Olive Senior

The Secret of Crusoe's Parrot

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

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

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

Parrot is all pretence, mimicry,

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

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

the poor creature of his illusion of mastery, and myself of some good jokes. Such as his thinking

I'm alone and celibate. Poor Poll!

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

I let him teach me speech for much I forget between visitors. And granted that such speech as I usually imbibe — from cannibals, pirates, buccaneers, delirious castaways, is not appropriate for his Christian ears. Though sometimes when I'm angry or for mischief
Calabash

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

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

His servant, indeed. When that other creature came, the one called Friday, I almost left him (that one was a quick study. Knew exactly how to please). I stayed because being 'Crusoe's parrot' does give me status among the poor dumb creatures in the trees. Now their teacher is me.

I had thought of peopling the island with educated parrots and sweet airs. But I laid off the teaching when I found I could no longer stand their screeching. Since he arrived, my hearing is not what it used to be. I find the senseless cries of those uncivilized birds unbearable — as they find talkative me. Once he goes, I'll have to find my place again among my own, go back to playing dumb. Knowing I cannot stave off the yearning that will master me for words addictive as grain cracked open on the tongue. Ashamed, alone again,

I'll start to haunt the beach, waiting for another to come along, to give me speech.