

# Aviary

by Llŷr Gwyn Lewis

When I spoke to Carys online that night, during what we had already begun to call the Newsnight Hour, when I would often be preparing my Zoom lectures for the next day and she would be translating some last-minute press releases for the morning, she remarked to me that it had happened: she had reached that desperate point of cabin fever where she would do anything to be able to go travelling again. She had begun, in the captivity of that first lockdown, to long for the most peculiar and unexpected sensations: the irritation of sand in her socks; the smell of Paris bin juice first thing in the morning before the sun has fully risen above the roofs; the specific, dust-metal-brake-tang smell of the London Underground, or the blunt roughness of old, cold stone in various castles, churches, houses older than hers. And of course I asked her the most predictable question imaginable: if she could choose anywhere now, this instant, where would she go? The answer came like a shot, as the quiet stars revolved above our tiny portion of Cardiff between the park and the river: Berlin. She would go to Berlin.

I had only been there once, I told her in reply, and my first reaction had been one of disappointment. I had come to Berlin foolishly, naively expecting the ornate, the Baroque— I had been looking for traces of the old classical Germany and, simultaneously, for traces of the tragedy of its destruction in the Second War. I had no interest in what had come afterwards, too recent, too prosaic, too cold. But the city, with its brutal concrete, its angles, had entirely won me over during the course of one weekend, so that I went away with my arms full of books and photographs, eager to learn about its more recent history, the division and the fear, the ambition and the terror, the razing of streets and lives. I'd love to go back some day, I added, knowing what I know now. I feel as though I could peel back its layers a little more: scratch around a bit in the dirt of history. I'd like to go to the Tränenpalast in Friedrichstrasse, walk down Karl Marx Allee. That was the

charm of the place, in the end, for me—the gritty, rainy East with its remnants, its concrete and its layers of history.

Did you visit Charlottenburg at all, Carys asked, when you were there? The glittering heart of the West, she had seen it described in a guidebook, and she'd been drawn there through the S-Bahn's lofty glass stations. This surprised me: the places to which I had gravitated were all in the old East—the Brandenburg Gate, the Museumsinsel, Prenzlauer Berg and Alexanderplatz. It was as though now, in our respective memories, we were revisiting two different cities entirely. It was this other Berlin that her mind inhabited, a city with a zoo, a department store, a broken shard of a church, left there as a warning against war that had only half worked. It was a much more Western city: it had leafy boulevards. You wouldn't have come across the Kranzler Eck, then, she typed, and I replied that I'd never even heard of it. The Cafe Kranzler, she explained to me, was a famous coffee house that in its own distinct, art-deco way had become a symbol of West Berlin—a kind of antithesis in its rotundness to the starkly angular Cafe Moscow on Karl Marx Allee. In fact, it was ironic that since the fall of the wall the East had grown in its gritty appeal to tourists, but that places like the Kranzler, no longer isolated and therefore no longer a symbol of anything unique, had fallen into disrepair. The capitalist symbol fell victim to the triumph of capitalism, and the defeated communist neighbourhoods had learnt to wear their exoticism with a kind of ironic pride. Thankfully, Carys said, the Kranzler had ultimately been saved from ruin by being incorporated into a larger, sprawling, imposingly modern development. Its lower floor now housed a SuperDry store.

She had arrived at the Cafe from an unexpected angle—had happened upon it, in fact, from the direction of Savignyplatz, creeping up on it as though from behind, through that sprawling steel-and-glass development. In the courtyard behind it, she found that there was an aviary—two aviaries, in fact, right in the centre, with a path through the middle between them that only became evident as you walked around the perimeter. Before then you would have imagined that the path was enclosed within the aviary itself, as they were two tall structures, leaning in towards each other: conical shapes that rather

echoed and emulated the skyscrapers around them. Their lines confounded perspective from all perspectives. Their slender black frames supported the fine mesh netting that enclosed the birds themselves.

