

## Birdsong

Morag Edward

On Sunday afternoons the fashionable couples stroll along the dappled pathways, shaded by the archways of leafy elm trees. Each couple wheels a small gilded cage alongside, or behind them, and in each cage kneels a small bald child. Singing emanates from these caged pets, the fragile top notes of the little castrati warbling the last remembered arias of the old lost operas. Tourists sit on the park benches and enjoy the music as it drifts past them, fades and is replaced by the sounds from the next cage wheeling along.

There aren't as many boybirds in the city as there used to be. Only the tiniest weakest child can become a boybird, so they are usually bought as babies from itinerant mothers who have nicely pre-shrunk them with a diet of foetal alcohol. These featherweight creatures are then selected by voice and rewarded with castration. Sold on, the most gifted given the full training in isolation until truly part of the song and the cage. It takes years to shape the spindly arms into the most desirable curves, bent and wrapped until they grow to resemble wings, and all the time the wasted legs tightly bound in a crouch so that they will never straighten.

It is an art form and an investment, so despite their lowly origins, these songbirds are extremely expensive possessions. The best families keep a boybird in their town house, accessorised in the most fashionable manner, or just dyed to match the decor. The boys can be shaved, painted, pierced and tattooed, but some seasons simplicity is de rigour, and the smooth young skin is best kept clean and naked. Colours vary. Last year black skin was in but this year looks to be good for the red-heads on the market.

One blue-painted boybird sits in his antique prison, sun glinting off the brightly polished ornate bars. He shifts a little in the warmth, takes a pursed sip from the wine bowl, and begins to sing a tremulous crescendo of high notes. A swift rattle along the gilded bars with the man's walking cane subdues him to a softer more melancholy warble. His owners lie back on the grass to relax in the afternoon light, only half-listening to the beautiful music that fills the park at this time of day.

"I don't know what's wrong with it," complains the woman with a heartfelt sigh, "it doesn't sound right anymore."

"We've done our best, given it a good home and loved it as though it was a real child. There's no more that we can do. Perhaps we should try for another one, darling?" suggests her husband. He strokes her hair comfortingly.

The small boybirds are kept in the finest cages of woven gold and antique bronze, warbling their refrains, with no awareness that they could have been, might have been anything else anywhere

else. They haven't been taught the words that they would need to think such un-bird-like thoughts. They are fed the sweetest wines and tastiest morsels, their bones soft and their song softer.

The owners love these little boybirds, and it is always a sad day when the household has to get rid of one early. There are many reasons why a bird might no longer be able to kneel in its little cage and sing happily. Some grow too fast, despite the wine and tightest binding, while others wane and for unknowable reasons just won't or can't sing. In the end they all have to go. Castrati boybirds grow so tall that only the church has cages for them, and they live the rest of their bird-like lives in the distant stone vaults, praising something.

Wild birds perch on tree branches above the caged blue-painted boybird, attracted by the old songs, many of which mimic their own calls. The wild birds answer the blue boybird, and he joins their chorus with an aching surge of what he doesn't even know is loneliness. The other sparrows flock around the blue boybird's cage and they chorus together in the sunshine. The owners notice the noise and wave their stick at the common little birds. The sparrows take flight; in a blur of browns they rise above the cage and leave, soaring together free above the trees. The blue boybird kneels in his cage and watches them fly away.