

SPARROWS

Susan Palwick

Susan Palwick has published four novels with Tor Books: *Flying in Place* (1992), *The Necessary Beggar* (2005), *Shelter* (2007), and *Mending the Moon* (2013). Her story collection *The Fate of Mice* appeared in 2007 from Tachyon Publications. Her second collection, *All Worlds are Real*, was published in 2019 by Fairwood Press. Susan's fiction honors include the Crawford Award, an Alex Award from the American Library Association, and a Silver Pen Award from the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. Her work has been shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award, the Mythopoeic Award, and the Philip K. Dick Award. After spending twenty years as an English professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, Susan now works as a health-care chaplain. She lives in Reno with her husband and their three cats. The author's wrenching new tale depicts grace in the face of oncoming disaster.

Lacey had been alone in the dorm for three weeks when she finished her Shakespeare paper. All the electronics had been down even before the evacuation, but she'd anticipated that. She'd printed out a copy of the draft while she still could. After everyone else had left, she raided Robert's room. He collected manual typewriters, and he'd had to leave them behind. "One backpack," they'd been told, but Lacey had seen bright things that looked like backpacks bobbing in the water off the island, during the brief periods of calm. She had a feeling that a lot of her classmates were already dead. Maybe what she took for backpacks were actually bodies.

There were five manual typewriters in Robert's room: a Royal, two Smith Coronas, and two Remingtons. Lacey tested each. She liked the Royal the best—the way the smooth black disks of the keys felt under her fingers, the smell of the ink—but she suspected it had been Robert's favorite, too, because the ribbon seemed awfully worn. She rooted through drawers, found a replacement, and carried her haul back to her own room.

She was on the third floor, and Bartoch Hall was on a hill. This area hadn't flooded yet. Her room had a good view of the harbor and of the storms, when anything was visible. She was less vulnerable to water here, but more exposed to wind. She'd taped her windows, but two had already broken. She'd moved everything away from that side of the small room, taking over Shelley's side.

She could take whatever room she wanted, now. She wasn't sure why she stayed in this one. She foraged in other people's rooms for cardboard to put over the windows.

Sometimes she found a bit of food: ramen, or cookies and trail mix. She knew there were birds and other creatures still alive outside, but her bio professor had said that many of them were diseased, unsafe to eat or approach. Lacey didn't have the skills or the stomach to hunt and cook them, and there seemed little point.

It had been hard to calculate how much to eat each day. What she had wouldn't last long, and she wouldn't last long past that, but she wanted to finish her paper. Water wasn't a problem. She'd found some matches—precious, how could anyone have left them behind?—and a camping pot, and boiled the water before she drank it. Books were the fuel. Once this would have sickened her, but now it didn't matter. She only burned the ones that didn't interest her, though, the stuff she respected but didn't understand. Calculus, organic chemistry. Literature she brought back to her own room, when she could.

The room felt peaceful to her, a good place to work. She'd always liked Shelley's side better. She revised her draft in pencil, and handwrote the rest of it, and then painstakingly typed it on the Royal. With no way to correct mistakes, she had to be careful. There was limited light each day, which made everything slower, and she worked more slowly than she usually would have, anyway. After she finished the paper, there would be nothing left to do.

Shelley and the others would have mocked her for staying here to finish a paper, but she didn't think they were having any fun wherever they were, if they were still alive. Her parents had died in a car crash three years ago, and since then she'd lived with a distant, harried aunt who didn't do much but drink and watch TV. It wasn't a relationship worth braving the storms to get back to, and she hadn't made any friendships in her four months here that were worth that struggle, either. She was happier staying in the dorm by herself, with her books, finishing her paper.

As far as she knew, she was the only person left on campus, maybe the only person left on the island, although she hadn't ventured very far outside. When she finished her paper, she'd put it in the mailbox outside her professor's office, although she knew he must be gone, too, knew no one would ever read it. That was all right.

The paper was a comparison of *Richard II* and *King Lear*, contrasting close readings of Richard's "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground" speech and Lear's speech to Cordelia: "Come, let's away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage." The sonorous language filled Lacey's head, as if the characters were here, talking to her. Both of these beaten kings: Richard railing against mortality and Lear—unaware that he was about to lose his only loyal daughter—vowing to find every grace he could in her company, to "wear out in a wall'd prison packs and sects of great ones that ebb and flow by the moon." Both of them were doomed. But Lear's sufferings had brought him acceptance and humility, while Richard just felt sorry for himself.