It was the birds' noise that had struck her first, in fact, before she turned the corner to see the structures. Then, the birds themselves, weaving and glimmering in brilliant flashes of technicolour against the grey sky. There were parrots and parrakeets, macaws, cockatoos and budgerigars. As she said, she had not realised at first that you could walk between the two structures, but she saw after a while that a young woman stood on the path and had a pram in front of her, so she couldn't have been a worker, cleaning the enclosure or feeding the birds, inside the aviary itself. Carys had ventured along the path but maintained a respectful distance both from the birds and the young mother, who had brought her toddler, Carys now saw, to enjoy them. It was clear, she said, that this was something the mother and child did together often, a sort of ritual anticipated with great excitement and restlessness; the child strained against the pram's straps, yearning to get out, to get nearer the birds, in fact to enter the aviary itself it seemed. (As a matter of fact, Carys typed as an aside, when I saw them I thought of you, as I had just heard the news that you and Ana had had your boy. I imagined you both, bringing him here one day to look at the birds, how he might point to them, or squint as he looked up.) But the mother wouldn't let the child out: Carys had guessed that this was a decision borne from experience, that she'd let the child out previously perhaps and that it had scared the birds away, up, to the very top of the aviary, which had in turn upset the child and ruined that particular visit. To allow the child to get what it wanted, then, and perhaps indeed to keep it safe, she had to restrain and confine it. The child was unhappy about this, but happy to see the birds up close, their red and blue plumage, their hooked bills and suspicious eyes, their flashes of yellow and green, and so, on balance, there was more happiness than unhappiness this way.

Eventually they had left, leaving the aviary to Carys by herself. This courtyard was so close, Carys explained, to the busy boulevard under the archway, its rushing traffic and its footfall of shoppers and diners. But here, all was quiet and calm and deserted, like the City of London on a Sunday, and she and the birds were in a world all of their own. After a while spent squinting, trying to trace their arcs against the sky as they flew in their confinement, and then studying the information panels, trying to match the photographs and the Latin names with the actual birds that she saw in front of her, she realized that the fluttering of wings was not only coming from inside the aviary. Startlingly near to her, two or three much smaller and duller birds—the usual dappled browns and greys of the house sparrows, a sort of camouflage in comparison—were flying directly towards the netting, coming up against it and bouncing lightly off, before trying again. Why on earth were these other birds, indigenous inhabitants of the city's boundless sky, attempting so valiantly to break in to that place of captivity?

I sensed that I knew what she'd say next, but abruptly she typed that she needed to go, bade me goodnight, and disappeared. I waited a minute or two, in case she had needed to attend to something quickly before returning; I typed a quizzical 'hello?', but saw that the white 'delivered' tick didn't turn to blue and therefore that the message remained unread. I wrapped up my work for the night and went to bed.

I could see exactly where those thoughts had been taking her: was the aviary not a perfect metaphor for the Berlin Wall itself: its mesh cones, protruding into the air, dividing the very sky in which these birds tried to soar, and restricting them in their spheres? More than that, I realized, there was a cruel irony in that image of the other, smaller birds, free to fly anywhere they wished but trying to break in to the enclosure. What had Carys seen in this—a reflection of how East Berliners had strained against the wall that enclosed their Western neighbours, perhaps? It was the West that the wall had hemmed in, after all, and the East Berliners, so their rulers had wanted them to believe, were the free ones. Or perhaps she had seen it the other way entirely, as an allegory of how Westerners had increasingly, as the rules governing their movement loosened over

the decades, been drawn to travel across the border, through the wall, to ogle at the Easterners in their captivity. I felt sure that Carys had been trying to draw some sort of analogy between these birds, this aviary, and the history of the city itself, to suggest perhaps that even in such an absurd, inhuman and farcical edifice as the wall, people had in fact been imitating what can also be found (the inhuman) in nature.

I was eager to ask her whether I had guessed correctly, but a chaotic few days ensued, as Ana and I tried to juggle the care of our two-year-old son with our work duties. We had been given some licence by our employers at the very beginning of the pandemic, but by now, for my part at least, the students had begun to complain and to speak of value for money and of refunds, and I had been told in no uncertain terms by the head of department that I needed to up my game and my Zoom lectures. It was a manic period but also a somnambulant one, somehow, and we seemed, Ana and I, to pass each other by; one would take our son out on the daily constitutional while the other tried to hunker down and get something done. Then we would hand him over, glance quickly at each other, and go our separate ways again, one to the desk upstairs and the other to the kitchen table, the garden, the bakery if we could justify it.

