



Empty Rooms

(from *The Red Bird*)

Hugo writes: ‘I keep a red bird in a cage. I don’t approve, of course, but he’s like us, outside the cage he’d not survive. He’s a bright little guy – like my superego, my intelligence, he stands there most of the day, watching me. Not contributing, of course. If you visit, he’ll surely take you in ... see his black stony eye!

‘I’ve tried my hand at earth moving – no, not orgasms as a gigolò, but driving a heavy beast, with a huge horn on its nose. A machine.

‘As for your disbelief – treasure it, and all the secret truths it holds. The guys here – they’ve never been a nation. We thought that they should

be one, at least trying, like the rest. For the others, we made the threat – to arms, citizens! The threat sufficed. Then, to toughen them all – a stretch of capitalism. Calm the whites all over. “Excuse me!” everybody says. No one wants their servants getting uppity, buying machetes in the market. Instead, a show of striving, and docility. Then maybe we’d see. Some gentle socialism. Everyone – all up for it.

‘You are right, of course. The socialism that should have been the goal – that’s all gone dead. We’ve dug out all the wealth. The guys are poor, and ignorant. Those phases that we thought we’d engineer – they haven’t sequenced. Everything is stuck. No revolution.

‘Keep your truth close to yourself. It’s quite irrelevant.

‘Once a day, the red bird climbs on the highest stick, and sings his whole song, the trills, the melody, the hero’s call, the triumph, and the *dies irae*. Come and listen to him. I don’t have much room, but for a night, you can make do. Hear the bird through twice at least – maybe he’ll change his tune for you.’

There’s a note on the back: ‘Don’t ask the cops where my place is. Our armed wing didn’t fight much, but it thinned out our dissent. All the big bosses now were survivors of their purges. Intruders scare them, and they defend themselves against the ghosts.’ He scrawls on, ‘There was this sweet old man. He’d do anything, so’s not to go to jail again. He was set up to be friends –

with everyone. They all drank it in, like it was love potions.'

I don't go, of course. There's interesting things around, without seeking out the dangerous ones.

I tell Marcel, 'Hugo's got quite reactionary.' He doesn't believe me. Maybe he doesn't understand the word.

'Shall you go?' asks Marcel. 'Hugo is sour, of course. There's always guys who think they have decided everything, and then it turns out otherwise.'

'It's not safe there,' I tell Marcel. 'Of course I shan't be going. Hugo's lost the pleasure of observing paradox. Contradiction. He used to be a naturalist – then he lost patience. Things slip away so fast, however much you're devoted. Animals quicker still. He eats bush meat now.'

I buy a red bird, though. The guy says, 'He may not sing. He's young.'

He doesn't sing. Maybe no one taught him to.

I think of Hugo as a precursor. Africa – as a biblical land: enslavement, tribes, kings, prophets and idols. Backsliding and plagues. Expulsions and exodus. Wraths of God. Those old radicals, gone into their wilderness. Hugo, bored among his animals, scientifically observing creatures quite unscientific. Now down to his caged bird. Everyone waiting for the wealth, and meanwhile digging it up and shipping it out. I tell Marcel,

'Hugo's out of cash. He's doing heavy work. It makes his point.'

‘He’s got a few more years,’ says Marcel. ‘I for sure can’t sub him.’

‘They nicked his car and phone,’ I say. ‘That’s why he writes. He’s satisfied, he said – they did what they had to, making transition clean and swift. They can’t stop the new guys stealing and running brothels.’

‘He loved a lot of people,’ Marcel says. ‘Black and white, and nothing in between. That’s what he said. It wasn’t true. Sometimes, he loved everyone. Other times, he was more a realist.’

‘The air there is special pure,’ I say. ‘There was an observatory – the old kind, hole in the roof, and sextant on the floor. They heard the final messages from stars, as they went ploff!’

‘People don’t live on stars,’ Marcel says. ‘They live on rocks that circle round.’

‘Those messages, the final words...’ I say.

‘I’m sure ours have been written. Who by, I’d like to know. Some guy we didn’t tell him to, I bet,’ he says, and pulls a face. ‘Terrible. The human age – summed up in seven words.’

