

To Speak in Silence

by *Mary Robinette Kowal* in *Uncanny Magazine Issue Sixty-Seven* | 2307 Words

On the pump organ in the formal parlor sat two chickens carved in clay in the place in which, were this another home, one might find candles. The one on the right had a rooster's comb and was shiny with red atop and a dark black bottom, as if he had been dipped in ink, which—of course—was the case.

The other chicken, a bright yellow affair, had a smaller chicken sitting on her back and four holes piercing her breast. Through those holes, Big Yellow's voice emanated, "She is late."

Red and Black's glazed eye glinted with annoyance. "Quiet. She will be here in a moment."

But Big Yellow was placed so that she could see the mantel clock that sat over the stone fireplace at the end of the room. The time had gone to half past the hour. Still she said nothing and let the clock tick forward.

Steps rattled the front stairs as the letter carrier made his rounds. He stood on the front porch for awhile, as was his habit. He had once delivered a parcel and told the woman that he liked to listen to her practice. But the house was silent now and he did not knock. Big Yellow watched the clock on the mantel tick forward a full five minutes, before the letter carrier slipped the mail into the slot.

The woman did not come to check the mail.

After another minute, the letter carrier went away, footsteps crunching on the gravel path.

When two hours had gone past, Little Yellow piped up. “Is she coming?”

“Of course she is.” Red and Black replied. “She has never missed a day of practice.”

Big Yellow eyed the clock on the mantel and clucked with dry, hollow worry.

They had come to this house at the same time, placed upon the organ in an act of whimsy by a young woman who was young no longer. They had remained as shiny as ever, because the young woman took them up and wiped them clean before sitting down to play the organ. Those vibrations resonated through their hollow clay bodies, and over time, they had learned to store the vibrations and with them, to speak.

“She did not play long yesterday,” Big Yellow said.

“But she did play.” Red and Black’s voice was firm, but the light on his feathers had dimmed.

The room grew dark.

The sun set.

Around the room, the other knickknacks and curios watched from their perches with the silence borne of utter stillness. In the static posture of the milkmaid, bending over her pail, there was a tension of concern. The carved walnut owl’s eyes were wide and watched the door for any movement. The iron cat crouched by the door, poised as if it might spend its one movement to leave the room and check the hallway for the woman. But it stayed put, propping the door open.

None of them sat on the organ and none of them could speak.

Red and Black’s feathers blended with the night. “She did not come.”

She had not, but Big Yellow did not reply to him. She sat as mute as the other inanimates because it had occurred to her that without the organ, she might lose the ability to speak so she did not want to waste her words on the obvious.

In the deep night, when stillness and silence had gathered in the darkness like a blanket, a single sound drifted across the hall and into the parlor. A creak, such as the velvet couch had made when the woman had a caller.

Big Yellow listened for more.

She had seen the other rooms of the house when first she had been brought here. The woman had tried her in the kitchen on the round table. There had been a whole day when she had been on the bookshelf in the library. For a brief, beautiful hour, when she had stood across the hall in the window of the bedroom and had been caressed by the sunbeams.

The sound had come, she felt certain, from that room.

Later, in between the ticks of the mantel clock, she heard a single, soft, "Ah."

And then nothing save for the ticking of the clock and the wind humming across the chimney.

In the morning, the sun crept into the parlor like an uncertain visitor. On her back, Little Yellow said, "Will she come today?"

Red and Black said, "Of course she will."

Big Yellow held her response. She met the gaze of the milkmaid who seemed poised to throw her pail at the rooster with frustration.

The sound of footsteps broke the silence.

“She’s coming!” Red and Black’s voice shivered the dust motes on his back.

The sounds came from the front of the house and Big Yellow faced toward the hearth at the rear. “Little Yellow! What do you see outside?”

The smaller bird sat on her crossways, one eye pointed to the back of the house and one eye toward the front. The little bird’s voice sounded thin and sad. “It’s not her. The letter carrier is here.”

