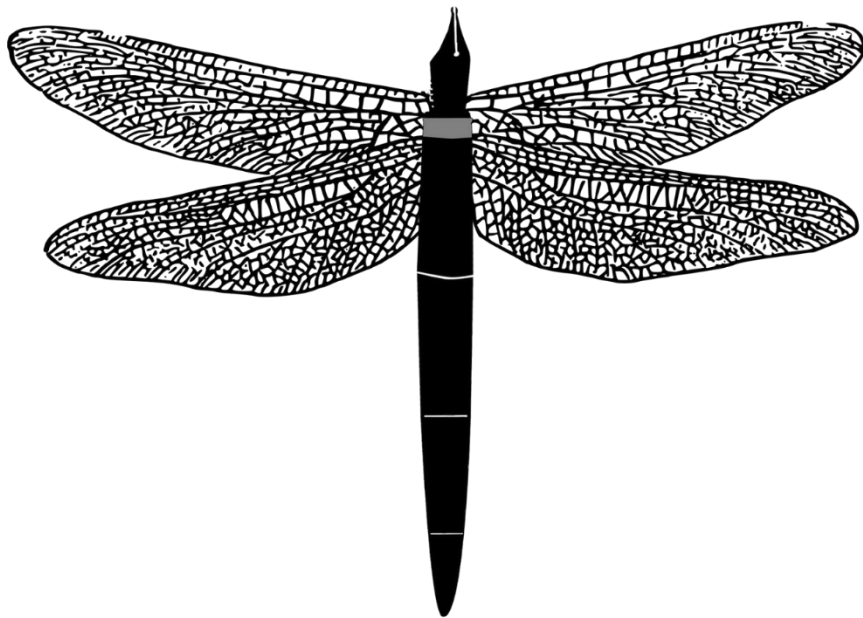


FLIGHTS

ISSUE 15



Welcome to the much-delayed Issue 15 of Flights Journal,

First, a huge apology to all the lovely writers who submitted for a deadline in December 2024 and only heard an outcome in August 2025. This is not how you should have been served. And thank you for your patience in waiting for this issue to finally get published on the website.

Secondly, an explanation for the change to PDF format. It has become increasingly obvious that, in publishing work direct to the website, this work is exposed to engines feeding the rapacious beast that is AI development. I'm not anti AI specifically, but do believe that if big tech wants to use the work of creatives, big tech should be paying creatives. PDF format is not totally scrape proof, but it probably renders the process not worth the effort. I am hoping that, over time, I can get the previous issues into a .pdf format.

Thirdly, you will note the use of the first-person singular. Sadly, Darren has had to retire from Flight of the Dragonfly. He has an enormously busy job which means much less time available for other stuff.

Fourthly, and very sadly, I must let you all know that Issue 16, which will be issued alongside this one, will be the last publication of *Flights* journal for the time being. Now that I am looking after Flight of the Dragonfly on my own, I need to make sure that I can keep the press running first and foremost. If, after a time, I believe I can manage *Flights* as well, then I will restart submissions.

With many thanks to all the lovely people who have shared their words in this issue, and for all 16 issues. There wouldn't be a small press without Flights Journal, and there wouldn't have been a journal if you hadn't all submitted to it. I will be forever grateful to you all.

With very best wishes for all your writing,

Barbara

Editor-in-Chief
Flights and Flight of the Dragonfly

Acknowledgements

‘Short Circuit’, ‘17 °C’, ‘Le Mot injuste’ appear in Gordon Vells’ collection *The Stoat-Weasel Interface: Poems of light, life and mustelids* (2025, Folde)

www.xenonlobster.co.uk

‘I have not died’ and ‘In one breath’ appear in Heather Wastie’s collection *You are Here* (2025, Lapal Publications) www.lapalpublications.co.uk/

‘Preparation’ and ‘June’ appear in Erica Hesketh’s collection *In the Lily Room* (2025, Nine Arches Press)

We always had a non-simultaneous submission policy. But, given the time lag between submission and acceptance in this instance, I am gratefully acknowledging Gordon, Heather and Erica’s publications.