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In that way a week passed before I found myself, again, at my desk in the attic at the chiming of the Newsnight hour, trying to find some half-decent photos of authors to liven up my slides, when I noticed that Carys was online, and active. Hello stranger, I offered casually, and for a while there was no answer; perhaps I had just missed her. Eventually she answered with a Hi! and asked me how I was. Her replies seemed terse: she was “fine,” and when I asked whether the wanderlust had subsided, she responded instantly: why, what have you heard? After assuring her that I’d heard nothing, had not even seen her from across the nearby park, she apologized that she was tired and might need to go soon. I had been trying to work out a way of returning casually, gradually to our previous conversation, but now that time was suddenly of the essence, I brought it up directly and

asked her whether she remembered the conversation; whether my estimation of the aviary's significance to her and of why it had stuck in her mind was correct.

At this she seemed to mellow and to relax, though it's always difficult to tell, talking online. But she was typing, elaborately it seemed: the ellipsis flashed. Eventually her message appeared: she said that she quite liked my comparison of the two parts of the aviary to the division of the city, but that she hadn't been convinced by that last part about the birds trying to break in: you can't have it both ways, she remarked. In fact, Carys said, my mind was more or less entirely in the present when I was thinking of that aviary. I was thinking of this pandemic, and of its cruel, arbitrary, entirely necessary and unavoidable inhumanity. How young lovers now find themselves separated, locked away from each other, how old mates from the pub have had to retire to drink themselves to a stupor in their own drafty homes. And yes, she added, she had been thinking in particular of those little birds who had been trying to break into the aviary, but they had made her think of those poor families who had a loved one in a care home. Those sons, daughters and grandchildren who've had to go and see their mothers and fathers and grandparents and trace their hands through the glass, mouthing to them that everything will be alright, some even trying to get them to recognize them at all... You see them on the news and they just look so helpless, so desperate to reach in, even though they know they can't. Just like those little birds I saw that day. It just makes me so sad. And this isn't some cruel, twisted set of rules thought up to torture people, or to inflict a kind of mental torment on them intentionally. It's entirely, heartbreakingly necessary, and completely for their own protection. It's just—I don't know, it's something that my head—my heart maybe—I just can't sort of compute it in a way, or I can't make sense of it. It's like something from a different age, I think, isn't it? That sense of sacrifice. I don't think that I thought it could still exist nowadays, so in a way it made me glad, and yet—who would wish this? On anyone?

I didn't really know what to say to her. I, too, of course, had seen the images on the news, had felt empathy, sympathy, distress, pity, relief. But she seemed so exercised by it all and I couldn't quite see why. I tried to lighten things up by concurring that yes, my interpretation of her whole account had been pretty far off.

She went off in another direction again, and asked whether I could keep a secret. Of course, I replied. I'm serious, she typed—you can't tell anyone, not a soul. Not even Ana. If I tell you and later find out that... And she actually typed it like that, breaking off mid-sentence. Not even Ana, I repeated her words. Promise. Cris croes, tân poeth.

No words, for a while. Then the ellipsis began flashing, before disappearing again. She was typing, then deleting; she was hesitating. Then: I've been home, she said. Well where else would you be in a lockdown?? I retorted. No no, not home—home home, she explained. I broke the lockdown. I feel terrible. But I just had to go. I don't know, it's Dad, he's so, well... You never know do you? When this might end, when I might see him. Her sentences were all over the place; she seemed to be trying to justify her actions to me, to herself. I told her not to worry, of course, that it was an entirely natural instinct, that I wouldn't tell a soul, that it wasn't that bad really, that loads of people must have done something similar. I was just so worried about him, she added, I mean I know he's used to being alone since Mum went but this was different, a different kind of alone. Isn't your brother up there with him, I asked? Yes, he moved in just before they announced everything, he saw the way things were going. But I needed to see him for myself. You won't tell anyone? No of course not, I retorted again. But what about Will? Will's fine, he's on furlough, she said. I just decided that night, with the birds—I had to go so I just told him, I'm going, I need to go, and off I went. Packed a bag, sneaked to the car, and off. Under cover of darkness...

