

The Language of the Birds

By Richard Siken

1

A man saw a bird and found him beautiful. The bird had a song inside him, and feathers. Sometimes the man felt like the bird and sometimes the man felt like a stone—solid, inevitable—but mostly he felt like a bird, or that there was a bird inside him, or that something inside him was like a bird fluttering. This went on for a long time.

2

A man saw a bird and wanted to paint it. The problem, if there was one, was simply a problem with the question. Why paint a bird? Why do anything at all? Not how, because hows are easy—series or sequence, one foot after the other—but existentially why bother, what does it solve?

And just because you want to paint a bird, do actually paint a bird, it doesn't mean you've accomplished anything. Who gets to measure the distance between experience and its representation? Who controls the lines of inquiry? We do. Anyone can.

Blackbird, he says. So be it, indexed and normative. But it isn't a bird, it's a man in a bird suit, blue shoulders instead of feathers, because he isn't looking at a bird, real bird, as he paints, he is looking at his heart, which is impossible.

Unless his heart is a metaphor for his heart, as everything is a metaphor for itself, so that looking at the paint is like looking at a bird that isn't there, with a song in its throat that you don't want to hear but you paint anyway.

The hand is a voice that can sing what the voice will not, and the hand wants to do something useful. Sometimes, at night, in bed, before I fall asleep, I think about a poem I might write, someday, about my heart, says the heart.

3

They looked at the animals. They looked at the walls of the cave. This is earlier, these are different men. They painted in torchlight: red mostly, sometimes black—mammoth, lion, horse, bear—things on a wall, in profile or superimposed, dynamic and alert.

They weren't animals but they looked like animals, enough like animals to make it confusing, meant something but the meaning was slippery: it wasn't there but it remained, looked like the thing but wasn't the thing —was a second thing, following a second set of rules— and it was too late: their power over it was no longer absolute.

What is alive and what isn't and what should we do about it? Theories: about the nature of the thing. And of the soul. Because people die. The fear: that nothing survives. The greater fear: that something does.

The night sky is vast and wide.

They huddled closer, shoulder to shoulder, painted themselves in herds, all together and apart from the rest. They looked at the sky, and at the mud, and at their hands in the mud, and their dead friends in the mud. This went on for a long time.

4

To be a bird, or a flock of birds doing something together, one or many, starling or murmuration. To be a man on a hill, or all the men on all the hills, or half a man shivering in the flock of himself. These are some choices.

The night sky is vast and wide.

A man had two birds in his head—not in his throat, not in his chest—and the birds would sing all day never stopping. The man thought to himself, One of these birds is not my bird. The birds agreed.