‘Hugo told me he hears the last accounts in Xhosa, drifting off the stars. That must be the language of the universe. That’s as it all should be,’ I say. ‘Though guys on the stars – they maybe don’t look like us at all.’

‘Why shouldn’t other people look like us?’ asks Marcel, squaring up.

‘Well,’ I say, ‘the shape is clumsy. Then there’s clothes, on, off. And farts. The design is fairly crap.’

‘I’ve heard,’ says Marcel, cooling down. ‘Those messages gave Hugo a revealing key. All the big books – are really marginalia. Who would imagine gods would write some stuff that left creation sceptical? Hugo has sketched the real book, the ur, the book of books. “Capital” was just a footnote. The bible – just the lyrics and some lists of relatives, to go with a far greater work, a brick of wisdom and foretells.’

‘I’m not convinced,’ I say. ‘Besides – those women, Hugo’s. Not everyone was sure it was a good idea....’

‘Going with women,’ Marcel says, ‘it’s like the races, or the gaming wheel. You do it for the rush, the kick – but in the end to lose, be punished. And to start again, or not.’

‘Hallucinations, thoughts, dreams...’ I say. ‘Hugo’s forever a materialist. Those are the clues. They all come from the grey sponge he wears behind his eyes. But – who is to judge, the right, the wrong? And that big text, elusive...in his fantasy, perhaps?’

‘Of course we judge,’ Marcel says. ‘Each with what works for where he lives. Hugo was disappointed it ended bad for him. But – disappointment everywhere – it has its cures, its pretexts... Take all those women – you can’t conclude with all of them, layered in the bed. Even if you had them all, none of them remains, nor you with them. And so – don’t judge, and don’t regret. After a while, you see – refinement’s painful, but it’s best.’

‘Hugo wasn’t one for cutting out, or cutting down,’ I say. ‘He wanted narrative, not messages pinned up on a board. Nor farewells – they weren’t the text. They were just the key that said – there is a tale, not spoken by a faltering voice, but made of signs engraved. The tale that never ends. Not falling stars – he wanted a story, coherent, upright, on its own.’

‘Ah,’ Marcel jumps on this. ‘But what would that all mean? What’s it all about?’

I improvise. ‘Well, I think it would be about itself. It would be the string, remaining when all the stars are dead, the string that tied them all, and has no light.’

The red bird hops, buzzes its wings.

‘There!’ says Marcel, ‘it’s hungry. Don’t you give it water?’

‘Of course,’ I say. ‘I give it everything it wants. It’s very moderate. I don’t think it would sing, even if it starved. I shan’t try, of course.’

We’re concerned, about everything. ‘Maybe we should take a trip,’ I say. ‘See Hugo.’

‘Tania and I, we could go,’ Marcel says.

I thought Tania was my girl.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t go with you,’ says Tania, squinting at me. ‘You’ve got the butterflies, behind your eyes, like your mad friend, Hugo. I’d go with Marcel here,’ and she holds his arm.

‘You’d inflate it all,’ I say. ‘The blacks and whites of it.’ I guess that’s not good taste. I hope they don’t set off.

‘Oh,’ says Tania, ‘we know it all already. The world. Everyone knows everything. Dug up, cut up, thought up. All talents on a disc. All the past is present. If the future doesn’t come – look! – it is already here. The poet said, “The half is greater than the whole.” That is our commonplace, but he had thought that up ten thousand years ago. Half portions, now, for everyone.’

‘Well, Tania,’ says Marcel, ‘if everything is known, all you need do is master it, and everyone.’

‘I ought to side with humans, in the last resort,’ says Hugo, writing again, ‘but I don’t. I ought then to side with the animals. But they prey on one another too. I can’t shift it on to Nature. Nature’s like History. It’s a hedge to hide behind, I’ve planted some myself.’

‘There,’ says Tania. ‘I told you. If you’ve become a loner, you don’t want people visiting.’

We sit in line, we three. We sort of watch TV. The screen is white, then there come wolves. I want to cry, just like they wanted me... Their humanity, their love, the cubs...

‘It’s made by Disney,’ Marcel says. ‘So when they shoot the wolves, it’s something we don’t see.’

‘Should I like that?’ Tania asks. ‘Live in a tent, eat mice, and empathise? Is that what Hugo did?’

