

To the Roost by Emily Hunt

With a chack, chack, they gather. Weighing down boughs of Wellingtonia, swaying, coal-black. A flick and a flap, a beakful of needles plucked, flung, flurries of falling cones.

Hundreds of jackdaws. A swarm. Thronging as other groups swoop in, colliding. They grow thicker, curdling. Chackling and chackling, reaching a crescendo.

A fanfare, a beating pulse, alive, one being. United, they are a whirlwind, a torrent of billowing wings, spiralling and spiralling, up. They eclipse the sun. Climb, so high, almost out of sight. But I can still hear them, ringing out, jarring their jagged, unforgiving sound. They weave, bunch together, form a group, one rotating mandala.

Then there's a rush. An exhilaration. They spread, float away from each other, nothing binding them. Their ragged wings stop. They fall, like ashes, let themselves drop, as if they've been shot, plummeting, fragments of night. Spinning round, a kaleidoscope. Falling, fast, as if they will hit the ground, slice into it, spearheads. Down and down.

A roar, a roll, a thunderous wash of sound. They angle themselves to the wind, tuck in their wings. Glide. Shuttling off into the distance.

Everything opens up before them.

A stitched-up scrapbook of landscape – a thread of gold here, a strip of green there. It's ripening. The barley hardening, its bristles shuffling up the hill, undulating, ebbing and flowing. I wonder what it looks like from above – a sea?

Just the surface – what lies beneath slithers and scuttles, hidden from them. But not for long. Soon the dust will come, the harvest, fields left barren, pillaged, swathes of golden stubble which they will pick through in their masses.

But for now they follow the hedgerow. Leave the village behind, its red-tiled rooftops and gutters, screeches of swifts, the church spire's cockerel glinting on its perch, catching the sun, looking out over gravestones, lichenous, worn, communities of bones. Behind them trail those who hatched from their chimney pot nests of sticks and twigs and straw, fell from them, rugged, unkempt, just days before. Now they're on their first journey to roost.

They follow the hedgerow, turn its corners and curves, chase it all the way up, learn navigation by hawthorn and ash, the slight twists of the brook.

Ink stains, they fluctuate against the flare of sunset. The hill ignites, kindling, illuminating the Yorkshire fog, bronze tops of foxtails and fescue, marbled whites closing up like petals, resting on stems.

They reach the wood, stood haggard and bold against the melting sun. Hedgerows approach from all directions, and from all the fields come crows, jackdaws, magpies, each village's corvids. Dropping down into branches, draping from them like mosses, tapestries of darkness, lichen on bark.

Only when it is truly dark, when they are completely hidden, out of sight, does the cacophony fall silent, fledglings huddled into each other's wings, cornflower eyes disappearing behind sheaths.