

BARRELHOUSE

A LOUDNESS OF SCREECHERS

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BY RION AMILCAR SCOTT

Prompt, by Tara Campbell: Banquet of beasts: beasts could be literal/figurative/whatever. And they could be on either side of the table: eating or being eaten. Or they could be underneath the table doing whatever it is beasts do best.



The first of the screecher birds appeared that year over the town like a hero in the sky during a cold walk home from the bus stop. Josh had just grabbed my butt and dashed off as a dare. He looked back with a dumb smile and there the impressive thing coasted overhead, massive wingspan spread wide.

Nigga's childish as shit, said Andrew, the boy who dared Josh, as he sidled up next to me, too close; his breath smelled of peppermint, cigarettes and tooth decay.

I breathed the cold air deeply, hoping it would freeze and then crack my heart. One more week until Christmas break and Josh and Andrew wouldn't be in my face everyday and I could ignore them more easily. Just ignoring them is what my mother would advise anyway. Daddy would tell me to punch them in their heads. That's far too angry, my Uncle Charles would say: Smile and don't let them dumb niggas see you sweat.

Go somewhere before I call that screecher down to snatch y'all, I said. There was a smile on my face that poisoned my words, made them sound joyful.

Josh mumbled something about the birds never straying so far from the Wildlands while I looked at the claws on the circling thing and imagined it swooping down and snatching the boys, piercing their chests with sharp talons before flying off to feast, digging into the boys' chests, pulling out their intestines to gobble them like early birds gobble worms from the dirt.

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Just before Christmas the sky turned black with a loudness of screechers flying in impossible patterns. Cracks of light peeked through their ragged feathers. Their impossible wingspans took our breath from us, my little brothers and me, and we pointed and ooh-ed by the window. Every so often the birds would flap their massive wings and we wondered how they stayed up there with so little effort. Both day and night the bawling from the sky left us awake and red-eyed. Mahad and Jamal ran about flapping and squawking until Umi told them to shut their mouths. This is not the joke you think

this is, she said. My father, my uncle and about six or seven important men—Josh's dad was there as was Andrew's mother (the only woman in the bunch)—sat in my dad's study talking real low and from time to time they raised their voices in anger, but it would always settle to a low grumble.

Do 'em like the wolves, a voice, not my father's called. Bang. Bang. Do 'em like the wolves.

Sorai, my mother called. Take your brothers downstairs, please.

It wasn't at all fair of Umi to tell me to wrangle two curious five-year olds. Seems to me now that was her job, but I didn't complain back then, I just said, OK, you little rats, you heard Umi, downstairs.

The little rats ran about—one clockwise, the other counter--squawking, squawking, squawking, saliva running down their chins.

My father stepped from the room looking taller than usual, his face disturbed and heavy. I froze, grabbed the fleeing Jamal as he dashed by and pulled him close. I'd seen this face before and a beating usually followed.

He called our names and knelt so he was eye level with my brothers. He pulled us all in, hugging us too tight. The boys squirmed. My back hurt, but I didn't fight. Daddy pressed his face to my stomach. I felt the wetness of his tears soaking my shirt.

I love you all and your mother loves you all and your Uncle Charles does too, he said. My uncle walked by, a silver platter in his hands, atop it the charred wolf that was to be our holiday centerpiece.

Charlie, my father called, but my Uncle didn't look back as he moved swiftly out the door.

We watched by the window as Uncle Charles bowed before the flying birds in an exaggerated gesture of respect. The important men mumbled amongst themselves while my parents watched stoically and when my father could take no more he turned and shambled away. One of those big, black things landed in front of my uncle. With its beak, the bird knocked the wolf from the platter and stared down at Uncle Charles with a condescending glare.

Good lord, Josh's dad said, the offering—

It screeched in Uncle Charles's face, a sound like ten air raid sirens. I could feel the sound vibrating at my feet. Another landed behind my uncle and let out more screeching. The two birds rose above Uncle Charles's head beating their wings into one another, pecking at feathers and flesh.

My uncle raised his arms in protection.

My father burst into the room, shotgun in hand. No, Andrew's mother called. This is the ritual.

Fuck the ritual, my father cried. That's my only brother. Some of the important men snatched at him, he held firm to his weapon, swinging it all about. I'll shoot, he called. I'll shoot.

My brothers held tight to my legs, tears staining their cheeks and shirts. I assured them things would be fine, but my wet face was no better than theirs.

Reynold, my mother said, finally. Reynold. This is the ritual. He held his gun at her, the only thing between him and the door, but the tension had broken, we all knew my father couldn't shoot my mother. This is the ritual, she repeated.

Fuck the ritual, my father said, lowering the gun, tears in his eyes. That's my little brother.

By then one screecher lay dead and the other had snatched Uncle Charles, talons piercing his sides, blood dripping to the streets. He flopped about like a doll in that bird's embrace as it took him to the sky. The layer of screechers that blocked the blue cleared, first slowly and then all at once.

The loudness flew off, leaving nothing but birdshit and ear-splitting wails in its wake. For the first time in weeks we could see the turquoise and the clouds and we could see the sun and now I hated them fiercely.

Rion Amilcar Scott has contributed to The Kenyon Review, Crab Orchard Review, and PANK, among others. His linked story collection, Wolf Tickets, is forthcoming from Tiny Hardcore Press and his short story collection, People in Motion, is forthcoming from University Press of Kentucky. Currently, he teaches English at Bowie State University.