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POETRY

Raymond Miller

Afterlife

Some days I imagine it might really happen:
orifices oozing with ectoplasm,
Dorises with messages we can't fathom;
transmigration's been the fashion since ages ago
when Buddhists could make it to the sixth Bardo
or lose their many selves in Limbo.
You don't think so?
Of course, it's never on CNN, BBC or Sky,
but something glimpsed in the corner of an eye.
Like shortly after my sister-in-law passed on
my wife sat outside a Melbourne restaurant
where they'd fitted this special netting
to protect the food from birds pecking.
Yet a species of bird, reputed to be timid,
gained entrance and shared the food she was eating.
Then back home when she took our dog and children
to a play park in West Malvern, England,
the birds went mad, chattering, swooping,
flying off at crazy angles, then regrouping,
spooking the dog who jumped the fence round the park,
climbed the steps of the slide, slid down and barked.
Her sister loved birds. My wife loves birds.
Quod erat demonstrandum –
the truth is revealed in tandem.
Now, nobody would think of me as spiritual,
it's the kind of thing I've always ridiculed;
but assuming that I drop dead first
I'm planning to come back as a bird.
A bird who'd be useful to my wife,
but I can't decide which one would be right
to express my love and gratitude,
not just scare dogs and steal the food.
A peacock, perhaps, but all those eyes
are likely to make her paranoid;
a songbird to soothe her when she's restless,
a chicken to lay her eggs for breakfast;

a mynah to call her mind to attention
if she's perched on the brink of dementia.
Rook or raven, chaffinch, she likes a chat;
a cock – she's probably had enough of that.
Penguins have always made her laugh
and when she's bored I could be a lark;
starlings, sparrows, robins, pigeons;
I'm not used to making decisions,
so I left the final word to the missus
and asked her what bird I reminded her of,
what to come back as when I've shuffled off?
Straight from the neck she said Albatross.

Dominik Slusarczyk

My Mission

I row a
Rough boat over
Chattering seas.
Each time the
Waves slap
The wood they
Dampen and
Darken it.
The proud
Lighthouse is
Mere metres away
But however
Hard I push
I cannot reach it.
This is surely the
Sea of the damned.
God taunts me
As he always has.

Andrew Scott

Monster (Villanelle)

Know there is a monster under the bed
who wants to take me whole
It is messing with my head
body tingles with dread
paranoid sleep is taking its toll
Know there is a monster under the bed
why does he not leave instead?
is it a way to control?
It is messing with my head
trembling, filled with dread
I feel the darkness troll
Know there is a monster under the bed
Its mission under there is unsaid
having my body afraid must be the goal
It is messing with my head
the evil I feel spread
fear it is trying to swallow my soul
Know there is a monster under the bed
It is messing with my head

John Grey

A STRANGER HERE

The more trees,
the more I'm bred to smile,
no brooding over the age of these oaks,
no prize for naming the scotch pine
from the twist of its needles.
I suspend my encyclopedic brain
for the forest's great indifference.
I'm not surprised when the shaft of light
finds reindeer lichen, lacewing, and not me.
Better the shining horsetail any day
than the human face, lucid for no good reason.
It's a world where I'm unnecessary.
Everywhere I look, flowers pose for another flower's lens,
with a flutter, a petal spread, compose the shot.
I skirt a creek where turtles bask on rocks,
not on my say-so.
I hear the warbler chorus, mostly love poetry,
an occasional invitation to join newfound feeding grounds.
Only once does one voice gripe at my intrusion,
and that, a crow, citified I'm sure.
I hail the finished product
but the design is out of reach.
Tired, I lean against a maple trunk.
It doesn't lean against me.

