

LIKE OWLS

Someone died. That was the whisper down the line. The line, that stretched, that snaked, that wound. Someone died, they hissed, pass it on. And we did, we bent towards our neighbour, our hot breath in their ear. Who, who, who? Like owls, the sounds came back. Who died, who died, who died? But nothing was returned, and no-one could see, no-one could see the front, although every day we shuffled some, we moved one foot and maybe the other. We hoped, we hoped and hoped, we clutched our numbers, shuffling.

Inside our heads we wondered if we were it, the dead, the expired. Perhaps we had all passed on but why the shuffling then? If we were dead, we thought, we'd rest. If we were dead we'd lie around all day, in sunshine if it still existed. Lucky dead, we thought, lucky not to have to queue, to eat, or breathe, or sigh or sweat, or love or curse. Lucky, lucky, lucky.

The next day and the next, we stood, we inched, we stood. And then: a runner. A runner streaking, from behind straight up, towards the head, the start, the finish! Go go go go, we cried, clutching our numbers, our shuffling feet thrilled to the chase, thrilled to the bravery. Go go go go go! The runner vanished, far far ahead, and we strained to hear, to hear some cheers, some acts, some violence, some thing. But no, the runner's run was done. Bones broken, came the whisper, hissed from one ear to the next. Truncheons, batons, zappers, chains and stern commands. The runner won't be running now, or ever, and we giggled, laughed and cackled, foolish runner, stupid stupid stupid, no not brave, not brave. Queue we must and queue we did, no breaking free, no gaining ground.

Someone died. That's what the whisper was down the line. Who who who? Like owls, the sound came back.