

Slow Birds

by Ian Watson

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It was Mayday, and the skate-sailing festival that year was being held at Tuckerton.

By late morning, after the umpires had been out on the glass plain setting red flags around the circuit, cumulous clouds began to fill a previously blue sky, promising ideal conditions for the afternoon's sport. No rain; so that the glass wouldn't be an inch deep in water as last year at Atherton. No dazzling glare to blind the spectators, as the year before that at Buckby. And a breeze verging on brisk without ever becoming fierce: perfect to speed the competitors' sails along without lifting people off their feet and tumbling them, as four years previously at Edgewood when a couple of broken ankles and numerous bruises had been sustained.

After the contest there would be a pig roast; or rather the succulent fruits thereof, for the pig had been turning slowly on its spit these past thirty-six hours. And there would be kegs of Old Codger Ale to be cracked. But right now Jason Babbidge's mind was mainly occupied with checking

out his glass-skates and his fine crocus-yellow hand-sail.

As high as a tall man, and of best old silk, only patched in a couple of places, the sail's fore-spar of flexible ash was bent into a bow belly by a strong hemp cord. Jason plucked this thoughtfully like a harpist, testing the tension. Already a fair number of racers were out on the glass, showing off their paces to applause. Tuckerton folk mostly, they were—acting as if they owned the glass hereabouts and knew it more intimately than any visitors could. Not that it was in any way different from the same glass over Atherton way.

Jason's younger brother Daniel whistled appreciatively as a Tuckerton man carrying purple silk executed perfect circles at speed, his sail shivering as he tacked.

"Just look at him, Jay!"

"What, Bob Marchant? He took a pratfall last year. Where's the use in working up a sweat before the whistle blows?"

By now a couple of sisters from Buckby were out too with matching black sails, skating figure-eights around each other, risking collision by a hair's breadth.

"Go on, Jay," urged young Daniel. "Show 'em."

Contestants from the other villages were starting to flood on to the glass as well, but Jason noticed how Max Tarnover was standing not so far away, merely observing these antics with a wise smile. Master Tarnover of Tuckerton, last year's victor at Atherton despite the drenching spray. . . . Taking his cue from this, and going one better, Jason ignored events on the glass and surveyed the crowds instead.

He noticed Uncle John Babbidge chatting intently to an Edgewood man over where the silver band was playing; which was hardly the quietest place to talk, so perhaps they were doing business. Meanwhile on the green beyond the band the children of five villages buzzed like flies from hoop-la to skittles to bran tub, to apples in buckets of water. And those grownups who weren't intent on the band or the practice runs or on something else, such as gossip, besieged the craft and produce stalls. There must be going on for a thousand people at the festival, and the village beyond looked deserted. Rugs and benches and half-barrels had even been set out near the edge of the glass for the old folk of Tuckerton.

As the band lowered their instruments for a breather after finishing *The Floral Dance*, a bleat of panic cut across the chatter of many voices. A farmer had just vaulted into a tiny sheep-pen where a lamb almost as

large as its shorn, protesting dam was ducking beneath her to suckle and hide. Laughing, the farmer hauled it out and hoisted it by its neck and back legs to guess its weight, and maybe win a prize.

And now Jason's mother was threading her way through the crowd, chewing the remnants of a pasty.

"Best of luck, son!" She grinned.

"I've told you, Mum," protested Jason. "It's bad luck to say 'good luck'."

"Oh, luck yourself! What's luck, anyway?" She prodded her Adam's apple as if to press the last piece of meat and potatoes on its way down, though really she was indicating that her throat was bare of any charm or amulet.

"I suppose I'd better make a move." Kicking off his sandals, Jason sat to lace up his skates. With a helping hand from Daniel he rose and stood knock-kneed, blades cutting into the turf while the boy hoisted the sails across his shoulders. Jason gripped the leather straps on the bowstring and the spine-spar.

"Okay." He wagged the sail this way and that. "Let's go, then. I won't blow away."

But just as he was about to proceed down on to the glass, out upon the glass less than a hundred yards away a slow bird appeared.

It materialized directly in front of one of the Buckby sisters. Unable to veer, she had no choice but to throw herself backwards. Crying out in frustration, and perhaps hurt by her fall, she skidded underneath the slow bird, sledging supine upon her now snapped and crumpled sail.

They were called slow birds because they flew through the air—at the stately pace of three feet per minute.

They looked a little like birds, too, though only a little. Their tubular metal bodies were rounded at the head and tapering to a finned point at the tail, with two stubby wings midway. Yet these wings could hardly have anything to do with suspending their bulk in the air; the girth of a bird was that of a horse, and its length twice that of a man lying full length. Perhaps those wings controlled orientation or trim.

In color they were a silvery grey; though this was only the color of their outer skin, made of a soft metal like lead. Quarter of an inch beneath this coating their inner skins were black and stiff as steel. The noses of the birds were all scored with at least a few scrape marks due to encounters

with obstacles down the years; slow birds always kept the same height above ground—underbelly level with a man's shoulders—and they would bank to avoid substantial buildings or mature trees, but any frailer obstructions they would push on through. Hence the individual patterns of scratches. However, a far easier way of telling them apart was by the graffiti carved on so many of their flanks; initials entwined in hearts, dates, place names, fragments of messages. These amply confirmed how very many slow birds there must be in all—something of which people could not otherwise have been totally convinced. For no one could keep track of a single slow bird. After each one had appeared—over hill, down dale, in the middle of a pasture or half way along a village street—it would fly onward slowly for any length of time between an hour and a day, covering any distance between a few score yards and a full mile. And vanish again. To reappear somewhere else unpredictably: far away or close by, maybe long afterwards or maybe soon.

Usually a bird would vanish, to reappear again.

Not always, though. Half a dozen times a year, within the confines of this particular island country, a slow bird would reach its journey's end.

It would destroy itself, and all the terrain around it for a radius of two and a half miles, fusing the landscape instantly into a sheet of glass. A flat, circular sheet of glass. A polarized, limited zone of annihilation. Scant yards beyond its rim a person might escape unharmed, only being deafened and dazzled temporarily.