THE LAST GULL FOR THIS EVENING

Swift solo run from a cliff,
to the deck of fishing vessel
overloaded with catch,
shooshed away but never frightened off,
foraging scraps
for repatriation to the nest,
then rising with its silver prize,
an incandescent lantern
set ablaze by fading sun.

FALCONS ON THE NEWS

Falcons nest
in a twig home
atop the abandoned high tower.
They're the only mating pair
in the city.

The ongoing fortunes
of their clutch of eggs
is carried on the news.
Now and then,
the story is
not murder, not robbery,
not rape,
not fatal car crash
or little kid drowning
in a neighbor's pool.
High in the eaves,
in a cache of pine sprigs,
life takes on a life
of its own.
And, now and then,
all news asks of us
is to leave life well alone.

Clare Manicom

Too close

In life's forest
we stand as trees.
We weather seasons,
watch growth all
around us.
I know your weak places -
open gashes of storm damage,
twisted branches of private thoughts,
bitter fruits of words spoken in haste.
I have seen you ugly and exposed.
A tree worn by life.
I am
too close now
to notice your strength.
I feel sharply
where our branches
rub against each other,
barking,
wearing down,
fretting.
The weight of your trunk
leans against mine.
My limbs
reach away to find their
own sunshine
own space
own piece of the forest.

Kingston upon Thames

My sister and I were once likened to swans
as we paddled around
in towelling dressing gowns
after our small children.

She and I sit on the tow path next to the Thames,
watch white swans,
their heavy take off to flight,
black beaks leading.
My son is with us.

We eat sandwiches, hope the rain will stay away.
I think they're owned by the Queen, or at least protected by her.
There is nothing to say, really.
We've said it all.

A green painted barge putters past.
Decorated houseboats rest alongside.
The river is higher than earlier on in my visit
when we were affronted by its low-tide rankness.
A few brown-tinged plane trees suggest change of season.

My sister manages some chatter as we drive to the airport.
I am grateful for a corner in the backseat of my son's car,
partially hidden by a suitcase.
The plane, fully loaded,
battles to lift off the wet runway.
Its wheels trail water like the legs of a swan.

Gordon Vells

Short Circuit

earthbound,
deskbound at an upstairs window
facing a queue of bronchial oaks
(moss-green highlights
on dark, stark branches)

and the squirrels,
arc-ing from outstretched branch
to opposing outstretched branch,
short-circuiting, proving
you don't need wings to fly

17 °C

At 17 degrees or above,
– RED ADMIRAL –
it doesn't matter if it's overcast:
– GREEN-VEINED WHITE, BRIMSTONE –
the transect is valid
– LARGE SKIPPER, SMALL SKIPPER –
and you can record what butterflies you see.
– PURPLE EMPEROR, HOLLY BLUE –
Now some species will fly
– PEACOCK, MARBLED WHITE –
at lower temperatures,
– SPECKLED WOOD, MEADOW BROWN –
but 17's the minimum, say the rules
– PAINTED LADY, CLOUDED YELLOW –
(14 if sunny); it's science.
– LARGE WHITE, SMALL WHITE, WALL –
At the millennium's turn
– ORANGE TIP, LARGE BLUE –
I'd regularly do counts in a local wood,
– SILVER-WASHED FRITILLARY –
and July would be the highlight;
– GATEKEEPER, RINGLET –
but now the white admirals have gone.
– WHITE ADMIRAL –

I also used to often see the erratic,
– PURPLE HAIRSTREAK –
random wingbeats of purple hairstreaks.
– PURPLE HAIRSTREAK –
Once I found one in the grass, too weak to fly;
– PURPLE HAIRSTREAK –
it climbed onto my hand, supped sweat and iridesced away.
– PURPLE HAIRSTREAK –
Four in five of our butterfly species
– SMALL TORTOISESHELL –
have fallen in numbers in the last 50 years.
– DUKE OF BURGUNDY, SMALL COPPER –
They talk to us the only way they can.
– COMMON BLUE, CHALKHILL BLUE –
Are we listening ...
– COMMA –

