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Mundus vult decipi

© Yesterday, I walked down to the gardens. I sat working a diary essay on symbolism e.g. this beautiful garden juxtaposed against a garden of stone. It strikes me as natural antinomy.

I did learn some wisdom from it; that whatever contemplations I have in this place, I should leave by the Abbey Gate. Instead of through the garden of stone. I'd been doing it the other way. It's just better to sleep on flowers instead of stone.

But I've also been looking for a man. Last Sunday of last May, I saw him here. Before that, around January sixth. I mentioned his black cane with the gold handle in an entry. He's about 80 or so. I was sitting at my usual bench near the Martyr's Memorial. I looked up and there he sat.

This old man sat up so straight, like a statue. His hands upon his cane as he looked out across the stones. His clothes were impeccable. A black ensemble of suit underneath a wool topcoat. Black scarf. Black shoes and his black hat sat at a tilt in a touch of style. From my vantage point, the only thing not black was his face and that gold handled cane. It looked like a dragon's head.

So I studied this man, wondering, "What's an eighty-year-old think about in a place like this? About life? The other?" He sat so still, out of respect I closed my diary as if the scratching of this pen was an intrusion. I hope I'm as elegant in forty years. I won't mind getting old but you gotta look good at it. This guy did.

Then he took a drawing pad from an inside pocket and set it on his lap. From an outside pocket he removed colored pencils in a small ornate tin. Then, he surveyed the scene and began drawing. I so badly wanted to take a looksee. But I know how I am, if I'm writing and deep into something, man, don't disturb me.

There's nothing worse than having a thread broken before a weave is complete. I decided, out of respect, not to disturb his view and departed by the Norman Tower and walked back up to the Bartons.

Then I saw him yesterday, Battle of Britain Day. A day marking the valiant history of how these people came together and defeated the Nazi attempt to soften them for invasion. It is the story of the Royal Air Force. I noted the poppy in his lapel and sat opposite him at his usual bench near the ossuary.

He said his name was Robbie McCrae. It sounded like Row-bee Mack-Ray. I think he said he was from south London. I got almost every word. His accent was deep, gravely, and lovely. He spoke of the war and how the world changed so slowly. "Not fast, like people say."

Trying not to look noseey, I took peeks at the drawing pad at his side. He spoke of V-rockets and nightly-bombings and the thousands of Brits sheltering in the underground. He told of how everyone came together, the city people and the country people, the teacher and stone mason, and on. He said, "We pulled together. Our brave Queen walking the London ruins..." He wiped a tear here. "Her example encouraged us to fight."

I didn't want to interrupt or ask a question. I felt he just needed someone to listen to his story. I like old-men stories, so I did. He stood and nodded toward the Abbey Gate. "Loo. Be just a moment." He left the drawing pad on the bench, pages ruffling in a low wind, and departed for the restroom.

I saw the most amazing drawings of birds. All kinds of birds. I looked over my shoulder, he was tapping the cane and moving slowly. It would take a bit. He glanced back. I didn't want him to think I was prying, so I opened this diary to look busy. I wouldn't go in anyone's private stuff. But hey, the wind is blowing

the pages. What can I say? I scooted over and looked but I did not touch a single page.

I noted the drawings were all at the top of the pages with paragraphs neatly written beneath. It seemed to be a story about birds. It looked like an amazing amount of work and detail. Scribbled atop the first page, 'The Darksell Choir.' I kept glancing over my shoulder. I wanted to flip the pages to see more but that would be unethical as an artist. Then I heard his cane tapping the walk. He settled down gently beside and picked up the book. He looked over at me with a grin.

"Did you look?" I shook my head. He laughed, "Because you're a Yank." He asked if I was an American airman. I told him I was. He asked what I flew. People always think that. I told him I flew a large D-1. Desk for one. He liked my joke. He also liked that I am a scientist, said he, "I always went with the smart people." He patted my arm, "Airmen chatting on Battle of Britain. Smashing."

Then he fell quiet, looked out at the stones and opened the drawing pad. In a voice like a dream-oracle he began, "There was once a place called the Isle of Carimea." He described how all kinds of birds from the world over had migrated to this one isle. He said it was unusual that so many different types lived as one. He looked at a page and said, "Birds have a social hierarchy like humans." I nodded agreement. He also said that like humans, birds also war with each other.

He turned to page three of Darksell, he'd drawn in pencil a large barnyard surrounded by a fence. There were birds aligned on opposite sides of the dirt yard and several scattered in between, pecking at seeds or sipping water from the bath. To my eye, the scene captured the opening of a conflict. It had an inert tension.

He continued on, a thin finger pointing to a gathering of birds on the right of the barnyard. His drawing had them looking like cardinals with their dark

bandit masks. He said by their raucousness and flamboyance that they were the dominant group. He slid his finger across the page to the other group. They looked like bluebirds. Several were just eating the seeds. Others frolicked in the large water bath and others played about zipping blissfully through the blue sky.

He looked at me, “These birds are oblivious because they have water and seed.” He tapped the page. Then he tapped the large mix of birds in between. He said those didn’t know which way to go. “So they sat without seed or water.” He laughed and clapped his hands. “These wouldn’t decide.” I didn’t get it.

He turned the page. The scene looked the same except that the cardinals had moved closer to the seed and the bath. A few had entered the bath, madly flapping about in a frenzy to drive the bluebirds up into the trees.