In that moment the sound of the carrier’s feet changed to reverberate on the wood steps and then the broad porch. The letter carrier stopped on the porch, shifting his weight. The brass mail slot in the front door clanked as it opened. Paper rustled and fluttered to the ground.

The floorboards creaked as he turned.

Big Yellow let out all the sound she had stored. “HELP! HEEEEEEEEEEEEELP!”

By the door, the letter carrier paused. “Hello?”

Red and Black shot Big Yellow a glance and whispered, “What are you do...” and then his voice faded to nothing.

“PLEASE!” Big Yellow felt her voice fading and used everything she had left to shriek. “BEDROOM! Help. Hel...”

She had nothing left.

The letter carrier tried the door. The knob rattled with his impatience but did not open.

From his perch, the walnut owl tumbled, clattering to the floor.

A shadow fell across the window and cast the silhouette of the letter carrier into the room. On her back, Little Yellow piped a single, “help!”

Behind Big Yellow, glass shattered. She could not see and no one had voice to tell her what was happening. She heard only scrabbling and grunting. Then footsteps, cautious at first.

“Hello?”

Big Yellow waited, silent and tense. Across from her, Red and Black’s eyes glinted as he watched the letter carrier but he could tell her nothing of what happened. What she heard was the sound of cautious footsteps, creeping out of the room into the hallway.

Another, “Hello?”

And then an answering soft moan from the bedroom. The footsteps moved with alacrity then and the letter carrier made a startled gasp. From the sounds, she could tell nothing, save for when the telephone rattled as the letter carrier picked up the receiver and rang for help.

People came in answer to the call and the house was filled with a great bustling and people whose voices sounded calm and urgent at the same time. And then they were all gone.

The house stood silent save for the ticking of the clock.

Some time later, someone—perhaps the letter carrier, but Big Yellow could not see behind her—arrived and boarded up the broken glass. The sun could only creep around the edges and hint at its presence.

The milkmaid stood in shadow. A sliver of light burnished the oak owl where he lay on the floor. Red and Black's feet were invisible in the gloom.

And Big Yellow stared at the clock. It was too dark to see the face, but she heard the moment when it stopped ticking.

All was still and silent.

Dust gathered on Big Yellow. Her eyes grew cloudy. Then she could see nothing, not even the ghost of the sunbeam. It occurred to her to wonder if this was what it was like when humans went to sleep.

The footsteps returned.

Big Yellow felt herself picked up, with Little Yellow riding along. They were wrapped in something soft and for a brief moment, the dust on one of her eyes was clear and she could see that Red and Black was gone from his perch.

Then the fabric swaddled her tight and she was nestled into a tight space. The hush of cardboard scraped above her and reminded Big Yellow of when she had been brought here in a box. This box lifted into the air and then swayed in time with footsteps, first on wood, then on the porch, and then on the gravel of the front walk.

It was the first time she had been out of the house since the woman had brought them here. The weight of Little Yellow on her back seemed to grow with every step away from the house. She could feel him wanting to ask, "Will we come back?"

He could not ask and that was just as well. She thought it likely that they would never see the house again.

Her time in the dark box, swaddled in soft cloth, had been punctuated by the rumbling of vehicles and travel, during which muffled voices told her nothing.

She did not know if Big Red was in the box with her or if he was somewhere else. She did not know the fate of the milkmaid or the owl. She, at least, had Little Yellow to keep her company and even if they could not speak, she could feel his presence on her back. She was not alone.

All she was certain of was that the box was carried somewhere by someone and then set down.

The darkness and quiet returned. They were, apparently, forgotten.

Nothing gave her means to mark the time. There was no ticking clock to give heartbeat or music to give voice. She felt Little Yellow settle into the stillness and became an inert piece of fired clay upon her back.

The box was silent and dark.

If a chicken made of clay could sleep, she slept. If it could not, then she was an inanimate object with all life drained away.

A movement roused her awareness. Cloth still wrapped itself around her, but she had been lifted out of the box at some point while she stood insensate. She heard first, footsteps on wooden floors but could not place where in the house she was.