What did she mean, I asked—that night when we had spoken? Yes, that very night. She didn't like to admit it, but the guilt, the fear, had gradually turned into some sort of excitement, a thrill almost. She had stepped on the throttle and raced through Powys, even though she knew that she shouldn't be drawing attention to herself. But no one,

anywhere, had stopped her. She was almost confounded by this; she'd been convinced that somewhere, at some point, a blue light would come flashing up behind her, and send her bundling back with a fine, that the whole haywire idea would be stopped for her so that she couldn't go through with it, would have to go back to her husband. But no one did, and so she arrived in Nant Gwynant, at her father's house in the mountain's shadow, around 4:30 the next morning. Gave them both an absolute fright, she said, tapping at the kitchen window.

I asked her how long she had stayed with her father. A pause in the cloud, an ellipsis; then: I'm still here now, she replied. All I could think of in response was a cheap joke: what, they have internet in Nant Gwynant??

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Carys's mother had died when she was in her early twenties; the family had pulled together, at the beginning, drawn tight in the rawness of it all. I was studying away at the time and we had lost connection really, and so I hadn't been in touch with her much, except to express a few sparse commiserations, and I suppose that I still felt some guilt about that now, though she had never given me cause to think that she resented it in any way. And in the way that grief has of fermenting, of lying low and awaiting its chance, it had over the years splintered and shattered the small remaining family unit in a number of minor, miserly, devastating ways. Her brother had stayed, had married a local girl and moved to the nearby village, one of the satellites surrounding Caernarfon; she had met Will in London after university and the move back to Cardiff had been a daunting enough step homewards so that anywhere nearer—more parochial, perhaps, would have been Will's view—was entirely out of the question. So I had been surprised to learn of Carys's decision, on that very night that we had been conversing, to leave so abruptly, to leave Will alone, too, to go against the law and contrary to the way society had so easily conformed to the rules of the lockdown. Something strong must have pulled her, and its



seed was in that memory of the aviary in Berlin that had come to her that night as we spoke. I almost felt guilty for a while for playing a part in planting that seed in her mind.

I was online, late, around a week later, when suddenly an open tab flashed blue. Hi, Carys said. Well hello there, how's Nant Gwynant, you lucky devil, I asked. How is it having the mountains to yourself, no tourists, no English? No need to socially distance in the queue up yr Wyddfa?

I'm back, she answered, and my heart, without warning, lurched. Suddenly I felt her proximity where it hadn't been the previous moment. Carys was just down the road once more. She seemed apologetic, embarrassed, almost as though the whole undertaking had been a rare episode of delirium. Her father and brother had welcomed her, cautiously, at first, but had eyed her with some suspicion, too, as if they feared that she'd brought the virus with her from Cardiff. You know I do go back to Elin and the kids, every now and then, her brother had said, sounding almost accusatory. But the first few days had been pleasant enough. Only after around a week and a half had her brother's resentment grown until he could no longer contain it, and he'd directed an angry tirade at her. She couldn't now, when pressed, tell me exactly what he'd shouted at her about; but she knew that he had never really forgiven her for going away after their mother's death, for abandoning their father, as her brother saw it, to his fate, for her perceived embarrassment at all of them for even existing. Of course the pandemic and its privations had exacerbated these feelings in him; she could understand that, and could see also why he might be suspicious of her motives, landing as she did in their lap on a dark April night.

That, she could bear; but what had taken her by surprise, and had hurt her, was the way her father had sided with his son, something that he would never usually have done. He had reprimanded her for her absence from his life, how she never really visited any more, even though she knew how hard it was for him to travel down to the city. She remembered how bitter he'd sounded when he remarked that it had taken a pandemic for her to drive up to see him. In particular, he resented the way that he learned more about her life through facebook, these days, than he did from her directly. Two things,

she'd replied: first of all, who do you think posts things on my facebook page. Do you think I employ a social media person or something? If you learn things about me on facebook, then you \*are\* learning it from me! And second: I didn't even know you were on facebook... He'd replied, indignant: I only joined so that I could keep in touch with you. And with that she knew that she had lost. Her brother stood behind his father, looking down now to the floor. The father wiped away a dramatic tear. She had packed her bags that afternoon and slipped away again, by cover of night, feeling something rise behind her as the clouds sometimes rose over the mountains in the rear-view mirror, leaving her lighter. She was so relieved, she said, to get back to her little home in Cardiff, with Will, away from her brother's smirk and her father's martyrdom, and I allowed myself to imagine for the slightest second that her relief had something to do with me, too.