Hitherto no slow bird had been known to explode so as to overlap an earlier sheet of glass. Consequently many towns and villages clung close to the borders of what had already been destroyed, and news of a fresh glass plain would cause farms and settlements to spring up there. Even so, the bulk of people still kept fatalistically to the old historic towns. They assumed that a slow bird wouldn't explode in their midst during their own lifetimes. And if it did, what would they know of it? Unless the glass happened merely to bisect a town—in which case, once the weeping and mourning was over, the remaining citizenry could relax and feel secure.

True, in the long term the whole country from coast to coast and from north to south would be a solid sheet of glass. Or perhaps it would merely be a checkerboard, of circles touching circles: a glass mosaic. With what in between? Patches of desert dust, if the climate dried up due to reflections from the glass. Or floodwater, swampland. But that day was still far distant: a hundred years away, two hundred, three. So people didn't worry too much. They had been used to this all their lives long, and their parents before them. Perhaps one day the slow birds would stop

coming. And going. And exploding. Just as they had first started, once. Certainly the situation was no different, by all accounts, anywhere else in the world. Only the seas were clear of slow birds. So maybe the human race would have to take to rafts one day. Though by then, with what would they build them? Meanwhile, people got by; and most had long ago given up asking why. For there was no answer.

The girl's sister helped her rise. No bones broken, it seemed. Only an injury to dignity; and to her sail.

The other skaters had all coasted to a halt and were staring resentfully at the bird in their midst. Its belly and sides were almost bare of graffiti; seeing this, a number of youths hastened on to the glass, clutching penknives, rusty nails and such. But an umpire waved them back angrily.

"Shoo! Be off with you!" His gaze seemed to alight on Jason, and for a fatuous moment Jason imagined that it was himself to whom the umpire was about to appeal; but the man called, "Master Tarnover!" instead, and Max Tarnover duck-waddled past then glided out over the glass, to confer.

Presently, the umpire cupped his hands. "We're delaying the start for half an hour," he bellowed. "Fair's fair: young lady ought to have a chance to fix her sail, seeing as it wasn't her fault."

Jason noted a small crinkle of amusement on Tarnover's face; for now either the other competitors would have to carry on prancing around tiring themselves with extra practice which none of them needed, or else troop off the glass for a recess and lose some psychological edge. In fact almost everyone opted for a break and some refreshments.

"Luck indeed!" snorted Mrs. Babbidge, as Max Tarnover clumped back their way.

Tarnover paused by Jason. "Frankly I'd say her sail's a wreck," he confided. "But what can you do? The Buckby lot would have been bitching on otherwise. 'Oh, she could have won. If she'd had ten minutes to fix it.' Bloody hunk of metal in the way." Tarnover ran a lordly eye over Jason's sail "What price skill, then?"

Daniel Babbidge regarded Tarnover with a mixture of hero worship and hostile partisanship on his brother's behalf. Jason himself only nodded and said, "Fair enough." He wasn't certain whether Tarnover was acting generously—or with patronizing arrogance. Or did this word in his ear mean that Tarnover actually saw Jason as a valid rival for the silver punch-bowl this year round?

Obviously young Daniel did not regard Jason's response as adequate. He piped up: "So where do *you* think the birds go, Master Tarnover, when they aren't here?"

A good question: quite unanswerable, but Max Tarnover would probably feel obliged to offer an answer if only to maintain his pose of worldly wisdom. Jason warmed to his brother, while Mrs. Babbidge, catching on, cuffed the boy softly.

"Now don't you go wasting Master Tarnover's time. Happen he hasn't given it a moment's thought, all his born days."

"Oh, but I have," Tarnover said.

"Well?" the boy insisted.

"Well . . . maybe they don't go anywhere at all."

Mrs. Babbidge chuckled, and Tarnover flushed.

"What I mean is, maybe they just stop being in one place then suddenly they're in the next place."

"If only you could skate like that!" Jason laughed. "Bit slow, though . . . Everyone would still pass you by at the last moment."

"They must go somewhere," young Dan said doggedly. "Maybe it's somewhere we can't see. Another sort of place, with other people. Maybe it's them that builds the birds."

"Look, freckleface, the birds don't come from Russ, or 'Merica, or anywhere else. So where's this other place?"

"Maybe it's right here, only we can't see it."

"And maybe pigs have wings." Tarnover looked about to march towards the cider and perry stall; but Mrs. Babbidge interposed herself smartly.

"Oh, as to that, I'm sure our sow Betsey couldn't fly, wings or no wings. Just hanging in the air like that, and so heavy."

"Weighed a bird recently, have you?"

"They look heavy, Master Tarnover."

Tarnover couldn't quite push his way past Mrs. Babbidge, not with his sail impeding him. He contented himself with staring past her, and muttering, "If we've nothing sensible to say about them, in my opinion it's better to shut up."

"But it isn't better," protested Daniel. "They're blowing the world up. Bit by bit. As though they're at war with us."

Jason felt humorously inventive. "Maybe that's it. Maybe these other people of Dan's are at war with us—only they forgot to mention it. And when they've glassed us all, they'll move in for the holidays. And skate happily for ever more."

"Damn long war, if that's so," growled Tarnover. "Been going on over a century now."

"Maybe that's why the birds fly so slowly," said Daniel. "What if a year to us is like an hour to those people? That's why the birds don't fall. They don't have time to."

Tarnover's expression was almost savage. "And what if the birds come only to punish us for our sins? What if they're simply a miraculous proof—"

"—that the Lord cares about us? And one day He'll forgive us? Oh goodness," and Mrs. Babbidge beamed, "surely you aren't one of *them*? A bright lad like you. Me, I don't even put candles in the window or tie knots in the bedsheets anymore to keep the birds away." She ruffled her younger son's mop of red hair. "Every one dies sooner or later, Dan. You'll get used to it, when you're properly grown up. When it's time to die, it's time to die."

Tarnover looked furiously put out; though young Daniel also seemed distressed in a different way.

"And when you're thirsty, it's time for a drink!" Spying an opening, and his opportunity, Tarnover sidled quickly around Mrs. Babbidge and strode off. She chuckled as she watched him go.

