pie our custodian had left cooling on the windowsill.

I'd like to think that the parrots stopped because they were ashamed of what they'd done, but there is no evidence to support it. Nevertheless, the beating was over because Webster hopped up to their perch, in silence, and with a look of detachment. Fernando gave my neck a nasty bite, beat his wings, and followed his brother. As if some great dial had been turned, the locals fell silent, their cacophony finally muted. Shortly after that, the terrace spotlights failed and the octagon was plunged into total darkness. That evening, for the first time in months, there had been no shanty.

I waited until I heard the macaws snoring, comatose from spent bloodlust, and then whispered to Simeon from my adjacent perch.

"Hang on in there, I said. "She'll move you indoors tomorrow, she'll have to."

But battered, broken and slumped against his seed tray, Simeon remained silent. All around, in the flowerbeds and bushes, fireflies flickered in shades of green and yellow neon.

I barely slept that night, and as the awful poppy fug slowly receded I realised how badly I had failed Simeon. If the truth be told, I'd expected his corpse to thud onto the cage slabs several times throughout the night. But, somehow, Simeon hung on, and then day broke, and our jelly-armed custodian arrived with our breakfast platter, which soon hit the slabs with a clatter. Even to a creature as dense as her it was obvious who the culprits were. After all, the parrots' black and white striped faces were streaked with the ghastly evidence. Our custodian lifted the shaking Goffin's Cockatoo into her bosom and carried my friend towards the townhouse. We weren't groomed that morning. Breakfast was al fresco off the floor slabs. At noon, lunch was cancelled, and then later, so was dinner. Yet I felt elated. After all, Simeon had escaped the octagon.

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I woke from my nap to a terrible malaise that has since thickened. After Simeon left, our attempts to continue as a trio have been quite miserable. Sonically, we've adapted, but our shanties are as empty as the maple pods that litter the backyard at Martinmas. The parrots

don't seem to notice or care, yet even our most ardent fans no longer lose themselves in a cacophony, and I long for late autumn when our custodian will move us back indoors.

Rumours are rife as to Simeon's condition, with conflicting stories emanating from the locals, some saying that he's dead, others insisting they've seen our custodian taking seeds and nuts into the living room. But who knows what to believe. One thing they all agree on is that Simeon's cage is now covered with a cloth. It is my great hope that underneath that cloth there is a Goffin's Cockatoo, recovering.

Despite their gawps, the flocks of feckless locals don't concern me. I've never listened to their chaff. I'm impervious to stares. My great vexation is this octagon, or the macaws I share it with, and the thought of belting out another shanty fills me with despair. No, the living room's the place to be, back in my own cage, and tonight, if I'm brave enough, I'll refuse to scrape my beak along the bars. I've had enough, you see. I want out and I'll take what's coming. These will be my last lungfuls of balmy evening air. Then let me wake to the drone of the air conditioner, one day soon, while the sun still roasts and the cherries aren't yet purple.