‘People look happy when they should be suffering,’ I say. ‘And when the filming stops, maybe the story starts.’ Another movie now –

The cops are shooting miners. That’s a channel near where Hugo lives.

‘I’d work out in America,’ Marcel says. ‘A personal success. Even here, New York. Except – they’re beaten on the battlefield, and now they burn the stuff that ends the world. Sore losers: that I can’t abide. It’s why I don’t play cards.’

‘We don’t have skills,’ says Tania, ‘us immigrants. We just grimace. That gets you fired.’

‘I can’t help anything,’ I say. ‘This here is not a bird of wisdom, it’s a bird of song.’

‘You make even mute things seem strange,’ says Tina. ‘The rest of us is on this raft. Is there land? And are there savages? Do we eat each other? Do we sink? There’s answers for each eventuality...’

‘I hope he sings,’ I say. ‘Though I’d not know if it’s tradition, or what he’s just invented.’

‘Just checking,’ Marcel says. ‘We talk about Hugo, and do nothing more. He said, “We brought the new men. If it’s revolution – with the new men comes the Terror. We have the new men, the terror’s yet to come. Then – there must be an idea, down in the depths – the giant squid, who turns the ocean black. Even the Reformation was a revolution, Holy Wars. New men, the terror, holy war – and the idea. Sometimes, the new men are just beasts. Sometimes the terror’s

all you see. If you survive – it is the ink, suffusing all. The squid. Down here – there is no squid. I’m terrified.”

We are silent, digesting that.

‘I thought we’d go, cheer Hugo up,’ Marcel says. ‘Just a human thing. Maybe he’s past it, though.’

‘These old guys – they make me sad,’ says Tania, pleased the trip is off.

‘There’s only one dark wood,’ I say. ‘Just one, for everyone. There’s birds, and monkeys. Colours you don’t see outside. If there is somewhere else, of course, other outsides.’

‘Well,’ says Marcel, ‘there’s your psychology. You want out. Somewhere quite colourless, where danger’s absent...’ He and Tania move away, talking about me.

‘He’s typical of the sceptic whose persistent dream – the dying dream – is of enthusiasm reborn, finding apotheosis,’ Marcel says.

‘He was my “older man”,’ says Tania, ‘but he went on getting older.’

‘Not as old as Hugo,’ Marcel says, pulling her close: ‘Hugo collected the money. Maybe he wanted in the end to sign the banknotes. But, of course, he fingered guys. A courtmartial, then they disappeared.’

I interrupt. ‘I have to start from my own self, the horror that there is inside. I starts where Hugo ends. Where else? It isn’t self-absorption – it’s the only way to reach the calm outside: the abstract, the horror quite impersonal, embodying

everybody else's. It's the sea of commonality, of common understanding, sharing the dread. It's acceptance, indifference. Life's like that, not like anything else. Then, there's Hugo – trying to change, to live with, the evil: the necessary doing wrong to reach the good that makes a mock of good.'

They stare. Marcel asks, 'Do you roil like this, each time there's maybe need to make a trip?'

To lighten up, I stare at the red bird. He stares back, the unanswered question in his eye. Much interested, on the verge of some reaction – any reaction, if I give a clue. Sing! I have no gesture that conveys. He does communicate, though; perhaps he thinks that's all that's needed. Or can do no more.

Later, I say to Tania, 'I thought we two had something... now, for you it's Africa with Marcel.'

She winds her hand round, as if time was a clock, brim full of seconds: 'It's voyaging,' she says, 'not sticking. You want everything stuck firm in its place.'

'If it isn't in its place, where is it?' I ask.

'Do you like it?' she asks. 'My hair. I had it bobbed.'

'That's just in novels, a century ago,' I say.

'I guess it's in the movie now,' she says. 'You stay quiet here, and fuss about your bird. If it won't sing, teach it to speak.'

'It won't know anything to say,' I say.

Marcel and Tania take a trip, not to Hugo. They don't say where.

Tania sends a card – Extreme Sports, is the land it's from. 'Marcel jumps from aeroplanes. He wants to be wonderful, so it's higher and higher. I run to him, when he lands. I'll tell you when the highest heaven's reached!'