"That's put a kink in his sail!"

Forty-one other contestants, besides Jason and Tarnover, gathered between the starting flags, though not the girl who had fallen. Despite all best efforts she was out of the race, and sat morosely watching.

Then the Tuckerton umpire blew his whistle, and they were off.

The course was in the shape of a long bloomer loaf. First, it curved gently along the edge of the glass for three quarters of a mile, then bent sharply around in a half circle on to the straight, returning towards Tuckerton. At the end of the straight, another sharp half circle brought it back to the starting—and finishing—line. Three circuits in all were to be skate-sailed before the victory whistle blew. Much more than this, and the lag between leaders and stragglers could lead to confusion.

By the first turn Jason was ahead of the rest of the field, and all his practice since last year was paying off. His skates raced over the glass. The breeze thrust him convincingly. As he rounded the end of the loaf, swinging his sail to a new pitch, he noted Max Tarnover hanging back in fourth place. Determined to increase his lead, Jason leaned so close to the flag on the entry to the straight that he almost tipped it. Compensating, he came poorly on to the straight, losing a few yards. By the time Jason swept over the finishing line for the first time, to cheers from Atherton villagers, Tarnover was in third position; though he was making no very strenuous effort to overhaul, Jason realized that Tarnover was simply letting him act as pacemaker.

But a skate-sailing race wasn't the same as a foot race, where a pacemaker was generally bound to drop back eventually. Jason pressed on. Yet by the second crossing of the line Tarnover was ten yards behind, moving without apparent effort as though he and his sail and the wind and the glass were one. Noting Jason's glance, Tarnover grinned and put on a small burst of speed to push the front-runner to even greater efforts. And as he entered on the final circuit Jason also noted the progress of the slow bird, off to his left, now midway between the long curve and the straight, heading in the general direction of Edgewood. Even the laggards ought to clear the final straight before the thing got in their way, he calculated.

This brief distraction was a mistake. Tarnover was even closer behind him now, his sail pitched at an angle which must have made his wrists ache. Already he was drifting aside to overhaul Jason. And at this moment Jason grasped how he could win: by letting Tarnover think that he was pushing Jason beyond his capacity—so that Tarnover would be fooled into overexerting himself too soon.

"Can't catch me!" Jason called into the wind, guessing that Tarnover would misread this as braggadocio and assume that Jason wasn't really thinking ahead. At the same time Jason slackened his own pace slightly, hoping that his rival would fail to notice, since this was at odds with his own boast. Pretending to look panicked, he let Tarnover overtake—and saw how Tarnover continued to trip his sail strenuously even though he was actually moving a little slower than before. Without realizing it, Tarnover had his angle wrong; he was using unnecessary wrist action.

Tarnover was in the lead now. Immediately all psychological pressure lifted from Jason. With ease and grace he stayed a few yards behind, just where he could benefit from the 'eye' of air in Tarnover's wake. And thus he remained till half way down the final straight, feeling like a kestrel

hanging in the sky with a mere twitch of its wings before swooping.

He held back; held back. Then suddenly changing the cant of his sail he did swoop—into the lead again.

It was a mistake. It had been a mistake all along. For as Jason sailed past, Tarnover actually laughed. Jerking his brown and orange silk to an easier, more efficient pitch, Tarnover began to pump his legs, skating like a demon. Already he was ahead again. By five yards. By ten. And entering the final curve.

As Jason tried to catch up in the brief time remaining, he knew how he had been fooled; though the knowledge came too late. So cleverly had Tarnover fixed Jason's mind on the stance of the sails, by holding his own in such a way—a way, too, which deliberately created that convenient eye of air—that Jason had quite neglected the contribution of his legs and skates, taking this for granted, failing to monitor it from moment to moment. It only took moments to recover and begin pumping his own legs too, but those few moments were fatal. Jason crossed the finish line one yard behind last year's victor; who was this year's victor too.

As he slid to a halt, bitter with chagrin, Jason was well aware that it was up to him to be gracious in defeat rather than let Tarnover seize that advantage, too.

He called out, loud enough for everyone to hear: "Magnificent, Max! Splendid skating! You really caught me on the hop there."

Tarnover smiled for the benefit of all onlookers.

"What a noisy family you Babbidges are," he said softly; and skated off to be presented with the silver punch-bowl again.

Much later that afternoon, replete with roast pork and awash with Old Codger Ale, Jason was waving an empty beer mug about as he talked to Bob Marchant in the midst of a noisy crowd. Bob, who had fallen so spectacularly the year before. Maybe that was why he had skated diffidently today and been one of the laggards.

The sky was heavily overcast, and daylight too was failing. Soon the homeward trek would have to start.

One of Jason's drinking and skating partners from Atherton, Sam Partridge, thrust his way through.

"Jay! That brother of yours: he's out on the glass. He's scrambled up on the back of the bird. He's riding it."

"What?"

Jason sobered rapidly, and followed Partridge with Bob Marchant tagging along behind.

Sure enough, a couple of hundred yards away in the gloaming Daniel was perched astride the slow bird. His red hair was unmistakable. By now a lot of other people were beginning to take notice and point him out. There were some ragged cheers, and a few angry protests.

Jason clutched Partridge's arm. "Somebody must have helped him up. Who was it?"

"Haven't the foggiest. That boy needs a good walloping."

"Daniel *Babbidge!*" Mrs. Babbidge was calling nearby. She too had seen. Cautiously she advanced on to the glass, wary of losing her balance.

Jason and company were soon at her side. "It's all right, Mum," he assured her. "I'll fetch the little . . . perisher."

Courteously Bob Marchant offered his arm and escorted Mrs. Babbidge back on the rough ground again. Jason and Partridge stepped flat-foot out across the vitrified surface accompanied by at least a dozen curious spectators.

"Did anyone spot who helped him up?" Jason demanded of them. No one admitted it.

When the group was a good twenty yards from the bird, everyone but Jason halted. Pressing on alone, Jason pitched his voice so that only the boy would hear.

"Slide off," he ordered grimly. "I'll catch you. Right monkey you've made of your mother and me."

