



the birds

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The latest Kate Bush CD includes a song called "Aerial"; and, one spring afternoon, Hugh sat down to listen to it. In the city, I'm forever nagging him about the volume. "The neighbors!" I say. But out in Normandy I have to admit that it's me who's being disturbed. The music I can usually live with—it's the lyrics I find irritating—especially when I'm at my desk and looking for a reason to feel distracted. If one line ends with, say, the word "stranger", I'll try to second-guess the corresponding rhyme. "Danger", I'll think; then, "No, wait...this is a Christmas album. 'Manger'. The word will be 'manger'."

If I guess correctly, the songwriter will be cursed for his predictability; and if I guess *incorrectly*, he's being willfully obtuse—a word I learned from my publisher, who applied it to the title of my last book. It's a no-win situation that's made even worse when the lyrics are unintelligible, the voice a shriek embedded in noise. This makes me feel both cranky and old, the type of pill who says things like "You and that *rock!*"

There are singers Hugh's not allowed to listen to while I'm in the house, but Kate Bush isn't one of them; or, at least, she wasn't until recently. The song I mentioned, "Aerial", opens with the trilling of birds. This might be startling if you lived in the city; but, in Normandy, it's all we ever hear: a constant din of chirps and whistles that may grow fainter at certain times of year but never goes away. It's like living in an aviary. Added to the calls of larks and swallows are those of the geese and chickens that live across the road. After they've all gone to bed, the owls come out and raise hell until dawn, when the whole thing starts over again.

The Kate Bush song had been playing for all of thirty seconds when we heard an odd noise and turned to see a bird rapping its beak against the windowpane. A moment later, its identical twin appeared at the adjacent window and began to do the same thing. Had they knocked once or twice, I'd have chalked it up to an accident, but these two were really going at it—like woodpeckers, almost. "What's got into *them?*" I asked.

Hugh turned to the liner notes, hoping to find some sort of explanation. "Maybe the recorded birds are saying something about free food," he suggested; but, to me, the message seemed much darker: a call to anarchy, or even murder. Some might think this was crazy, but I'd been keeping my ear to the ground and had learned that birds are not as carefree as they're cracked up to be. Take the crows that descend, each winter, on the surrounding fields, and pluck the eyes out of newborn lambs. Are they so hard up for a snack that they have to blind a universal symbol of youth and innocence, or are they simply evil—a quality they possibly share with these two things at the window?

"What do you want from us?" I asked, and, rather than peck, the birds stepped back into the

flower box, getting a little traction before hurling themselves against the glass.

"They'll wear themselves out sooner or later," Hugh said. But they didn't. Not even after the clouds moved in and it began to rain. By late afternoon, they were still at it, soaking wet, but no less determined. I was lying on the daybed, working a crossword puzzle and listening to the distinct sound of feathers against glass. Every two minutes, I'd put aside my paper and walk across the room. "You think it's so great in here?" I'd say. "You think we've got something you can't live without?" At my approach, the birds would fly away, returning the moment I'd settled back down. Then I'd say, "All right, if you really want to come in that badly."

But the two lost interest as soon as the windows were open. And, so, I'd close them again and return to my puzzle, at which point the birds would reappear and continue their assault. Then, I'd say, "All right, if you really want to come in that badly..."

Einstein wrote that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. That said, is it crazier to repeatedly throw yourself against a window, or to repeatedly *open* that window, believing the creatures that are throwing themselves against it might come into your house, take a look around, and leave with no hard feelings?

I considered this as I leafed through Birds of the World, a visual guide as thick as a dictionary. After learning of the Philippine Eagle—a heartless predator whose diet consists of monkeys—I identified the things at the window as chaffinches. The size was about right, six inches from head to tail, longish legs, pink breast, and crooked white bands running along the wings. The book explained that they eat seeds and insects. It stated that some chaffinches prefer to winter in India, or North Africa, but it did not explain why they were trying to get into my house.

"Could it be something they picked up in Africa?" I wondered. And Hugh, who had lived there until his late teens, said, "Why are you asking *me*?"

When the sun finally set, the birds went away, but they were at it again the following morning. Between their running starts and their pitiful back-assed tumbles, the flowers in the window box were trashed—petals and bits of stem scattered everywhere. There were scratch marks on the windowpanes, along with what I'm guessing was saliva—the thick, bubbly kind that forms when you're enraged.