It's the only extreme thing about Marcel. Stepping into nothing – it seems easy, though it's hard enough you wouldn't do it.

Hugo writes, 'Everyone's apologising. What if you don't, if things seemed set, OK a certain way? We were sorry about it then, the killing. Why say we're sorry now?' His card has a scene of gnus running, not aeroplanes stretching for the heights.

When Marcel returns, he's taller. He must have landed well.

'He's still afraid of elevators,' Tania says.

'You can't see where they'll finish up,' says Marcel.

'Quiet,' says Tania loudly. 'We've finished with this crap – the fear, regrets – the doubt. Marcel looks for cures, the rest of you – expect the miracles: the song... Me – I'm quite indifferent.'

'Oh no,' I say, 'I've quite abandoned that, the singing, the instruction. The bird'll live out his life in quiet.'

'Your life,' Tania says to me, 'will be much less than the one you want. Marcel's – beyond his dreams, beyond his imagination.'

‘Who cares?’ I say. ‘What about Hugo?’

‘He’s part of what happens. Do you think he might have stood aside? Devoted himself to animals? If he’s disappointed, so what? As for me – I’m one of those he helped to free, and now – I must think of casting off these chains,’ and she holds out wrists, as if she wants assistance, or to assist.

‘All kinds of people trained there, like us,’ she says. ‘Jumping, falling. Gliding, like those spooky planes that bomb, on purple wings. All kinds – hitmen, crusaders. All were there, in sportsland. We aren’t at all the bourgeois you might think.’

‘I didn’t think,’ I say. ‘Not that it’s relevant.’

Tania presses on. ‘Follow your sympathies. Start a war. Put the fractured in a camp. Make a nation, sell weapons, pills; sell your brain cells. Sell yourself and renounce the cash. Take your job...’

‘It’s the new generation, Tania,’ I say. ‘You wouldn’t understand. They move you round from job to job. Some, so’s they know what’s being done, others so’s they don’t. It’s more contemporary than you, than your “holidays with hoods”, your “Spies and warriors” – train together, beat their fears, down from the skies like scalding rain. Knowing where your enemy is dropping. Just muscle and gravity.’

‘Marcel follows the trend,’ she says, ‘then backflips. In the end – he’s nothing. I’m something. In the end.’

We contemplate each other's chances, and our hopes.

'Take a flight,' says Tania. 'Leave the bird. They don't let it on the plane, even if it's in your pocket. They fear it has some secret song, that makes you step outside, and fly and glide.'

'Forget the goddam bird,' I say. 'It hops. It isn't made to fly. No whimsy, Tania.'

'Forget yourself!' she says. 'Forget understanding. Just think! – everything that is, was made for you, and only you. And when you die, it disappears, every last star and string, all pasts, all futures. It is only you, and whatever you choose to call an other. It's all yours, your enchantment, your wood, your path. True, you can't choose. Not anything, not even clothes. And – it's injustice, thickly spread for everyone. But – the scene is yours...'

She talks on: 'Tania,' I say. 'That's a crap idea. And not even yours. "No nature, all is art." You'll broadcast it, somehow, and make it true.'

'I know,' she says, 'I've had enough of catching Marcel as he falls from heaven.'

'Marcel hears music as he falls,' I say, 'but doesn't know the notation, so it's lost, unwritten.'

'That's the trouble with guys like you,' Tania says. 'Marcel – he can be heartbreaking, if you care to stand around and wait. But you – you could be anything: a painter, a Croesus of the retail. A Sufi. Getting better: even, if you go to Hugo – black. But somehow – you lack the

equipment for any of these. It's a tragedy, but that's a splendour too, when it's performed well.'

'That bird, Tania,' I ask. 'Is it art or nature?'

'Oh,' she says wildly. 'Just bad art, I think. Duration. You must have that as well, or you'd not notice anything.'

'Hugo said duration counted lots,' I say.

'That's not in this argument,' she says, and dismisses me and Hugo.

Tania makes me love the bird more, and hope he doesn't need reciprocate. His eye is always bright, curious. He's interested in the small everything around.

I shan't go to Hugo, nor strive to be what Tania said – a black. What good would that do?

Maybe I'll come back to her.



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