"No," whispered Daniel. He clung tight, hands splayed like suckers, knees pressed to the flanks of the bird as though he was a jockey. "I'm going to see where it goes."

"Goes? Hell, I'm not going to waste time arguing. Get down!" Jason gripped an ankle and tugged, but this action only served to pull him up against the bird. Beside Dan's foot a heart with the entwined initials 'ZB' and 'EF' was carved. Turning away, Jason shouted, "Give me a hand, you lot! Come on someone, bunk me up!"

Nobody volunteered, not even Partridge.

"It won't bite you! There's no harm in touching it. Any kid knows that." Angrily he flat-footed back towards them. "Damn it all, Sam."

So now Partridge did shuffle forward, and a couple of other men too. But then they halted, gaping. Their expression puzzled Jason momentarily—till Sam Partridge gestured; till Jason swung round.

The air behind was empty.

The slow bird had departed suddenly. Taking its rider with it.

Half an hour later only the visitors from Atherton and their hosts remained on Tuckerton green. The Buckby, Edgewood and Hopperton contingents had set off for home. Uncle John was still consoling a snivelling Mrs. Babbidge. Most faces in the surrounding crowd looked sympathetic, though there was a certain air of resentment, too, among some Tuckerton folk that a boy's prank had cast this black shadow over their Mayday festival.

Jason glared wildly around the onlookers. "Did nobody see who helped my brother up?" he cried. "Couldn't very well have got up himself, could he? Where's Max Tarnover? Where is he?"

"You aren't accusing Master Tarnover, by any chance?" growled a beefy farmer with a large wart on his cheek. "Sour grapes, Master Babbidge! Sour grapes is what that sounds like, and we don't like the taste of those here."

"Where is he, dammit?"

Uncle John laid a hand on his nephew's arm. "Jason, lad. Hush. This isn't helping your Mum."

But then the crowd parted, and Tarnover sauntered through, still holding the silver punch-bowl he had won.

"Well, Master Babbidge?" he enquired. "I hear you want a word with me."

"Did you see who helped my brother onto that bird? Well, did you?"

"I didn't see," replied Tarnover coolly.

It had been the wrong question, as Jason at once realized. For if Tarnover had done the deed himself, how could he possibly have watched himself do it?

"Then did you—"

"Hey up," objected the same farmer. "You've asked him, and you've had his answer."

"And I imagine your brother has had his answer too," said Tarnover. "I hope he's well satisfied with it. Naturally I offer my heartfelt sympathies to Mrs. Babbidge. If indeed the boy *has* come to any harm. Can't be sure of that, though, can we?"

"Course we can't!"

Jason tensed, and Uncle John tightened his grip on him. "No, lad. There's no use."

It was a sad and quiet long walk homeward that evening for the three remaining Babbidges, though a fair few Atherton folk behind sang blithely and tipsily, nonetheless. Occasionally Jason looked around for Sam Partridge, but Sam Partridge seemed to be successfully avoiding them.

The next day, May the second, Mrs. Babbidge rallied and declared it to be a "sorting out" day; which meant a day for handling all Daniel's clothes and storybooks and old toys lovingly before setting them to one side out of sight. Jason himself she packed off to his job at the sawmill, with a flea in his ear for hanging around her like a whipped hound.

And as Jason worked at trimming planks that day the same shamed, angry frustrated thoughts skated round and round a single circuit in his head:

"In my book he's a murderer . . . You don't give a baby a knife to play with. He was cool as a cucumber afterwards. Not shocked, no. Smug . . ."

Yet what could be done about it? The bird might have hung around for hours more. Except that it hadn't. . .

Set out on a quest to find Daniel? But how? And where? Birds dodged around. Here, there and everywhere. No rhyme or reason to it. So what a useless quest that would be!

A quest to prove that Dan was alive. And if he were alive, then Tarnover hadn't killed him.

"In my book he's a murderer . . ." Jason's thoughts churned on impotently. It was like skating with both feet tied together.

Three days later a slow bird was sighted out Edgeway way. Jim Mitchum, the Edgewood thatcher, actually sought Jason out at the sawmill to bring him the news. He'd been coming over to do a job, anyway.

No doubt his visit was an act of kindness, but it filled Jason with guilt

quite as much as it boosted his morale. For now he was compelled to go and see for himself, when obviously there was nothing whatever to discover. Downing tools, he hurried home to collect his skates and sail, and sped over the glass to Edgewood.

The bird was still there; but it was a different bird. There was no carved heart with the love-tangled initials 'ZB' and 'EF'.

And four days after that, mention came from Buckby of a bird spotted a few miles west of the village on the main road to Harborough. This time Jason borrowed a horse and rode. But the mention had come late; the bird had flown on a day earlier. Still, he felt obliged to search the area of the sighting for a fallen body or some other sign.

And the week after that a bird vanished only a mile from Atherton itself; this one vanished even as Jason arrived on the scene . . .

Then one night Jason went down to the Wheatsheaf. It was several weeks, in fact, since he had last been in the alehouse; now he meant to get drunk, at the long bar under the horse brasses.

Sam Partridge, Ned Darrow and Frank Yardley were there boozing; and an hour or so later Ned Darrow was offering beery advice.

"Look, Jay, where's the use in you dashing off every time someone spots a ruddy bird? Keep that up and you'll make a ruddy fool of yourself. And what if a bird pops up in Tuckerton? Bound to happen sooner or later. Going to rush off there too, are you, with your tongue hanging out?"

"All this time you're taking off work," said Frank Yardley. "You'll end up losing the job. Get on living is my advice."

"Don't know about that," said Sam Partridge unexpectedly. "Does seem to me as man ought to get his own back. Supposing Tarnover did do the dirty on the Babbidges—"

"What's there to suppose about it?" Jason broke in angrily.

"Easy on, Jay. I was going to say as Babbidges are Atherton people. So he did the dirty on us all, right?"

"Thanks to some people being a bit slow in their help."

Sam flushed. "Now don't you start attacking everyone right and left. No one's perfect. Just remember who your real friends are, that's all."

"Oh, I'll remember, never fear."

Frank inclined an empty glass from side to side. "Right. Whose round is it?"