Speaking of Berlin, Carys typed apropos of nothing, I've been thinking about the Stasi... Wow, your brother's not that bad, is he? I asked. I was glad that she'd changed the subject and I was trying to lighten things up. Ha, she answered, no, I was just thinking. My father, joining facebook just to snoop at my life. It feels odd, knowing he's been, sort of, loitering there all that time. He should have just asked! I would have much preferred if he'd asked. I could have, I don't know, curated—God I hate that word. But if he'd just said, I'd like to be more involved in your life. I'd like to know more about how you're getting on. I'd have been happy to. But he never did, never has. So he's used these surreptitious ways, this... surveillance... to find out what sort of life I have. And that led me to think: the way we hand them over, these days, our lives, our details, our faces and our thoughts. No one has to coax them out of us. No one even has to invent or plant the devices, you know, the camera in the hat, the wire in the wall. These big companies give them to us for free, because they know that what we hand back over to them, freely, is much much more valuable. How the East Germans resisted the state and the Stasi's intrusion into their lives. How they battled it and fought it and died withstanding it. And now look at us! Giving Google all our photos to store because we can't be bothered deleting some of them. Or, queuing up to tell the police that Mrs Williams two doors down

has actually been for two walks today. Noticing with a tut on Strava that that annoying girl from uni's been on a cycle ride that's taken her thirty miles away and back and that she's been outdoors for five hours. Or that some musician you half know's latest YouTube video has a different background this time, some sort of floral pattern wallpaper, and wondering where they've gone, what are they up to. With neighbours like these, who needs the Stasi?

She sounded sad. She sounded defeated. She was tired, to be fair. We all were. This wasn't a natural way to live, cooped up like this. If it's any comfort to you, I said, I've felt like one of your parrots recently, since you've been away. It's beginning to get to me, with only that narrowing cone of sky to spread my wings in. Feels just that bit roomier now that you're back, even if we're just chatting like this.

That reminds me, she replied. I don't think your analogy was that far off in any case. I think you're right—there was something of the old wall in that aviary, you know? They must have known it would... what's the word... resonate. Mustn't they? When they were designing it.

Maybe so, I said, but the difference is in the material, isn't it? That wall was made of reinforced steel, barbed wire, thick concrete. You couldn't see through it, over it, except from those viewing platforms the west built. But this aviary, isn't it the whole idea for you to look in, to feel like there's nothing that separates you from the birds themselves? I've been looking at photos of this aviary online. The net is so thin, you could almost believe it's not there at all.

But that's the thing! she replied. That's exactly it. We like to think we're different—from them. That something's changed, since the sixties, say, or even the eighties. We like to think that we don't have walls any more: we'd rip that thing down in an instant, wouldn't we? We share, we curate, we touch base. We reach out, we connect. We can't stop ourselves! That's what our whole world's built on these days. We go for that screen, that keyboard, constantly, to be in touch with other humans. We can't stand a waking

second without it. Yet I can't help thinking... there's a lie there, too, at the heart of it. We don't know, really, what's going on on the other side, do we? With anyone. The walls are still there, impassable still, it's just that you can see through them now. They're so thin, we don't even notice them. They're designed to be exactly so. But they're there, and they're as fortified as ever... Anyway, I don't know. I'm tired, I'm waxing lyrical, so it's time for bed. But thanks for the chat tonight... It's good to be back.

With that, she was offline. I sat there, in the pool of light from the screen and the desk lamp for a while. Then I stood and opened the rooftop window, and looked out over the park and the dark houses and the still cars and listened to the world's stillness and watched the stars, still revolving in their spheres as before. And I looked over across the roofs to where I knew her house was, though I couldn't quite see it, and I thought of the wall between us, there, in the night, gossamer-thin and entirely impenetrable.