"What do we do, now?" I asked.

And Hugh told me to ignore them. "They just want attention." This is his explanation for everything from rowdy children to low-flying planes. "Turn the other way and they'll leave," he told me.

But how *could* I turn away?

The solution, it seemed, was to make some kind of scarecrow, which is not a bad project if you're in the proper mood. My first attempt involved an upside-down broom and a paper bag, which I placed over the bristles and drew an angry face on. For hair, I used a knot of steel wool. This made the figure look old and powerless, an overly tanned grandma, mad because she had no arms. The birds thought it was funny; and, after chuckling for a moment or two, they took a step

back and charged against the window.

Plan B was much easier, and involved nothing more than a climb to the attic, which Hugh uses as his studio. A few years earlier, bored, and in between projects, he started copying head shots he'd clipped from the newspaper. The resulting portraits were done in different styles, but the ones that best suited my purposes looked to be Mesopotamian, and pictured the hijackers of American Airlines Flight 11. Mohamed Atta fit perfectly into the windowpane, and the effect was immediate. The birds flew up, saw a terrorist staring back at them, and took off screaming.

I was feeling very satisfied with myself when I heard a thud coming from behind a closed curtain next to the bookcase. Another trip upstairs, another hijacker, and so on, until all five living-room windows were secured. It was then that the birds focussed their attention on the bedroom, and I had no choice but to return to the attic.

Aside from CDs, which Hugh buys like candy, he also has a pretty big record collection. Most are albums that he bought in his youth and shipped to Normandy against my better wishes. *Led Zeppelin II*, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*; if it played non-stop in a skanky-smelling dorm room, he's got it. I come home from my five-o'clock walk, and here's Toto or Bad Company blaring from the attic. "Turn that crap off!" I yell; but, of course, Hugh can't hear me. So, I go up, and there he is, positioned before his easel, one foot rigid on the floor, and the other keeping time with some guy in a spandex jumpsuit.

"Do you *mind*?" I say.

I never thought I would appreciate his music collection, but the chaffinches changed all that. What I needed were record jackets picturing life-sized heads, so I started with the 'A's and worked my way through the stack of boxes. The surprise was that some of Hugh's albums weren't so bad. "I didn't know he had this," I said, and I raced downstairs to prop Roberta Flack in the bedroom window. This was the cover of *Chapter Two*, and while, to me, the singer looked inviting, the birds thought differently and moved on to a room that once functioned as a milking parlor. There, I filled the windows with Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Joan Armatrading, and Donna Summer, who has her minuses but can really put the fear of God into a chaffinch.

The pair then moved upstairs to my office, where Janice Joplin and I were waiting for them. Bonnie Raitt and Rodney Crowell were standing by in case there was trouble with the skylights; but, strangely, the birds had no interest in them. Horizontal surfaces were not their thing; and, so, they flew on to the bathroom

By late afternoon, every window was filled. The storm clouds that had appeared the previous day finally blew off, and I was able to walk to the neighboring village. The route I normally take is circular, and leads past a stucco house occupied by a frail elderly couple. For years, they raised rabbits in their front yard; but, last summer, they either ate them (which is normal in this area) or turned them loose, which is *unheard* of. Then, they got rid of the pen and built a clumsy wooden shed in its place. A few months later, a cage appeared on its doorstep. It was the type you might keep a rodent in, but instead of a guinea pig, they use it to hold a pair of full-grown magpies. They're good-sized birds—almost as tall as crows—and their quarters are much too small for them. Unlike parakeets, which will eventually settle down, the magpies are constantly searching for a way out and move as if they were on fire—darting from one end of the cage to the other and banging their heads against the wire ceiling.

Their desperation is contagious, and watching them causes my pulse to quicken. Being locked up is one thing, but to have no concept of confinement, to be ignorant of its terms and never understand that struggle is useless—that's what Hell must be like. The magpies leave me feeling so depressed and anxious that I wonder how I can possibly make it the rest of the way home. I always do, though, and it's always a welcome sight—especially lately. At around seven, the light settles on the western wall of our house, just catching two of the hijackers and a half-dozen singer-songwriters who look out from the windows—some smiling, as if they were happy to see me, and others just staring into space, the way one might while listening to music, or waiting, halfheartedly, for something to happen.

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