One thing led to another, and Jason had a thick head the next morning.

In the evening Ned banged on the Babbidge door.

"Bird on the glass, Sam says to tell you," he announced. "How about going for a spin to see it?"

"I seem to recall last night you said I was wasting my time."

"Ay, running around all over the country. But this is just for a spin. Nice evening, like. Mind, if you don't want to bother . . . Then we can all have a few jars in the Wheatsheaf afterwards."

The lads must really have missed him over the past few weeks. Quickly Jason collected his skates and sail.

"But what about your supper?" asked his mother. "Sheep's head broth."

"Oh, it'll keep, won't it? I might as well have a pasty or two in the Wheatsheaf."

"Happen it's better you get out and enjoy yourself," she said. "I'm quite content. I've got things to mend."

Twenty minutes later Jason, Sam, and Ned were skimming over the glass two miles out. The sky was crimson with banks of stratus, and a river of gold ran clear along the horizon: foul weather tomorrow, but a glory this evening. The glassy expanse flowed with red and gold reflections: a lake of blood, fire, and molten metal. They did not at first spot the other solitary sail-skater, nor he them, till they were quite close to the slow bird.

Sam noticed first. "Who's that, then?"

The other sail was brown and orange. Jason recognized it easily. "It's Tarnover!"

"Now's your chance to find out, then," said Ned.

"Do you mean that?"

Ned grinned. "Why not? Could be fun. Let's take him."

Pumping their legs, the three sail-skaters sped apart to outflank Tarnover—who spied them and began to turn. All too sharply, though. Or else he may have run into a slick of water on the glass. To Jason's joy Max Tarnover, champion of the five villages, skidded.

They caught him. This done, it didn't take the strength of an ox to stop

a skater from going anywhere else, however much he kicked and struggled. But Jason hit Tarnover on the jaw, knocking him senseless.

"What the hell you do that for?" asked Sam, easing Tarnover's fall on the glass.

"How else do we get him up on the bird?"

Sam stared at Jason, then nodded slowly.

It hardly proved the easiest operation to hoist a limp and heavy body on to a slowly moving object while standing on a slippery surface; but after removing their skates they succeeded. Before too long Tarnover lay sprawled atop, legs dangling. Quickly with his pocket knife Jason cut the hemp cord from Tarnover's sail and bound his ankles together, running the tether tightly underneath the bird.

Presently Tarnover awoke, and struggled groggily erect. He groaned, rocked sideways, recovered his balance.

"Babbidge . . . Partridge, Ned Darrow. . . ? What the hell are you up to?"

Jason planted hands on hips. "Oh, we're just playing a little prank, same as you did on my brother Dan. Who's missing now; maybe forever, thanks to you."

"I never—"

"Admit it, then we might cut you down."

"And happen we mightn't," said Ned. "Not till the Wheatsheaf closes. But look on the bright side: happen we might."

Tarnover's legs twitched as he tested the bonds. He winced. "I honestly meant your brother no harm."

Sam smirked. "Nor do we mean you any. Ain't our fault if a bird decides to fly off. Anyway, only been here an hour or so. Could easily be here all night. Right, lads?"

"Right," said Ned. "And I'm thirsty. Race you? Last ones buys?"

"He's admitted he did it," said Jason. "You heard him."

"Look, I'm honestly very sorry if—"

"Shut up," said Sam. "You can stew for a while, seeing as how you've made the Babbidges stew. You can think about how sorry you really are." Partridge hoisted his sail.

It was not exactly how Jason had envisioned his revenge. This seemed like an anticlimax. Yet, to Tarnover no doubt it was serious enough. The champion was sweating slightly . . . Jason hoisted his sail, too. Presently the men skated away . . . to halt by unspoken agreement a quarter of a mile away. They stared back at Tarnover's little silhouette upon his metal steed.

"Now if it was me," observed Sam, "I'd shuffle myself along till I fell off the front. . . Rub you a bit raw, but that's how to do it."

"No need to come back, really," said Ned. "Hey, what's he trying?"

The silhouette had ducked. Perhaps Tarnover had panicked and wasn't thinking clearly, but it *looked* as if he was trying to lean over far enough to unfasten the knot beneath, or free one of his ankles. Suddenly the distant figure inverted itself. It swung right round the bird, and Tarnover's head and chest were hanging upside down, his arms flapping. Or perhaps Tarnover had hoped the cord would snap under his full weight; but snap it did not. And once he was stuck in that position there was no way he could recover himself upright again, or do anything about inching along to the front of the bird.

Ned whistled. "He's messed himself up now, and no mistake. He's ruddy crucified himself."

Jason hesitated before saying it: "Maybe we ought to go back? I mean, a man can die hanging upside-down too long . . . Can't he?" Suddenly the whole episode seemed unclean, unsatisfactory.

"Go back?" Sam Partridge fairly snarled at him. "You were the big mouth last night. And whose idea was it to tie him to the bird? You wanted him taught a lesson, and he's being taught one. We're only trying to oblige you, Jay."

"Yes, I appreciate that."

"You made enough fuss about it. He isn't going to wilt like a bunch of flowers in the time it takes us to swallow a couple of pints."

And so they skated on, back to the Wheatsheaf in Atherton.

At ten thirty, somewhat the worse for wear, the three men spilled out of the alehouse into Sheaf Street. A quarter moon was dodging from rift to rift in the cloudy sky, shedding little light.

"I'm for bed," said Sam. "Let the sod wriggle his way off."

"And who cares if he don't?" said Ned. "That way, nobody'll know. Who

wants an enemy for life? Do you, Jay? This way you can get on with things. Happen Tarnover'll bring your brother back from wherever it is."

Shouldering his sail and swinging his skates, Ned wandered off up Sheaf Street.

"But," said Jason. He felt as though he had blundered into a midden. There was a reek of sordidness about what had taken place. The memory of Tarnover hanging upside-down had tarnished him.

"But what?" said Sam.

Jason made a show of yawning. "Nothing. See you." And he set off homeward.

