

OCHREBEAK

A Story



By

JAMES WISE

OCHREBEAK

Copyright: James Wise
Published: 19th July 2014
Publisher: Pranadev
PDF Edition

The right of James Wise to be identified as author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved.

This story was written as part of a campaign to save green space from a development in Islington, London, England. To find out more about the campaign, sign the petition and hear the song, please visit: www.savethreetrees.org

© Cover illustration by Gareth A Hopkins.
www.grthink.com

© "Sweet Trees" music and lyrics by Aliyah Keshani,
guitar arrangement and production by Jamie West.
aliyahkeshani.wordpress.com & www.jamiewest.net

Edited by Carron Brown.
www.twitter.com/SquirkRodent

Follow @Ochrebeak on Twitter.

OCHREBEAK

The little blackbird awoke in his nest on a day like any other, except today the humans had placed a big, white tent right next to Three Trees, home to Ochrebeak, Old Greyfoot the crow and the Squirrel Tribe. Ignoring breakfast, Ochrebeak flew straight to the roof of the building next to the square of grass where Three Trees stood and hopped up and down along the gutter, trying to get a sense of what was going on.

'Humansong is so crude compared to birdsong,' his mother used to repeat endlessly, like a chorus. 'But they think we can't understand it because they don't know birdsong.' Knowing this, a young Ochrebeak delighted in perching just above the humans and listening to their every word, learning about the world. The couple under a tree sharing secrets between each other and, aha, Ochrebeak as well! The street cleaner singing his own song about three little birds, as he gathered debris (presumably for his own nest). The soft, kind words between an old lady and her granddaughter. Loud, hot, angry words on the street between a man and a woman. The hoots and hollers and yells of big packs of humans late at night (Ochrebeak wasn't sure if even other humans could understand all that racket, or if it meant anything to anyone). Even the cars they travelled in made urgent honking noises like geese and, sometimes, the brightly coloured ones emitted high-pitched wails that screeched throughout the town and scared the squirrels and the cats.

From his perch on the red brick building, Ochrebeak saw a man and a young boy walking past the long tent, when the boy yelped with delight.

'Can we go and see the art, Daddy?' Ochrebeak looked closer and noticed pictures on easels all around the tent, with humans milling about looking at them. The boy's father laughed. 'I don't think it's a gallery, son.'

Not an exhibition, thought Ochrebeak, what could it be then?

Humans were different from birds in that they could write down their song as strange markings, and anyone at any time could listen with their eyes, singing the song to themselves silently in their heads. But the birds couldn't hear the songwords with their eyes, they just looked like scribbly worms laid out on the grass. So, while Ochrebeak saw the words "collective" and "consultation", they meant nothing, except to remind him he'd missed his breakfast.

Listening in, Ochrebeak could hear much exchange of humansong. Some of the songs were becoming stressed and hot, like the couple on the street. Ochrebeak recognised one of the humans. This boy would stand in his garden and puff smoke from his mouth, and was well known to the birds and squirrels of Three Trees and Five Trees, just over the drive. The squirrels liked him because he sometimes threw them nuts and, rumour had it, he had something to do with Old Greyfoot. Right now he was talking to someone.

'Are you one of the architects?' he asked a silver-haired man. Ochrebeak didn't know what an "architect" was, but it was likely to be something to do with the event. The boy and the architect walked as they talked, looking at the pictures on the easels. Ochrebeak didn't know what the pictures were meant to be, but he knew they were like the songwords humans used – "songpictures" his mother told him. The pictures had lots of green and browns and greys, reminding him of trees and grass. The boy and the architect studied them, looking over at

Three Trees and pointing. This only heightened Ochrebeak's curiosity - could this have something to do with Three Trees?

The boy led the architect outside the tent and stood by Three Trees, right under Ochrebeak.

'I'm telling you this right now,' said the boy in even tones. 'There's no way you're building a block of flats on this land.'

'I understand your concerns,' the architect said. 'I'm just doing my job. It's not a done deal by any stretch, but we just do what the Council tells us, based on feedback from you, the Residents.'

'Well *my* feedback is that you are not going to cut down those trees and build all over that lovely green space!' the boy said hotly. Ochrebeak was shocked. He opened and closed his beak silently a few times in disbelief. Cut. Down. Trees? He looked around, a few of Three Trees' community were up and about, a couple of squirrels chasing each other and birds flapping around, mostly away from the humans.