Typing up the paper took longer than she had expected, because the light was so uncertain, and the cardboard over the windows disintegrated, and then water blew into the room again, all the way over to Shelley's side. Lacey dragged her desk and books and the typewriter into the narrow hallway and kept working by the fading light of a solar lantern she'd found.

She finished the paper just as she ran out of food, although she'd been hungry for days anyway. She proofread the paper, ate the last of her stash—a Mars bar and a precious piece of beef jerky—and got ready to hike across campus to the English building. There were sure to be broken windows, even if all the doors were locked. She'd get inside somehow.

Crossing campus, normally a twenty-minute walk, took hours. Lacey had to bypass bodies—none of people she knew—some crushed by trees, some apparently washed here by floods. From a tree still standing, she saw someone dangling from a noose. There'd been a lot of talk of suicide, of pacts, people sitting in little groups in

the hallways, saying we can't make it anyway, it's hopeless, let's just end it. She'd seen most of those people heading to the boats, but apparently some had stayed and gone through with it.

The bodies smelled terrible, and animals had been eating them. She hurried past those as quickly as she could, but still had to climb over fallen trees and navigate through mud and all sorts of debris. The wind was picking up again: another storm coming, or an eye in the current storm ending, no way to know now without meteorologists or the net. She hadn't been paying much attention to the weather. It was background noise, the soundtrack to the end of the world, a droning monotony.

Finally she got to the English building, one of the oldest on campus but, amazingly, still standing. The massive front door was unlocked. She walked in, called out a tentative "hello?" There was no answer, except a squeaking somewhere, mouse or rat. Lacey shuddered and headed up the stairs, wading through mud and water. She was grateful that it was still daylight so she could see where she was going through the stairwell windows, or rather the gaps where windows had been.

The second floor was better, cleaner. She stopped to catch her breath and then pushed forward, unwilling to think about what she'd do next. Finishing the paper, delivering it, had been her only goal. In a minute or two she'd put it in Professor Ablethwaite's box, and then there'd be nothing left to do. Fear and despair twisted in her stomach.

You weren't supposed to put papers in open mailboxes; other students might steal your work, or it might get lost somehow, but it wasn't like any of that mattered now. She'd reach his door and stand in front of the wooden box nailed to the wall next to it. She'd take off her backpack, put it on the ground, and reach into it for the paper. She'd put the paper in the box.

She'd rehearsed all that in her head a hundred times. Past it lay utter darkness, the unknown.

Here. Here was his box, and just past it was his office door.

Which was open. Not open all the way, but ajar a few inches.

Lacey stood and blinked. Someone had broken in, maybe, looking for supplies, the way she'd been doing. "Hello?" she called again and heard a startled movement inside.

"Is someone there?" a voice called. Professor Ablethwaite's voice.

Astonished, Lacey pushed the door open farther. He was sitting at his desk, his feet propped on top of it, near a half-empty bottle of whisky and a gun. Ablethwaite had always dressed impeccably in class: tailored suits, bowties. Now he wore ripped jeans and a faded, stained sweatshirt.

They stared at each other. "I'm one of your students," Lacey said. She knew he wouldn't know her. She'd always sat in the back while he lectured. A TA had taught her discussion section, although he might not have remembered her either. "I'm in your Shakespeare class."

"You're what?" Ablethwaite swung his legs down from the desk, leaned forward, and squinted at her. "Class is over. The semester's over. Everything's over. Why are you here?"

"I'm handing in my final paper," Lacey said, and then, when he gaped at her, "Why are *you* here?"

He seemed taken aback, but only for a moment. "I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Well, neither did I." She edged into the room, moved some books off a chair, put her backpack on the floor, and sat down. "I'm Lacey. Lacey Wilson."

"Charmed," Ablethwaite said. "Don't be scared of the gun. It's just there in case someone dangerous shows up."

"I'm not dangerous," she said. She didn't think that was why the gun was on his desk. Through the window behind him, she saw the next storm approaching, huge and dark, a mass of writhing clouds and tornados and lightning. "I just came to hand in my paper. I didn't think you'd be here, but I knew my TA was gone and it seemed, you know, symbolic for me to put the paper in the professor's actual box and—"

"You wrote the final paper? Why?"