But as soon as he was out of sight of Sam he slipped down through Butcher's Row in the direction of the glass alone. It was dark out there with no stars and only an occasional hint of moonlight, yet the breeze was steady and there was nothing to trip over on the glass. The bird wouldn't have moved more than a hundred yards. Jason made good speed.

The slow bird was still there. But Tarnover wasn't with it; its belly was barren of any hanged man.

As Jason skated to a halt, to look closer, figures arose in the darkness from where they had been lying flat upon the glass, covered by their sails. Six figures. Eight. Nine. All had lurked within two or three hundred yards of the bird, though not too close—nor any in the direction of Atherton. They had left a wide corridor open, which now they closed.

As the Tuckerton men moved in on him, Jason stood still, knowing that he had no chance.

Max Tarnover skated up, accompanied by that same beefy farmer with the wart.

"I did come back for you," began Jason.

The farmer spoke, but not to Jason. "Did he now? That's big of him. Could have saved his time, what with Tim Earnshaw happening along—when Master Tarnover was gone a long time. So what's to be done with him, eh?"

"Tit for tat, I'd say," said another voice.

"Let him go and look for his kid brother," offered a third. "Instead of sending other folk on his errands. What a nerve."

Tarnover himself said nothing; he just stood in the night silently.

So, presently, Jason was raised on to the back of the bird and his feet were tied tightly under it. But his wrists were bound together too, and for good measure the cord was linked through his belt.

Within a few minutes all the skaters had sped away towards Tuckerton.

Jason sat. Remembering Sam's words he tried to inch forward, but with both hands fastened to his waist this proved impossible; he couldn't gain purchase. Besides, he was scared of losing his balance as Tarnover had.

He sat and thought of his mother. Maybe she would grow alarmed when he didn't come home. Maybe she would go out and rouse Uncle John . . . And maybe she had gone to bed already.

But maybe she would wake in the night and glance into his room and send help. With fierce concentration he tried to project thoughts and images of himself at her, two miles away.

An hour wore on, then two; or so he supposed from the moving of the moon-crescent. He wished he could slump forward and sleep. That might be best; then he wouldn't know anything. He still felt drunk enough to pass out, even with his face pressed against metal. But he might easily slide to one side or the other in his sleep.

How could his mother survive a double loss? It seemed as though a curse had descended on the Babbidge family. But of course that curse had a human name; and the name was Max Tarnover. So for a while Jason damned him and imagined retribution by all the villagers of Atherton. A bloody feud. Cottages burnt. Perhaps a rape. Deaths even. No Mayday festival ever again.

But would Sam and Ned speak up? And would Atherton folk be sufficiently incensed, sufficiently willing to destroy the harmony of the five villages in a world where other things were so unsure? Particularly as some less than sympathetic soul might say that Jason, Sam, and Ned had started it all.

Jason was so involved in imagining a future feud between Atherton and Tuckerton that he almost forgot he was astride a slow bird. There was no sense of motion, no feeling of going anywhere. When he recollected where he was, it actually came as a shock.

He was riding a bird.

But for how long?

It had been around, what, six hours now? A bird could stay for a whole day. In which case he had another eighteen hours left to be rescued in. Or if it only stayed for half a day, that would take him through to morning.

Just.

He found himself wondering what was underneath the metal skin of the bird. Something which could turn five miles of landscape into a sheet of glass, certainly. But other things too. Things that let it ignore gravity. Things that let it dodge in and out of existence. A brain of some kind, even?

"Can you hear me, bird?" he asked it. Maybe no one had ever spoken to a slow bird before.

The slow bird did not answer.

Maybe it couldn't, but maybe it could hear him, even so. Maybe it could obey orders.

"Don't disappear with me on your back," he told it. "Stay here. Keep on flying just like this."

But since it was doing just that already, he had no idea whether it was obeying him or not.

"Land, bird. Settle down onto the glass. Lie still."

It did not. He felt stupid. He knew nothing at all about the bird. Nobody did. Yet somewhere, someone knew. Unless the slow birds did indeed come from God, as miracles, to punish. To make men God-fearing. But why should a God want to be feared? Unless God was insane, in which case the birds might well come from Him.

They were something irrational, something from elsewhere, something which couldn't be understood by their victims any more than an ant colony understood the gardener's boot, exposing the white eggs to the sun and the sparrows.

Maybe something had entered the seas from elsewhere the previous century, something that didn't like land dwellers. Any of them. People or sheep, birds or worms or plants ... It didn't seem likely. Salt water would rust steel, but for the first time in his life Jason thought about it intently.

"Bird, what are you? Why are you here?" Why, he thought, is anything here? Why is there a world and sky and stars? Why shouldn't there simply be nothing for ever and ever?

Perhaps that was the nature of death: nothing for ever and ever. And one's life was like a slow bird. Appearing then vanishing, with nothing before and nothing after.

An immeasurable period of time later, dawn began to streak the sky behind him, washing it from black to grey. The greyness advanced slowly

overhead as thick clouds filtered the light of the rising but hidden sun. Soon there was enough illumination to see clear all around. It must be five o'clock. Or six. But the grey glass remained blankly empty.

Who am I? wondered Jason, calm and still. Why am I conscious of a world? Why do people have minds, and think thoughts? For the first time in his life he felt that he was really thinking—and thinking had no outcome. It led nowhere.

He was, he realized, preparing himself to die. Just as all the land would die, piece by piece, fused into glass. Then no one would think thoughts any more, so that it wouldn't matter if a certain Jason Babbidge had ceased thinking at half past six one morning late in May. After all, the same thing happened every night when you went to sleep, didn't it? You stopped thinking. Perhaps everything would be purer and cleaner afterwards. Less untidy, less fretful: a pure ball of glass. In fact, not fretful at all, even if all the stars in the sky crashed into each other, even if the earth was swallowed by the sun. Silence, forever: once there was no one about to hear.

Maybe this was the message of the slow birds. Yet people only carved their initials upon them. And hearts. And the names of places which had been vitrified in a flash; or else which were going to be.

I'm becoming a philosopher, thought Jason in wonder.

