

Number Forty Three

Jacky Taylor

Even the air outside is thick with the stink of it. The door swings open and the shriek of a thousand banshees explodes; he feels he's fallen into the pit of the damned – squawks, squeals and a frantic scritch- scratching all over the place.

There are cages everywhere. Zebra Finches, dozens of them, coralled in breeding pairs bouncing ping-pong from perch to perch. Cockatiels with teddy boy quiffs, grimy doves, lovebirds necking in perpetuum and macaws manacled to wooden poles. There must be hundreds of them. What a racket.

He counts them, puts the number of cages down in his book, then spots the largest one of all tucked in a corner. There's a blanket, colourless and hole-pecked, heaving in a breathy cycle. Whatever's under there is huge, massive. Wow, he jokes to himself: it must be a vulture. As he edges closer it launches itself at the bars, its cover slipping to the bottom of the cage.

Screeching in front of him is a boy: grimy, matted and naked, flapping his arms as if they were wings. Over and over the boy flings himself against the bars while the man freezes then tries hard to get a grip. He utters a few words to calm the child, but as soon as he starts speaking to him...

The boy chirps and pecks at the man's open hands.