"I wanted to," she said, and looked down at her hands, clenched in her lap. She unclenched them and bent to unzip the backpack, retrieve the paper. "It was something to do. I liked the poetry." It fit, she wanted to say; she wanted to talk about how symbolically apt it was, but she knew she'd only sound stupid. He thought she was crazy as it was. Maybe he was right. She put the paper on his desk, pushed it toward him slightly. "There are some handwritten corrections. I'm sorry. I didn't have Wite-Out or anything."

Ablethwaite laughed for a moment, hysterically, and then shook his head. "Back when students were still doing coursework instead of fleeing the apocalypse, half of them didn't write their papers anyway. They paid other people to do it for them."

Lacey shrugged. What did he want her to say? "I never did that."

"Jesus." Ablethwaite scratched his head—he looked very tired, she realized—and said, "I hope you don't expect me to grade this."

"Of course not. I didn't even think you'd be here."

He grimaced. "That was a crappy thing for me to say. If you write a paper while the world's ending, the least I can do is read it."

"You don't have to. I just wanted to write it. I'll leave now."

He shook his head again, wearily this time. "And go where? No, that's silly. Stay. Want some whisky? Are you old enough to drink? As if that matters now."

"I don't drink," she said, thinking of her aunt. Lacey wondered if she was dead, and if she'd been drunk when she died. Maybe she'd been too drunk to realize what was happening.

"Do you have any food?"

"Not anymore. I ate all I had left this morning. Do you have any food?"

"Some crackers that haven't gone moldy yet. And peanut butter."

"Peanut butter!" She felt her eyes widen, and Ablethwaite laughed.

"Yeah, the good stuff. A colleague kept it in her office. I've been looting."

"Me too." Lacey looked down at her lap again. She didn't want to ask why he'd stranded himself here. He was old. Didn't he have a family, or at least friends? She'd always thought life would be better when she was older, that somehow she'd find her way, find people, find a home worth having. But apparently getting older didn't guarantee any of that.

A booming sounded in the distance, and they both looked out the window. The storm was much closer, the few remaining trees dancing and crashing. "This may be it," Ablethwaite said.

"Yes. It may be."

He turned back to face her. "All right. So what's this paper about?"

She'd loved writing the paper, but now she felt tongue-tied. "It's about Richard the Second and Lear. It's a comparison of how they face their ends. Richard's all bitter and everything, but Lear's okay with being in a prison cell if he can be with Cordelia."

"Which he'll never get to be."

"No. But he doesn't know that."

Ablethwaite scowled. "Mercy not to know sometimes, isn't it? No currently relevant subtext, oh no. What is it Lear tells Cordelia? 'So we'll live?'"

"Yes. That's what he says."

Lear and Cordelia wouldn't live. No one would. Lacey wouldn't and her aunt

wouldn't and none of the departed students would. Even without the storms, even without social collapse and all the catastrophes besetting every corner of the globe Lacey had heard about, everyone would die, because everyone always did. The trick was to find what good you could while you were still alive. Lear had finally learned that, and all these hundreds of years after Shakespeare had written Lear's speech, he had taught Lacey, too.

She swallowed and said, "For just a minute, you know, he's happy. For just a little while. It's the only time he's happy in the whole play."

"The sparrow flying through the mead hall, warm and dry, before it has to fly back outside, into rain and darkness." Ablethwaite glanced through the window again. Nothing was visible. The wind was a howling roar.

"Is that Shakespeare?"

"Bede." Ablethwaite sighed, reached for the bottle, and stopped. He reached for the gun instead, and Lacey's breath caught for a second, but he opened a drawer with his free hand, put the gun inside, and pulled out a box of crackers and a jar of peanut butter. "I only have one knife, which I'm afraid I've been licking. And no napkins."

"You could wash the knife. Lots of water."

He laughed again, opened the jar, and scooped out some peanut butter with his fingers. He pushed the jar toward Lacey, leaving peanut butter smudges on the sides. "All right. I'm still not going to grade it, but we'll pretend we're at a real university. Oxford or Cambridge. One of those. Lacey Wilson, read me your paper."