

Misjudgement

And the clods buried the broken body of the bird. It was little and inoffensive, she mused as she stared down at its dumb and awkward form. It still held one wing angled stiffly up at the midnight sky. And the rock-strewn earth blanketed it. And his grip adjusted on the shovel. He tightened his face. The handle, coated with the underdirt of the college library flowerbeds, came away red-brown-sticky from his unknowable hands.

And it felt seditious burying this bird so, she felt, especially here, at night. There was something almost criminal about it, two students mutely burying a cooling accident of nature. At any second she expected another to intrude on their private little service and demand explanation. She stepped closer, rubbing the cold out of her arm. And he looked sturdy under the lamplight as he continued to scrape the soil thinly over the bird. He did this silently, dutifully. They were both eager for distraction, she thought, staring at the black crescents of dirt that lined his nails.

It died quickly, I'd imagine, he said. And he did not meet her gaze.

They were sitting in the shared kitchen in one of the North Court staircases when it had happened, and she had been peering up through the dark window onto underbrush path outside. Her hands were pressed around a chipped mug of something fizzy that smelt like wood varnish. He wasn't smiling anymore. Or, he had stopped smiling because she was finding it difficult to breathe.

They met, months ago, outside Café Nero. Holy Nero, it was called because it was situated right next to the Market Street church. He had mistaken her hair for another's and called out to her - Tiffany! - the wrong name for the wrong girl, met with raised eyebrows and a quizzical smile and quickly chuckled over. It gave them an excuse to chat, shyly, about all the things that suddenly mattered in this moment more than they should have, about home life, cats, liturgy and allergies and his secret longing to become a pilot. And she was amused and wondered if this is what it felt like when you met someone and felt sparks. And so he found himself worrying her cold fingertips between his dependable palms and promising her a coffee.

She found over the next few weeks that he was perfect, parental. Holding her hand to cross the road and bringing her presents during the sleepy gaps in between terms, he was even more aware of the obligations of her calendar than she was herself. And after each time they fumbled together in the dark, he would stroke her hair and kiss her on the nose, My cherub. And she would look at the wall from over his shoulder and feel overwhelmed with something that could have been love. He loved her deeply, that she knew. He could barely go a day without mentioning it, pressing it into his texts, her ears, the hollow of her collarbones. The way he looked at her each day, with big adoring eyes, took her breath away. Or, more precisely, it tightened her chest and pinched her ribs. And those were what everyone called butterflies. And she would kiss him and try to laugh because that's how you showed you felt the same.

She consulted her friend on the phone one night, who said in a little tinny voice through the speaker that while *she* had never felt that way, that sort-of-tickly-trapped when looking at *her* boyfriend, you never knew really what it was like for others and everyone felt these things differently. And sitting listening to that while staring into herself in the mirror with one finger tracing the bridge of her own nose, she decided to believe that it was fine.

But that one evening, with her wood-polish-fizz and her legs aching from what had happened in the narrow hours before, she stared at his happy largeness and felt herself say shortly, My feelings have changed. It came out like a slop, like her morning porridge slapping into a bowl. But she wasn't that surprised because it felt like it came from her chest, a little kernel of something else deep inside her body but very separate from herself. She stared hard into the murky drink, knowing that he was looking at her, open-mouthed, like a fish. And it was a little repulsive. She wished they would shut the fish's mouths and close their one eye when they lay like that on the ice in the supermarket, bloody and dazed. She would push past with her trolley and try to think of something else.

Your feelings have changed? He asked desperately. She knew that they hadn't, but she felt now that there was no other way to go about it. That thin inner-place in her body had reacted against something that it knew had been tolerated for too long. She nodded lightly and felt her breath come shallowly. And he blew out his cheeks and turned to face the empty, dark window. And he said curtly, You know mine haven't. She felt brittle, rubbed-bald, worn. He added, We had something so perfect. You can't do this to us. His mug rattled. She worried her cold fingertips and counted a long time waiting for him to speak again.

It was him who made the decision, not her decision but a decision he had made for them both. You won't do this, he said. He put the cup down firmly. I won't let you do this. And that was enough; he had laid it to rest. She knew that there was nothing more to be said. Her protest had been courteously overruled and so things must continue as they did before. He turned to face her and she saw him suddenly and clearly as another person, as someone she would examine on the train, his cuffed jeans and scratched jacket, his hard eyes. He looked like someone who was owed a debt. Had he always been like this and she had simply not seen it? And she thought of the long weeks with him pouring out like water, staining the years behind and the years ahead, her whole life unstopped like a bottle and seeping away like an accident. And she knew that this probably wasn't what you felt when you were in

love. And it was dizzying and he was approaching her, and she was not feeling those butterflies, or maybe she was, because her chest was tightening, and he was forcing one large dependable hand out through the space between them to quiet, and to restore, and to reassure and her breath caught in her throat.

And then it happened. A little thump – a heartbeat, really – against the window. Their heads turned. A little sparrow had misjudged the darkness and hit the window. And by the time they found it, in hastily pulled-on cardigans and coats, their feet stamping against the cold Autumn night, it was still. And to leave it felt incriminating.