

Olive Senior



The Secret of Crusoe's Parrot

Parrot, through heavily-lidded eyes, watches as the new
invader arrives. Friend or foe? Parrot doesn't know,
doesn't care. Parrot is ruler of air.

This island kingdom was Parrot's from time immemorial,
before arrivals, departures, of many such as he.
Their claims of overlordship

as predictable as the tide. Parrot's weakness is that he
loves company; even a human will do.
Parrot is all pretence, mimicry,

playing fool to catch wise. Yet if Crusoe had asked, Parrot
would have told no lies; he'd seen it all before.
Could have told where the fresh springs

were; how to bake bread, set traps, fire pottery. Where best
to build the boat. But (Parrot thinks) I mustn't gloat
for then I would have deprived

the poor creature of his illusion of mastery, and myself
of some good jokes. Such as his thinking
I'm alone and celibate. *Poor Poll*

says he. *You are just like me.* Not knowing what lurks
disguised as sweet juicy fruit in yonder tree —
My mate. My progeny.

I let him teach me speech for much I forget between
visitors. And granted that such speech as I usually
imbibe — from cannibals, pirates,

buccaneers, delirious castaways, is not appropriate
for his Christian ears. Though sometimes
when I'm angry or for mischief

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Calabash

I let fly a few. He usually attributes these to his loneliness
and delirium; or to his mishearing. He prays
extra hard those nights.

'Poor Robin Crusoe', I mock him. 'Where have you been?
How come you here?' *Poll*, he claims loftily, *the*
only person permitted to talk to me.

His servant, indeed. When that other creature came, the one
called Friday, I almost left him (that one was
a quick study. Knew exactly how

to please). I stayed because being 'Crusoe's parrot' does
give me status among the poor dumb creatures
in the trees. Now their teacher is me.

I had thought of peopling the island with
educated parrots and sweet airs. But I laid off the teaching
when I found I could no longer stand

their screeching. Since he arrived, my hearing is not what
it used to be. I find the senseless cries of those
uncivilized birds unbearable — as they find

talkative me. Once he goes, I'll have to find my place again
among my own, go back to playing dumb. Knowing
I cannot stave off the yearning

that will master me for words addictive as grain cracked
open on the tongue. Ashamed, alone again,
I'll start to haunt the beach, waiting for

another to come along, to give me speech.