It took a while, but Ochrebeak finally found his voice and he began his shrill melody loud and clear. He sang it from his chest, he sang it from his heart. 'No! No! You will not cut down our trees! You will not build here! Oh what can we do? What can we do to stop the humans waging war on us?' To his astonishment, the boy looked up, saying, 'You see? Even that little blackbird is telling you not to build here.' Ochrebeak couldn't believe it, could this *human* understand birdsong? Surely that would be the first human in history, if not bird myth and legend. No, he's just being sly, Ochrebeak concluded. He's trying to convince the architect - he's fighting for us. Just to be sure, Ochrebeak warbled, 'Free chips! Free chips for the humans!' No, neither the boy nor the architect gazed up at him hungrily or expectantly.

Then the architect said, 'Yeah right, I don't think that's what he's saying.'

'Yes, well he definitely ain't saying "please come and cut down these trees and fill the land with concrete" is he?' said the boy. The architect laughed in that baritone, belly, but fake way humans do when they're trying to please another.

'Listen, you'll have to write a formal objection when the proposal goes to the planning stage in a couple of months. At the moment we're just trying to gauge the reaction of the Residents.' Ochrebeak couldn't take any more. Dismayed, he flew back to Three Trees to consult with the others.



'We heard you Ochrebeak. We heard you,' soothed Sharpbeak, her brown speckled feathers ruffled despite preening them all morning. A soft breeze rustled the leaves and swayed the boughs of Three Trees. Despite her sympathy, Sharpbeak was clearly concerned. They had called a meeting for all the inhabitants of Three Trees and Five Trees, who were now gathered round Old Greyfoot's rambling and ancient nest. Jay and Robin were there, the nightingales and Mr and Mrs Magpie came too (because no one wants to live with only *one* magpie). Even some members of the Squirrel Tribe listened in, resting on their bushy tails. Sharpbeak addressed the crowd.

'I overheard things too – a humansong from the "Council" female with bits of glass around her neck.'

'The one with the hair like a badly built nest?'

'Yes, that one, Jay,' crooned Sharpbeak. 'She told the Residents that it wasn't up to her, that someone called "Labour" had decreed that new homes had to be built, and cutting down trees and building on "green space" was cheaper.' A cacophony of chirruping went up from the birds and the squirrels chattered loudly.

'At any rate,' said Ochrebeak, spreading his wings to appeal for calm, 'it seems the only way to stop this is to make one of these "objections".'

'What is an "objection"?' asked Mr Magpie.

'Is it like a "rejection"?' suggested Mrs Magpie. Greyfoot, silent until now, flapped his wings and stretched his neck and a hush fell over the group as they waited for the old crow to speak.

'Humans have their songwords, yes?' The little birds chirped in agreement. 'Well, sometimes they use their songwords to make all kinds of agreements between themselves and their various factions. An "objection" is a special set of songwords used when one faction doesn't agree with another.'

'Like a war?' considered Sharpbeak. 'A war of words?'

'Yes, yes,' agreed Greyfoot. 'Just like that in fact.'

'So we must write an objection!' piped Ochrebeak.

'But writing is forbidden to the birds!' boomed Greyfoot. 'You know this. If the Pigeon King found out, we'd have our gizzards strung from the highest Plane Tree. Even if we did write an objection, what would we do with it? Who would we deliver it to?' The group thought about this for a while.

'What about the boy?' asked Ochrebeak. 'He was fighting for us earlier.'

'Yes the boy! The boy!' chimed Sharpbeak, hopping up and down.

'The boy? What boy?' queried Greyfoot, puzzled.

'You know the one, Greyfoot,' said Ochrebeak. 'He lives at the end human nest and must love nature because he's let the jasmine twine and weeds wrap and moss grow all over his bicycle.'

'I weed on his saddle once,' whispered one of the squirrels, which was met with giggles from his friends.

'Oh, him,' mused Greyfoot with a faraway look.

'Is it true?' asked Sharpbeak. 'Is it true there's something between you and him?'

Greyfoot sighed.

'When I was young, just a hatchling really, I fell out of the bush with juicy red berries into his garden. I was hurt and could barely move, let alone fly. My parents were distraught – flapping and squawking above – but there was nothing they could do. His other companions at the human nest scared me and they even sang about "ending my suffering", as they put it. But the boy wouldn't let them and he even left out bread and water for me. When I was strong enough, I squeezed under the bottom of the fence and found my way home.'