A door opened and sunlight warmed the cloth, turning the fabric a bright white around her. On her back, Little Yellow's weight lessened as if he were aware again and trying to look about them. The footsteps went down some wooden steps but not onto the gravel path at the front of her house.

These footsteps hissed and slid, the sound almost vanishing into the sound of the wind. It plucked fitfully at the cloth around them as they were carried. As they went, the sound of the wind grew louder, growing slowly from a murmur to a rolling roar. The tendrils of it that picked at the fabric did not seem strong enough to belong to that tempestuous sound.

“I brought you your tea and...” The letter carrier’s voice came from above and behind her as he stopped walking. “A surprise.”

He set her down on a table. The table vibrated as something else touched the table’s surface and then he pulled the fabric away. Red and Black stood on the table in front of her, feathers reflecting bright sun back to the sky.

But beyond him was the most wondrous sight.

The woman sat beside the table, with a blanket tucked across her lap. Her white hair was pinned up in a crown around her head as it had been while still dark. The pink had come back to her cheeks in response to the touch of the air. She lowered a fragile hand and ran a finger across Little Yellow then down to Big Yellow. “My chickens!”

“I couldn’t bring the organ so I thought they might cheer you.” The letter carrier’s white mustache curved with his smile.

“Lands, yes.” She turned Big Yellow so that she faced soft rolling sand dunes, beyond which was a vast expanse of water in constant motion. Her gaze was captivated by this undulating, sparking, expanse of gray-blue that extended to the sky. Blue as the flowers that had been painted on the milkmaid’s dress, the sky had scant clouds drifting across it like gauze curtains.

“The rest are in the house, and we can get them set up in your room.”

“I can’t thank you enough because you keep being kind.” The wind frolicked with the woman’s hair and skipped across the four holes in Big Yellow’s chest. The breeze tickled the edges.

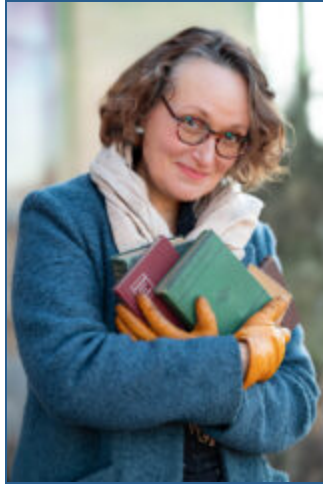
A whistle sounded across first one hole, then another and soon all four sang with the touch of the wind.

“Will you listen to that?” The woman laughed, resting her hand on Big Yellow’s back, one thumb playing with Little Yellow’s tail feathers. “She almost sounds like my organ.”

Big Yellow stood on the table with Red and Black at her side and Little Yellow perched upon her back. She could feel the smaller chicken wanting to ask a question and, if they stood there long enough, with the woman and the sea and the wind whistling across her chest, she thought that he might be able to.

The letter carrier took the woman’s hand and stood beside her, watching the ocean. The sunlight caressed her as gently as the woman and the wind wiped the dust from her feathers. In the sunlight, Big Yellow glowed with warmth.

No mantel clock marked the time, only the waves, and the sky, and the wind singing in her chest.



Mary Robinette Kowal

Mary Robinette Kowal is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus award-winning alternate history novel *The Calculating Stars*, the first book in the *Lady Astronaut* series. She is also the author of *The Glamourist Histories* series, *Ghost Talkers*, *The Spare Man*, *Molly on the Moon*, and has received the Astounding Award for Best New Writer, four Hugo Awards, the Nebula, and Locus Awards. Her stories appear in *Asimov's*, *Uncanny*, and several year's best anthologies. Mary Robinette has also worked as a professional puppeteer, is a member of the award-winning podcast *Writing Excuses*, and performs as a voice actor (SAG/AFTRA), recording fiction for authors including Seanan McGuire, Cory Doctorow, and Neal Stephenson. She lives in Denver with her husband Robert, their dog Guppy, and their “talking” cat Elsie. Visit her online at maryrobinettekowal.com.