

KING OF THE SKY by Nicola Davies

IT RAINED AND RAINED AND RAINED.
LITTLE HOUSES HUDDLED ON THE HUMPBACKED HILLS.
CHIMNEYS SMOKED AND METAL TOWERS CLANKED.
THE STREETS SMELLED OF MUTTON SOUP AND COAL DUST
AND NO ONE SPOKE MY LANGUAGE.

ALL OF IT TOLD ME THIS IS NOT WHERE YOU BELONG.

JUST ONE THING REMINDED ME OF HOME –
OF SUNLIGHT, FOUNTAINS AND THE VANILLA SMELL
OF ICE CREAM IN MY NONNA'S GELATERIA.
IT WAS MR EVANS'S PIGEONS IN THEIR LOFT BEHIND MY HOUSE,
COOING AS IF THEY STRUTTED IN ST. PETER'S SQUARE IN ROME.

MR EVANS'S FACE WAS CRUMPLED AND HE COULD HARDLY WALK.
BUT WHEN HIS BIRDS FLEW, HE SMILED LIKE SPRINGTIME.

I STOOD BESIDE HIM AND WATCHED
AS HIS PIGEONS SOARED ABOVE THE CHIMNEYS AND THE TOWERS,
UP TO WHERE THE SKY STRETCHED ALL THE WAY TO ITALY.

A LIFETIME WORKING IN A COAL MINE
HAD TAKEN MR EVANS'S BREATH AWAY,
SO HE SPOKE SOFT AND SLOW,
SLOW ENOUGH FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND.
"I LIKE TO SEE THEM FLY" HE WHISPERED,
"AFTER SO LONG UNDERGROUND."

EVERY DAY I CAME TO SEE THE PIGEONS,
"I'M TRAINING THEM TO RACE MR EVANS SAID,
"AND THIS ONE'S GOING TO BE A CHAMPION".

HE PUT A PIGEON IN MY HANDS.

I FELT ITS SMALL HEART RACING UNDERNEATH MY FINGER
AND THE PUSH AND POWER OF ITS WINGS.
ITS HEAD WAS WHITER THAN A SPLASH OF MILK. ITS EYE BLAZED FIRE.
“NAME HIM HE’S YOURS”, THE OLD MAN SAID.

I DIDN’T HAVE TO THINK. “RE DEL CIELO!” I REPLIED
“KING OF THE SKY!”

MR EVANS SHOWED ME HOW TO CATCH
THE BIRDS AND SLIP THEM INTO A BASKET.
THEN WE’D WHEEL THE BASKET TO THE STATION IN A BARROW.
“HOW FAR TODAY THEN MR EVANS? THE STATIONMASTER
WOULD ASK.
MY FRIEND WOULD NAME A STATION UP THE LINE:
FIVE MILES, TEN MILES, TWENTY MILES AWAY –
A LITTLE FARTHER EVERY TIME.

“THEY DON’T NEED A MAP LIKE WE DO,” MR EVANS TOLD ME.
“THEY’RE BORN KNOWING HOW TO FIND THEIR WAY.
ALL THEY NEED IS A BIT OF PRACTICE.”

BACK AT THE LOFT, WE’D WAIT, EATING MR EVANS’S WELSH CAKES
AND SQUINTING UP INTO THE LIGHT.
“LOOK OUT NOW!” MR EVANS WOULD SAY. “KEEP THOSE YOUNG EYES OF YOURS WELL PEELED!”
IT NEVER TOOK THEM LONG.
FROM PLACES FAR AWAY, PLACES THAT THEY’D NEVER BEEN,
THE PIGEONS FLEW HOME STRAIGHT AND FAST AS ARROWS.
BUT THE PIGEON WITH THE MILK-WHITE HEAD WAS ALWAYS LAST.
STILL MR EVANS SAID HE’D BE A WINNER.

“HE’S A HERO,” THE OLD MAN WHEEZED, “JUST LIKE THEN PIGEONS IN THE WAR,
CARRYING MESSAGES EVEN WHEN THEY WERE SHOT. JUST YOU WAIT AND SEE!”

EVERY DAY MR. EVANS GREW A LITTLE WEAKER.
BY RACING SEASON HE COULDN'T LEAVE HIS BED,
SO I PUT THE RACE RINGS ON THE PIGEONS' LEGS
AND TOOK THEM TO THE STATION.
I SCoured THE SKY FOR THEIR RETURN AND CHECKED THEM IN.

MR EVANS'S BEDROOM WALL WAS PAPERED WITH THEIR WINNINGS –
BUT NOT ONE FOR RE DEL CIELO, MY KING OF THE SKY.
“HE'S GOT THE WINGS FOR DISTANCE,” MR EVANS BREATHED.
“HERE'S THE RACE HE'S WAITED FOR.”

HE HANDED ME THE ENTRY FORM:
KING OF THE SKY WOULD GO TO ROME BY TRAIN.
THEN RACE BACK A THOUSAND MILES AND MORE!

I SMOOTHED HIS FEATHERS, LOOKED INTO HIS EYE,
AND PUT HIM INTO THE BASKET FOR THE JOURNEY,
A PART OF ME WAS GOING WITH HIM.
I WASN'T SURE IT WOULD COME BACK.

THE RACE DAY DAWNED. A STORM BLEW IN.

LIGHTNING, WIND, AND RAIN.

I WAITED FOR THE TWO WHOLE DAYS AND NIGHTS, BUT THE PIGEON
WITH THE MILK WHITE HEAD DID NOT RETURN.

I SAT BESIDE MY FRIEND'S BED,
AND I TOLD HIM

THAT PERHAPS THE SUNLIGHT AND THE FOUNTAINS
AND THE VANILLA SMELL OF ICE CREAM
FROM A THOUSAND GELATERIE

HAD MADE THE PIGEON WANT TO STAY.

“NO!” SAID MR EVANS.

“THAT WILL ONLY TELL HIM...

THIS IS NOT WHERE YOU BELONG.”

THE OLD MAN’S EYES BLAZED FIRE.

“GET OUT THERE BOY,” HE SAID.

“AND WELCOME HIM!”

THE RAIN HAD STOPPED. I RAN OUT TO THE LOFT

AND SQUINTED UP INTO THE CLOUDS.

A SPECK... A BLOB... A BIRD.

A PIGEON WITH A MILK-WHITE HEAD,

A HERO AND A CHAMPION!

TWELVE HUNDRED MILES HE’D FLOWN,

FROM SOMEWHERE FAR AWAY HE’D NEVER BEEN.

STEERED NORTH AND WEST, FINDING HIS DIRECTION FROM THE SUN

AND THE FORCE THAT GUIDES A COMPASS NEEDLE.

FLOWN UNTIL HE SAW THE SHAPE OF THE HUMPBACKED HILLS,

THE LINES OF THE LITTLE HOUSES AND THE CHIMNEYS,

HEARD THE CLANKING TOWERS, SMELLED THE SOUP AND THE COAL DUST.

FLOWN INTO THE ARMS

OF THE SMILING, CRYING BOY –

THE BOY WHO KNEW AT LAST

THAT HE WAS HOME.