'Oh that's awful,' said Sharpbeak after a short silence.

'That's got to be it, though,' said Ochrebeak. 'We must write this "objection" and deliver it to the boy.'

Greyfoot just shook his head.

'What if we went to the Pigeon King and asked his permission?' asked Sharpbeak.

'It'll be dangerous.'

'I'll go!' piped Jay. Robin flapped his wings in agreement.

'Well, I'll be damned if I'm going to let them destroy our beautiful home,' said Mrs Magpie.

'We'll go too.'

'Yes dear,' said Mr Magpie.

Greyfoot sighed. 'He'll never agree, but if you must go, you'll need a pen and a bit of paper.

Maybe the King will have some in his horde.'

'It's agreed then,' said Ochrebeak looking at the group.

'One more thing,' added Greyfoot. 'Pick up that good-for-nothing son of mine on your way.

He could use a kick up his tail.'



Stopping only to drag a reluctant Silverwing from his messy nest, the group flew up and over the streets and rooftops towards the Court of the Pigeon King. On the way, Ochrebeak looked down on the endless jumble of human nests and glass towers. What if once this was all trees and woodland and grass? he wondered. It was too mad an idea to be true, but what if it were? How many other birds and animals had seen their homes destroyed? Ochrebeak imagined humans cutting down trees while saying 'it's not my fault, I'm just doing my job' and the ones making nests in the new buildings, thinking 'oh well, it's here now isn't it? *I* didn't cut down the trees.' The journey wasn't far – they swooped down Whitecross Street, over Barbican, across Aldersgate, down Long Lane and landed on Smithfield Market. All along the roof pigeons waddled about between the stone acorn finials, pecking at imaginary grains of food.

'Don't be fooled,' cautioned Silverwing. 'They seem docile but they're really lookouts for the Pigeon King.' The group made their way warily past the sentries, who looked on more in disbelief than suspicion as the blackbirds, two magpies, a crow, a jay and a robin hopped past. They found the entrance behind the stone queen, above the central arcade. Once inside, it took their eyes a while to grow accustomed to the gloom.

They found themselves at the end of a vast attic space under the rafters. Thin shafts of sunlight fell on a floor covered with guano and strewn with a baffling mess of human rubbish, random objects, discarded burger boxes, noodle cartons, crisp packets and other food wrappers, which increased in height and variety towards a central point, lit from above by a gap in the roof. Here, hundreds of pigeons flocked.

Beaks agape, the group made their way forward.

'This must be the famous horde of the Pigeon King!' gasped Ochrebeak. 'I've heard the stories but I never thought I'd see it.'

'Cor!' crowed Silverwing. The pigeons started to notice them and stopped their ambling about to turn and stare. A hush fell over the space. Two large pigeons made their way through the crowd towards the group. One had a massive bulbous head, the other a club foot.

'Who dares approach the King?' bellowed Club Foot.

'But a group of humble songbirds seeking an audience with His Highness,' announced Sharpbeak.

The guards eyed the group warily.

'Let them through, let them through!' boomed a powerful voice from the centre. Club Foot and Big Head escorted the group through the crowd, kicking a poor old mangey pigeon aside as they went. At the very top of the pile, lit from above by the sun, perched the Pigeon King. Big Head gestured towards the King and proclaimed, 'His Majesty, King Poogian III, Lord and Master of all Pigeons and the lesser birds!' Poogian looked down at the little band of birds.

'What on earth brings such an unlikely group into my presence?'

Ochrebeak cleared his throat and began recounting everything he'd heard that morning. As he spoke, Poogian pecked at the food that lay all around him. The birds weren't sure if he was even listening. He stopped, though, when Ochrebeak made his request. Total silence fell over the entire court. Ochrebeak could feel his heart beating fast in his little breast.

'Writing is forbidden to the birds. It's always been this way – it is *law!*' His loud voice echoed around the space and rattled off the rafters. 'What would happen to the world if the birds started *writing* things down? Why, we'd become like the humans! We'd start cutting down their human nests, where would it end and where would all our food come from?' The little group looked at each other, not knowing what to say.

'We're not some bleeding heart *Jonathanists* here you know,' Poogian continued. 'Damn seagull – wasn't even a pigeon anyway.' Poogian's courtiers sniggered at this. One pigeon who was laughing a little too hard slipped and fell down the mound of rubbish, exposing a shiny object glinting in a shaft of sunlight.