He must have shifted into some hyperconscious state of mind, full of lucid clarity, though without immediate awareness of his surroundings, for he was not fully aware that help had arrived until the cord binding his ankles was cut and his right foot thrust up abruptly, toppling him off the other side of the bird into waiting arms.

Sam Patridge, Ned Darrow, Frank Yardley, and Uncle John, and Brian Sefton from the sawmill—who ducked under the bird brandishing a knife, and cut the other cord to free his wrists.

They retreated quickly from the bird, pulling Jason with them. He resisted feebly. He stretched an arm towards the bird.

"It's all right, lad," Uncle John soothed him.

"No, I want to *go*," he protested.

"Eh?"

At that moment the slow bird, having hung around long enough, vanished; and Jason stared at where it had been, speechless.

In the end his friends and uncle had to lead him away from that

featureless spot on the glass, as though he was an idiot, someone touched by imbecility.

But Jason did not long remain speechless. Presently he began to teach. Or preach. One or the other. And people listened; at first in Atherton, then in other places too.

He had learned wisdom from the slow bird, people said of him. He had communed with the bird during the night's vigil on the glass.

His doctrine of nothingness and silence spread, taking root in fertile soil, where there was soil remaining rather than glass—which was in most places, still. A paradox, perhaps: how eloquently he spoke—about being silent! But in so doing he seemed to make the silence of the glass lakes sing; and to this people listened with a new ear.

Jason traveled throughout the whole island. And this was another paradox, for what he taught was a kind of passivity, a blissful waiting for a death that was more than merely personal, a death which was also the death of the sun and stars and of all existence, a cosmic death which transfigured individual mortality. And sometimes he even sat on the back of a bird that happened by, to speak to a crowd—as though chancing fate or daring, begging the bird to take him away. But he never sat for more than an hour, then he would scramble down, trembling but quietly radiant. So besides being known as "The Silent Prophet," he was also known as "The Man who rides the Slow Birds." On balance, it could have been said that he worked great psychological good for the communities that survived; and his words even spread overseas. His mother died proud of him—so he thought—though there was always an element of wistful reserve in her attitude . . .

Many years later, when Jason Babbidge was approaching sixty, and still no bird had ever borne him away, he settled back in Atherton in his old home—to which pilgrims of silence would come, bringing prosperity to the village and particularly to the Wheatsheaf; managed now by the daughter of the previous landlord.

And every Mayday the skate-sailing festival was still held, but now always on the glass at Atherton. No longer was it a race and a competition; since in the end the race of life could not be won. Instead it had become a pageant, a glass ballet, a re-enactment of the events of many years ago—a passion play performed by the four remaining villages. Tuckerton and all its folk had been glassed ten years before by a bird

which destroyed itself so that the circle of annihilation exactly touched that edge of the glass where Tuckerton had stood till then.

One morning, the day before the festival, a knock sounded on Jason's door. His housekeeper, Martha Prestidge, was out shopping in the village so Jason answered.

A boy stood there. With red hair, and freckles.

For a moment Jason did not recognize the boy. But then he saw that it was Daniel. Daniel, unchanged. Or maybe grown up a little. Maybe a year older.

"Dan . . . ?"

The boy surveyed Jason bemusedly: his balding crown, his sagging girth, his now spindly legs, and the heavy stick with a stylized bird's head on which he leaned, gripping it with a liver-spotted hand.

"Jay," he said after a moment, "I've come back."

"Back? But"

"I know what the birds are now! They *are* weapons. Missiles. Tens and hundreds of thousands of them. There's a war going on. But it's like a game as well: a board game run by machines. Machines that think. It's only been going on for a few days in their time. The missiles shunt to and fro through time to get to their destination. But they can't shunt in the time of that world, because of cause and effect. So here's where they do their shunting. In our world. The other possibility-world."

"This is nonsense. I won't listen."

"But you must, Jay! It can be stopped for us before it's too late. I know how. Both sides can interfere with each other's missiles and explode them out of sight—that's here—if they can find them fast enough. But the war over there's completely out of control. There's a winning pattern to it, but this only matters to the machines any longer, and they're buried away underground. They build the birds at a huge rate with material from the Earth's crust, and launch them into other-time automatically."

"Stop it, Dan."

"I fell off the bird over there—but I fell into a lake, so I wasn't killed, only hurt. There are still some pockets of land left, around the Bases. They patched me up, the people there. They're finished, in another few hours of their time—though it's dozens of years to us. I brought them great hope, because it meant that all life isn't finished. Just theirs. Life can go on. What we have to do is build a machine that will stop their machines

finding the slow birds over here. By making interference in the air. There are waves. Like waves of light, but you can't see them."

"You're raving."

"Then the birds will still shunt here. But harmlessly. Without glassing us. And in a hundred years time, or a few hundred, they'll even stop coming at all, because the winning pattern will be all worked out by then. One of the war machines will give up, because it lost the game. Oh, I know it ought to be able to give up right now! But there's an element of the irrational programmed into the machines' brains too, so they don't give up too soon. When they do, everyone will be long dead there on land—and some surviving people think the war machines will start glassing the ocean floor as a final strategy before they're through. But we can build an air-wave-maker. They've locked the knowledge in my brain. It'll take us a few years to mine the right metals and tool up and provide a power source ..."

Young Daniel ran out of breath briefly. He gasped. "They had a prototype slow bird. They sat me on it and sent me into other-time again. They managed to guide it. It emerged just ten miles from here. So I walked home."

"Prototype? Air-waves? Power source? What are these?"

"I can tell you."

"Those are just words. Fanciful babble. Oh, for this babble of the world to still itself!"

"Just give me time, and I'll—"

"Time? You desire time? The mad ticking of men's minds instead of the great pure void of eternal silence? You reject acceptance? You want us to swarm forever aimlessly, deafening ourselves with our noisy chatter?"

"Look ... I suppose you've had a long, tough life, Jay. Maybe I shouldn't have come here first."

"Oh, but you should indeed, my impetuous fool of a brother. And I do not believe my life has been ill-spent."

