

Things in Cages

Gaynor Faulkner

Today, I'm not thinking about anything at all with feathers on my daily walk. It's only my thoughts that trudge along the path with me. Cloying and sticky in the summer heat. *What have I done agreeing to move to the city?* I see my future yawn in front of me like an endless dusty road in the outback. Making new friends, I know, is not so easy now I'm older.

Covid will put an end to the hobbies I thought I'd pursue and the new groups I was going to join. It puts a full stop to most things – like nudging me out of the job I'd loved so much. Even though my heart isn't in it, I utter a prayer as I walk along asking that everything will work out with this move. But the prayer feels small and trapped.

I barely finish when a bird boldly hops right in front of me on the path. Still absorbed in my sorry thoughts, I attempt to navigate myself around it but it shuffles closer and closer to my feet like a newborn puppy seeking its mother.

I'm not much of a bird type of person. Not really – so I don't know why it's attaching itself to me. I like them though – from that lofty distance they belong to in the sky. I admire the fluorescent colours of some, the flying acumen of others. I love watching the beautiful ones and curse the aggressive ones. There's no way though you'd see me armed with binoculars and camera, squinting my way through scratchy scrubland trying to spy a *spangled drongo* or a *spotted pardalote*. That's just not me.

I believe the real beauty of birds is their super power – their gift of flight. How they gracefully glide and soar in the breeze. The way they swim synchronised ballet in the blue grey ocean of sky. There's something of the ethereal in birds, I've always thought – something fey. But the magic dissipates for me when they're not allowed to fly freely. Boxed birds always make my heart heavy.

Cages remind me of Samorn, the old elephant at Adelaide Zoo that grew up with me and my generation. For thirty-five years, when she wasn't trudging kids around the zoo, Samorn existed alone in the orange dust of her enclosure. Her wrinkled foot was tethered to the ground by a fat, rusty chain. Year in and year out, Samorn rocked back and forth, back and forth with one foot. Her slight shuffle of freedom caused such a deep rut in the hard earth that it overflowed with water when it rained – as if the elephant was crying. Mum could never understand why I refused to linger around the old elephant. I didn't have the words when I was a child. I just knew I couldn't look into cages. Even then.

Thinking of freedom is what pulls most at my heart now as I watch the frantic little bird in front of me. Its hopping tells me it, too, is in a cage. Trapped because it can no longer fly.

The bird has yellow eyes. One of the aggressive types, I notice. A noisy miner. But this bird's eyes are fixed and look up at me pleadingly. They don't stare wildly at me as though it's bat-crazy like other noisy miners seem to do. They just look...sad.

Next thing, someone's walking past and the bird painstakingly shuffles into some nearby bushes. Once the coast is clear, it hops painfully back to me. I feel complicit in its need to survive now. When a cyclist whizzes past, I fan some leaves from a nearby branch to help conceal it. I notice then the line of ants trickling over its downy feathers. My heart melts as it blinks imploringly up at me through the leaves.

Suddenly, a woman's approaching us, pulling hard at the leash of a robust dog.

'There's a bird that can't fly in the bushes here,' I tell her. I feel compelled to explain why I'm hanging around the bushes stock-still in this scorching heat. I also want her to rein in her excitable dog.

Her expression is immediately kind and concerned. 'Oh, poor little thing', she says. 'And those ants aren't giving it a chance to survive in this sun, I see. I live just here so I'll try to get rid of those ants later.' I watch as she enters her front yard up ahead.

I appreciate her kindness, but my concern hasn't been completely allayed. What if the ant repellent makes the bird sicker? I fret. Racing back to our unit, I ask my husband to help me save it. 'Don't be silly!' he says. 'In today's heat, it's only going to die. Just leave it.' But I can't stand to see it die.

I grab some pellets of cat food and sprinkle them into a lid of water and sprint back to where I'd left it. I'm concerned that the heat has already taken its life, but thankfully, the bird's still alive. It feebly hops out from the bush a little to greet me. The ants steadfastly cling to it like vultures.

I have my mobile with me now and phone the bird rescue helpline to find out what to do. Arming myself with their instructions, I grab our cat carrier and tentatively attempt to capture it. A man from a nearby house sees my struggles and kindly assists me. I hold the cage precariously when it's captured and trudge home. My husband subsequently drives us to the nearest vet. I sigh in relief. Here, it will surely be nursed back to health.

But, when I phone the vet later to see how the bird is faring, I'm unprepared for what they tell me. The bird has been euthanased. It was too weak to save. I don't say goodbye to the receptionist when I hang up because I'm afraid I might cry.

‘At least you saved it from an agonising slow death by ants in this heat,’ my sister Kathy soothes later when I express my sadness. ‘It would still be there dying, even now.’ But her words only offer my heart a little comfort.

The next day on my walk I see a young woman out the front of the house where the lady with the dog lived.

‘Was it your mother yesterday that helped me with a lame bird?’ I call out.

The girl approaches me. ‘Yes. Mum mentioned that poor bird,’ she says. I ask her to please pass on that the bird was put down. How sad I was. The girl looks disappointed too.

‘I’m Lyla,’ the girl says when I introduce myself. She has a friendly face. Kind and smiling like her mother’s. We chat amiably for quite a while. It emerges that we share similar interests, like our faith and writing stories.

I feel so comfortable chatting with Lyla that I find myself saying out of the blue, ‘I had to give up work mainly due to my health – a congenital lung disease. Not good when Covid’s around.’ For once I say it casually, without shame. I’ve always found it so much easier to reveal secrets to a stranger.

The girl looks startled for a second. Hesitant. As though I have just divulged a deep secret I know about her. ‘Me too!’ she finally says. She laughs incredulously. I get the impression that she too has found it difficult to share this version of herself. ‘My health has affected my life as well,’ she tells me. ‘Encephalitis years ago and health problems ever since. It’s affected my studies. Relationships sometimes... Thank goodness I always have my writing. That never leaves me,’ she says.

A young girl that loves writing. Incarcerated sometimes by illness. We look at each other and slowly shake our heads. It’s as though we are old, dear friends that have suddenly recognised each other. Lyla is smiling and radiantly positive. I know how hard that sometimes can be. Suddenly, my problems seem small as a mouse.

Lyla and I plan to meet up soon to share our mutual enjoyment of writing. And just yesterday my husband and I saw the neighbour that helped me put the bird in the cage that day and we enjoyed a long friendly chat with him. Adelaide doesn’t seem that lonely place I’d envisioned for my future now. It seems exciting and rich with possibilities.

I realised that day that compassion towards others transcends concerns for myself. I also learnt that even when my prayers seem miniscule and confined, God still hears, loud and clear. It took that little bird to show me that God doesn’t see cages at all.