'Uh oh,' said Jay.

'Don't you dare!' breathed Mrs Magpie. Mr Magpie had many fibres of his being, but despite every single one of them resisting, he could not.

'Shiny thing!' he yelled and dashed over to the object, snatching it with his beak and flapping around in the rafters triumphantly.

'It's a pen!' gasped Silverwing.

'Stop! Thief!' squawked Poogian.

The group now found themselves at the centre of hundreds of hostile pigeons, closing in on them. 'What do we do? What do we do?'

'Don't panic, Silverwing, we'll get out of this.'

'But how?' asked Sharpbeak as she backed away from an advancing pigeon puffing up his neck angrily.

The pigeons started to chase the birds all around the attic space, with Poogian, Club Foot and Big Head shouting orders and encouragement from below. As they rounded back towards the Pigeon King, Ochrebeak shouted, 'The hole in the roof, head for that!'

'But we'll never all fit at once,' Mrs Magpie shouted back.

'You go first, we'll follow,' said Jay. Mrs Magpie made it through but the pigeons were almost upon the others.

'We're not going to make it,' yelled Sharpbeak. Just then, Robin rose into the air and hovered like a hummingbird. His wings were a blur, holding him perfectly stationary in space, his red breast a burning ember in the sunlight. Pecking at any pigeons who came close, Robin bought time for the others as they fled through the roof.

'But what about Robin? What about Robin?' chirped Sharpbeak as they soared above Farringdon.

'Leave him,' snapped Silverwing. 'He'll know what to do.'

'Don't lead them back to Three Trees,' urged Jay.

'Follow me, follow me,' called Ochrebeak. The group turned west as Ochrebeak led them over Gray's Inn and down Chancery Lane as they fled from the enraged pigeons. Mr and Mrs Magpie kept close, taking it in turns to carry the pen in their claws as they flew. All around them the call was going up, 'Stop them! Stop them! In the name of the King!' Pigeons all over were rising from rooftops and pavements, fighting furiously to get into the air and take up the chase.

Ochrebeak's mind raced, trying to think of a plan. The pigeons were everywhere – how could they possibly escape? As they soared above the oval of Aldwych, he caught the warm smells of a bakery below, with humans queuing outside and a thought struck him. Yes, maybe, just maybe that could work. Extending only the very tip of a wing, he pulled a sharp turn down The Strand. Flying low, Ochrebeak and his companions weaved between tall buses as red as the juicy berries that grew near Three Trees. More and more pigeons took off from the streets and joined the pursuit. They had to duck and dive and weave as pigeons approached them head on. One collided with Ochrebeak and clung on to him with his claws, drawing beads of blood.

'Leave him alone!' yelled Sharpbeak. Swooping in, she attacked Ochrebeak's assailant, jabbing fiercely with her beak. The three tumbled towards the ground, but at the last minute Sharpbeak managed to drive the pigeon away and the little birds beat their tired wings, rising back up into the sky. 'Are you ok?' called Sharpbeak.

'I'm fine,' Ochrebeak called back. 'Keep going!'

Finally they reached Trafalgar Square, so-named because it was square-shaped and Mr Trafalgar – clearly the greatest human who ever lived – was honoured on top of a gigantic stone column, surrounded by massive black cats. It's now or never thought Ochrebeak.

'What are you doing?' cried Jay. 'There are thousands of them here!' But just then their pursuers started breaking off and scattering. Amongst the hoards of pigeons in the square, some humans stood throwing seeds and bread crumbs on the ground. Forgetting their prey in an instant, the pigeons swooped down and started squabbling with each other over the feast. Mad with greed, one of the pigeons even landed on a little human boy's head.

'Ha ha!' cried Sharpbeak. Mr and Mrs Magpie shared a look of relief. Finally free, the birds turned and headed for home, taking a circuitous route up Regent Street just in case they were followed.



Nearing home, the little band of birds slowed only to allow Ochrebeak to swoop down and snatch a piece of paper from the street cleaner's little cart. Ochrebeak sang a "thank you" to him and he stopped his humming and waved at the bold blackbird.

Back at Three Trees, the birds perched in the cool calm of the rich, green, shady canopies. The late afternoon sunlight was thrown into little golden, dancing patterns on the rolling mounds of grass below. As they rested, a small figure limped beneath them.