Daniel tapped his forehead. "It's all in here. But I'd better get it down on paper. Make copies and spread it around—just in case Atherton gets glassed. Then somebody else will know how to build the transmitter. And life can go on. Over there they think maybe the human race is the only life in the whole universe. So we have a duty to go on existing. Only, the others have destroyed themselves arguing about which way to exist. But we've still got time enough. We can build ships to sail through space to the stars.

I know a bit about that too. I tell you, my visit brought them real joy in their last hours, to know this was all still possible after all."

"Oh, Dan." And Jason groaned. Patriarch-like, he raised his staff and brought it crashing down on Daniel's skull.

He had imagined that he mightn't really notice the blood amidst Daniel's bright red hair. But he did.

The boy's body slumped in the doorway. With an effort Jason dragged it inside, then with an even greater effort up the oak stairs to the attic where Martha Prestidge hardly ever went. The corpse might begin to smell after a while, but it could be wrapped up in old blankets and such.

However, the return of his housekeeper down below distracted Jason. Leaving the body on the floor he hastened out, turning the key in the lock and pocketing it.

It had become the custom to invite selected guests back to the Babbidge house following the Mayday festivities, so Martha Prestidge would be busy all the rest of the day cleaning and cooking and setting the house to rights. As was the way of the housekeepers, she hinted that Jason would get under her feet, so off he walked down to the glass and out onto its perfect flatness to stand and meditate. Villagers and visitors spying the lone figure out there nodded gladly. Their prophet was at peace, presiding over their lives. And over their deaths.

The skate-sailing masque, the passion play, was enacted as brightly and gracefully as ever the next day.

It was May the third before Jason could bring himself to go up to the attic again, carrying sacking and cord. He unlocked the door.

But apart from a dark stain of dried blood the floorboards were bare. There was only the usual jumble stacked around the walls. The room was empty of any corpse. And the window was open.

So he hadn't killed Daniel after all. The boy had recovered from the blow. Wild emotions stirred in Jason, disturbing his usual composure. He stared out of the window as though he might discover the boy lying below on the cobbles. But of Daniel there was no sign. He searched around Atherton like a haunted man, asking no questions but looking everywhere piercingly. Finding no clue, he ordered a horse and cart to take him to Edgewood. From there he traveled all around the glass, through Buckby and Hopperton; and now he asked wherever he went,

"Have you seen a boy with red hair?" The villagers told each other that Jason Babbidge had had another vision.

As well he might have, for within the year from far away news began to spread of a new teacher, with a new message. This new teacher was only a youth, but he had also ridden a slow bird—much farther than the Silent Prophet had ever ridden one.

However, it seemed that this young teacher was somewhat flawed, since he couldn't remember all the details of his message, of what he had been told to say. Sometimes he would beat his head with his fists in frustration, till it seemed that blood would flow. Yet perversely this touch of theatre appealed to some restless, troublesome streak in his audiences. They believed him because they saw his anguish, and it mirrored their own suppressed anxieties.

Jason Babbidge spoke zealously to oppose the rebellious new ideas, exhausting himself. All the philosophical beauty he had brought into the dying world seemed to hang in the balance; and reluctantly he called for a "crusade" against the new teacher, to defend his own dream of Submission.

Two years later, he might well have wished to call his words back, for their consequence was that people were tramping across the countryside in between the zones of annihilation armed with pitchforks and billhooks, cleavers and sickles. Villages were burnt; many hundreds were massacred; and there were rapes—all of which seemed to recall an earlier nightmare of Jason's from before the time of his revelation.

In the third year of this seemingly endless skirmish between the Pacificists and the Survivalists Jason died, feeling bitter beneath his cloak of serenity; and by way of burial his body was roped to a slow bird. Loyal mourners accompanied the bird in silent procession until it vanished hours later. A short while after that, quite suddenly at the Battle of Ashton Glass, it was all over, with victory for the Survivalists led by their young red-haired champion, who it was noted bore a striking resemblance to old Jason Babbidge, so that it almost seemed as though two basic principles of existence had been at contest in the world: two aspects of the selfsame being, two faces of one man.

Fifty years after that, by which time a full third of the land was glass and the climate was worsening, the Survival College in Ashton at last invented the promised machine; and from then on slow birds continued to

appear and fly and disappear as before, but now none of them exploded.

And a hundred years after that all the slow birds vanished from the Earth. Somewhere, a war was over, logically and finally.

But by then, from an Earth four-fifths of whose land surface was desert or swamp—in between necklaces of barren shining glass—the first starship would arise into orbit.

It would be called *Slow Bird*. For it would fly to the stars, slowly. Slowly in human terms; two generations it would take. But that was comparatively fast.

A second starship would follow it; called *Daniel*.

Though after that massive and exhausting effort, there would be no more starships. The remaining human race would settle down to cultivate what remained of their garden in amongst the dunes and floods and acres of glass. Whether either starship would find a new home as habitable even as the partly glassed Earth, would be merely an article of faith.

On his deathbed, eighty years of age, in Ashton College lay Daniel who had never admitted to a family name.

The room was almost indecently overcrowded, though well if warmly ventilated by a wind whipping over Ashton Glass, and bright-lit by the silvery blaze reflecting from that vitrified expanse.

The dying old man on the bed beneath a single silken sheet was like a bird himself now: shrivelled with thin bones, a beak of a nose, beady eyes, and a rooster's comb of red hair on his head.

He raised a frail hand as if to summon those closest even closer. Actually it was to touch the old wound in his skull which had begun to ache fiercely of late as though it was about to burst open or cave in, unlocking the door of memory—notwithstanding that no one now needed the key hidden there, since his Collegians had discovered it independently, given the knowledge that it existed.

Faces leaned over him: confident, dedicated faces.

"They've stopped exploding, then?" he asked, forgetfully.

"Yes, yes, years ago!" they assured him.

"And the stars—?"

"We'll build the ships. We'll discover how."

His hand sank back on to the sheet. "Call one of them—"

"Yes?"

"Daniel. Will you?"

They promised him this.

"That way . . . my spirit..."

"Yes?"

". . . will fly . . ."

"Yes?"

". . . into the silence of space."

This slightly puzzled the witnesses of his death; for they could not know that Daniel's last thought was that, when the day of the launching came, he and his brother might at last be reconciled.