Next page, more cardinals in the bath and on the seed. He drew one cluster of bluebirds fiercely tearing at the cardinals with beak and talon. McCrae winked and asked, “What are they fighting over, Yank?” I took a moment to study his drawing. I replied, “It’s not about seed or water. It’s about power. About which group of birds controls who eats, who drinks.” He patted my hand gently, “A bang-up job, Yank.” I couldn’t help but laugh with him. I asked if his storybook of drawings was an allegory.

He said he’d started while convalescing in Bristol Military Hospital after the war in Europe had ended. In his words, he’d written journals through his teens. “After the war, I couldn’t remember words as well. Or at all,” he said pensively, scratching his shin with the cane. He said, “But it gave me better vision and a far deeper insight. I learned to draw my words into a symbol-language.”

It blew my mind that from war trauma came a new way of expression. I was listening but I really wanted to see what was on the next page. I thought this guy

was the coolest dude. He finally turned the page –

It was a scene of confrontation but short of actual conflict. But the way he'd drawn the cardinals, it had the feel of a gathering storm. From out of their large gathering one stood toward the fore, feathers drawn all over the place, as in frenzy. McCrae tapped the bird, "He's out front clicking, chirping and bullying."

He pointed to the bluebirds; they appeared in disarray. He'd drawn in a few areas bluebirds furiously pecking on each other as the loudest and reddest cardinal moved in. He tapped that bird with a pencil. "I call this bloke, Elsegood." His blue eyes smiled at me. It was odd, he was old but there was something boyish in them. I listened and waited and he turned the page – the penultimate.

The scene he'd drawn was all chaos, blue feathers flying about the barnyard. Others stood still, unable to fly. Still many others flew up to a weathervane atop the barn. In the eye of this scene stood the loudest cardinal, still flapping and still clicking. Never silent. A thing of absolute chaos. To me, it looked a drawing from a Curious George book. Except this wasn't funny.

He drew little notes coming from the reddest cardinal with the blackest mask to symbolize speech, like in Curious George. I tapped the notes with my pen. He nodded somberly. "He is telling them that water is seed and that seed is water. Without end. Or until the bluebirds, unable to think clearly, give-in or they just migrate somewhere else."

He tapped the swarm of frenzied cardinals around the loudest one. "These are the Darksell Choir of ol' Elsegood." He waited with a smile. "Understand? It's a historical play. Yes, Yank?" I got to say, the guy had me hypnotized. Odd thing, the more he spoke and smiled – it seemed he got younger talking about his picture-storybook. He said he had over fifty years of drawings in the attic. I was

blown away. Imagine all that work and what's in it.

I was hoping he'd soon turn the page as it was getting colder. I was not dressed as warmly. He thumbed it, paused and said, "The bluebirds were too noble. This was not a time for noble ideas. This was a time to see things firmly." He got choked up and took a handkerchief from a pocket and dabbed his eyes. It was monogramed R.G.M. He composed himself and sat up straight and tapped the cane. The gold head was actually an eagle. Garnet eyes. He pointed to the area where bluebirds were going at each other as the loudest cardinal closed in.

"The bluebirds should have set aside disagreements over seed, water and individual nesting needs. The cardinals sing the siren song of chaos. It's pure cacophony. But if the bluebirds come together this one time, united around the barnyard and outside it; I mean the dark blue, the light blue, the straight-winged and the odd-winged, the old and the young. These, if they'd sing just one song together in the barnyard and out, they would overcome cardinal cacophony."

He paused to collect his thoughts. He looked sadly at me, "Beware the Darksell. If you hear it, it means ol' Elsegood is in motion." He was now shifting to present tense. I did wonder if his cheese was sliding off his cracker at this point. My toes were getting cold. I wished he'd turn that last page. "What happens next?" I interrupted. He patted my arm with a smile, "The patience of youth." He ran his pencil on the scene once more that showed some of the bluebirds joining with the cardinals but few exchanges the other way.

"In my experience from what I learned then," his eyes filled with tears and he squeezed my arm stronger than I thought possible. He tapped that cane on the blacktop several times like he was summoning someone. He turned to me, his eyes large and alert, "Beware the Darksell Choir. They only sing the praises of old

Elsegood.” He looked away and turned the page. I looked down.

Bluebirds were packed in cages on small railcars. More laid facing up to the sky, stripped clean of their feathers. Others lay strewn, face down in the red waters of the bath. Those who would not decide died where they frolicked, feathers and talons scattered like confetti throughout his dark drawing.

In the middle stood Elsegood atop a feedbox, blackest eyes in a black mask, still chirping away, surrounded by his Darksell Choir of Praise with a blood sun setting in the background. He gently closed the book.

We sat quietly a few minutes. He tapped my leg with the picture book as in offer. I told him no thanks. “That’s your life. That was your war experience.” He stood. I followed, glad to stretch. We stood a few feet apart as the Norman Tower struck four. He extended his hand and took mine firmly.

“I always liked Yanks. You’re slow to catch the penny dropping. But when you do, your country moved heaven and earth and saved us from tyranny.” He tapped his cane and looked at this diary under my arm. He held out his picture book, “Think this is just an allegory?”

He slid the drawings back into his pocket. He kind of bowed but before turning away he said, “Listen for the Darksell Choir. It will come back around. Next time, God only knows where.”

As he walked off, his poppy flew from his lapel. I placed it in this diary to remember Robbie McCrae of the RAF. A beautiful man and storybook artist with a voice like a dream-oracle.

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