'Robin!' squawked Jay. 'It's Robin, he's alive!'

Flying down, Jay found Robin in a bad way – a hurt claw and scratches and beak marks all over him. Robin gestured that he was OK, but the others flew him up to see the nightingales.

'Don't you worry,' called the nightingales. 'We'll nurse him back to health.'

Once they had made sure Robin was tucked up in his nest and being well cared for, they flew over to Copper Beech – Mrs Magpie carrying the pen, Ochrebeak with the paper. Greyfoot couldn't believe his eyes.

'Well I never!' he said. 'You got the King's permission and the writing materials?'

'Um,' said Jay.

'Er.' said Silverwing.

'Not exactly,' said Sharpbeak and she recounted the whole adventure to an increasingly amazed Greyfoot. As she did so, Greyfoot glanced occasionally at his son, Silverwing. Though he'd never admit it, the others could see the affection and pride in his eyes. When Sharpbeak finished, Greyfoot looked thoughtful for a long time.

'And you're absolutely sure you weren't followed and Poogian and his cronies can't trace us here?'

'We were very careful coming back,' reassured Ochrebeak. 'But we probably shouldn't be seen together for a while and Jay...'

Jay looked up at Ochrebeak.

'...you should low for a while. Not too many jays around here and you're pretty distinctive.'

Jay nodded. 'So I'd say we're safe. Poogian'll never know about the objection and he'll forget about the pen soon enough.'

'But maybe not the insult,' mused Greyfoot. 'Anyway, we should celebrate – well done everyone!'

Later, once they had gathered all the inhabitants of Three Trees and Five Trees together, the birds got to work setting their song down on paper. They took it in turns to work the pen with their beaks, each adding their own melody and their music to the text. Finally, as the shadows grew longer and the sky reddened, it was done. They rolled up the paper and Mr and Mrs Magpie wrapped some string from their nest around it. Then they waited.

Sure enough, the boy soon stepped out into his garden to take in the evening light and puff smoke. The group, as one, flew down and landed on his bushes and little trees and sang to him.

'Please take this, our objection, to the "Council", please oh please human boy, who once helped Greyfoot, help us now by saving our trees!'

When they had finished, Ochrebeak flew in – closer to a human than he'd ever been before – and dropped the scroll at the feet of the astonished boy. Bewildered, he picked it up, unrolled it and began reading. His draw dropped. He looked at the birds in disbelief. Then he said in humansong, 'Yes. Yes, little birds, I won't let them cut down your trees and build on your land. I will deliver your objection to the Council!' All the birds chirruped and sang with joy and danced around and hopped up and down.

The boy went back inside and closed the sliding door to his human nest. The others looked at each other with satisfaction. 'Well, that's that then,' their eyes said and they flapped home, tired but full of hope. The blackbirds flew to the Quill and Tailfeather to wet their beaks and they pecked each other on the cheeks long into the night.

SWEET TREES

You sweet trees
Standing here beside us
With your yellows and reds and greens.
You grew with us and watched us race
Through our childhood, our lives, our dreams,
Standing tall
On these concrete and greying streets.

So when they say the world's for sale,
I don't believe them, I won't believe them,
When they say the world's for sale,
It's not in my name, not in my name

So we'll get up onto our feet
Show the world what you mean to us
We'll get up onto our feet
And lift our voices up so loud
We'll get up onto our feet
And stop the world from crashing down
Around you sweet, sweet trees.

You sweet trees,
Just sighing in the breeze
And you're glorious, rich with life
And we struggle by our eyes so blind
To you green islands and the sun and the blue,
blue sky
But, no, not this time.

Oh, isn't it strange
Walking away from things unchanged?
Isn't it strange
What we choose to see
What we choose to save?

AFTERSONG

Thank you for reading! This story was written in response to a proposed development by Islington Council on the Redbrick Estate, near Old Street.

Please visit the campaign website www.savethreetrees.org, where you can hear the song Ochrebeak and his friends write (performed in humansong by the amazing Aliyah Keshani), sign the petition and find out more about Three Trees and the campaign.

Follow Ochrebeak on Twitter:
@Ochrebeak

CREDITS

Ochrebeak and his friends extend their warmest thanks to Aliyah Keshani and Jamie West for the humansong, Gareth A Hopkins for the songpictures, Carron Brown for her hawk-like editing and everyone who's signed the petition and got involved to save Three Trees.