

Wings
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and with the new home come new noises. The sounds keep him awake at night. At first it's a fluttering, then a scratching from behind the walls: a rustling in his spare room. He listens from the divot of his bed, wondering.

On the following day he calls a number tacked to his fridge. An unknown voice answers: Maybe it's vermin.

So what do I do? he asks.

Knock a hole in the wall, the voice says. Knock a couple holes in the wall and leave out some bread. Whatever it is, intones the voice, it'll crawl out and away while you're sleeping.

While he's sleeping he cannot rest at all. And while he cannot rest he dreams. In his dreams he has knocked openings in every wall until they are more hole than home. And in the moments between he is sweating and slipping his jaws, worrying himself ill.

Still exhausted he wakes to a jaundiced sun gilding his room. The yellow walls are now close with his scent, the new home already old and unclean. But it is, he notes, now quiet.

He rises and stands in silence before the door to his spare room. The door is closed. He does not remember closing it. Nor does he remember, upon its opening, ever seeing so many birds. They now fill the space, wings flapping and fanning everywhere, twitching from dozens of holes that litter the walls. A man stands among them. Feathers obscure his eyes, cover much of his face. All but his mouth, which moves slowly, as if trailing after its own voice.

Bring me someone, the man says. Bring me someone, and I'll let you fly.

But I don't know anyone.

Then find them.

However he angles his head, he cannot find the man's face above the mouth. Still he watches wet feathers fall from under his tongue. They gather in damp piles at his feet. The birds perched among him coo and flap from their holes, the walls thick with the spackle of their droppings. Still others flicker like moths at the inert lamp above, or stalk and waddle along the floor.

He shuts the door and stands before it, wondering how or why. But he cannot think clearly, even in the following silence. Now he can only think of flying.

Now he is in the next neighborhood over: shoes untied, buttons on his shirt misaligned. He avoids all windows, windshields, mirrored surfaces, and soon stumbles into a café. He does not look at the counterperson's lips as they speak but with his own mouth, then, tongue thick and feathered itself, he orders a drink, leaves, waits outside. A man much shorter than him passes. The stranger is headed from where he came that morning, walking in the direction of his new home.

Without collecting his drink he trails the man for many blocks, pursuing him, by chance, back to his own street. He shouts as they near his stoop. Hey, he calls. You dropped something. The man pauses, eyes narrowing against the clear sky, looking over the sloped hunch of a shoulder. And it's then that he makes his move. He grabs and muscles the stranger to the doorway, the man's coffee falling and spilling at their feet, which kick over the foyer and into the building.

In the hallway there is the commotion of bodies: the thudding of hips and knees, shins banging against stairs, voices reduced to stiff grunts and growled commands. There follows the gift of an elbow to a head, crown and cheek knotting against the blow of a fist. The body runs slack, sagging against his arm, and he drags its slight form up the stairs, tumbles it over the entryway. And it's there that he welcomes his first guest into his new home.

He huffs and shoulders the man down the corridor, past the divot of his bed, and walks him to the door of his spare room. But the door is not where he has left it. There is now, he sees, unblinking, unbelieving, only a bare wall. No, he says, releasing the body, its head lolling at the baseboard. I was going to fly, he howls. You were going to let me fly. He rakes fingers and nails against the wall, hands slapping and scratching like the fluttering of wings. Dark stains now describe their magnificent span. They may fly yet. He may fly with them.