Le Mot injuste

just the fatigue
when talking, can't find the words
must've fallen off the mental shelf

often the wrong worms come out
given up on pronouns
sometimes can't finish sentences
the thoughts dissolve before even

now taken to using placeholders
need to [verb] the [noun]
and hope others manage to grok the parsnip
not parsnip, the other thing

Clive Donovan

THE SCARF

This cashmere blend I love to touch;
the silky treat of its caress
like a priest's ritual stole – ceremonious –
weighty and blessed with memory...
In the midst of glass and picturesque girls
and the heady scent of new merchandise,
I dithered to choose my next Hermès scarf:
Le fleuve sacré; Au coeur de la vie; and I chose Les clés...
even as the gunmen's shots crackled and rang
and a rank cordite stink arose,
a mêlée of elbows,
mannequins crashing and we
– the assistant, me and the soft stitched scarf –
fingering the detail,
stretched in that open space held apart for us,
compressed between two heart-beats of the world,
which, by our presence, as all the rest slipped, we full possessed.
Adventuring, as not strangers, we dared to breathe,
compact in a glamour of innocent glow we lived,
for that one, impeccable moment – its lucid span –
even as the crazies entered, bandoliered with guns,
screaming ululations to a savage god,
as though in a vacuum – all thought banished –
we stared, transformed, immovable as stone,
yet in a coma of acceptance...
as they, like a brace of powerful hounds, tracking hot spoor,
in a stinking cloud of panic and lust for blood,
turned, repelled, and burst away, to hunt the herd.
I walked around the sales counter
and we held each other for the longest while.
Something real was here, she whispered.
She wouldn't let me pay.

SHE SMILES AMONG HIS FILES

In his never-emptied in-box
On the desk her picture lingers,

Nestling with memoranda,
Notes of passwords, keyboard short-cuts.
He picks her up, caresses her,
Thinking to frame that face some day,
Promote her to the out-tray then;
An oval shape, clean sheet of glass,
Tacked, taped, her image fixed at last,
As she deserves, this homeless girl.
He sighs and slides her vaguely back,
To drift among his jots and lists
Of things to do and things he's missed;
The articles and recipes,
The show-off postcards sent by friends
On mini-breaks and honeymoons,
The pointless warranties he's kept,
The oh so worthless guarantees,
That D.V.D. of Season 2
They never viewed with fingers clasped,
The unsolved puzzle just beyond
His grasp.

FINALLY

Finally the covers slammed shut
The words screaming inside
He will read no more it is enough
He hurtles the book away
It floats into the canyon
Where dissidents are shot
A balloon drifts over slopes of cactus
The basket is filled with refugees
They hunt for sweet thermals
Ascending with sage eagles
The pages of the book curl open
Even though the spine is broken
Swells a throbbing heart-song to the sky
Each foreign word cuts truly
Chiselling echoes into walls
Glistening with obsidian
Not yet made to knives

Cory Rich

A Love Letter to Sheep and People

Are the sheep in fields
clouds
that have fallen out
of the sky or
are the clouds
sheep
that have got lost
and flown away?
I can't help but
picture their little
legs flapping away
in the air
waving at planes
and tumbling in circles
off into the distance
in any direction the wind blows them.

I think I was maybe meant to be a sheep
God can't have intended me to
do much more than
sit in fields with my
thoughts
or glide through the sky
I want to stand with them
feel the rain on my back
and have no hands to grab an umbrella
I think maybe God made a mistake
and I'm sure I'm not meant to say that
but I thought I should let them know
I'm really not cut out for this.
I'm cut out to be cloud shaped.
maybe we all are.

I think people look more like sheep
than they realise
you all look like sheep
I don't mean your faces

I mean that so many of you have hearts
that are so much softer than you realise
fluffy, and light enough that if it weren't kept safe
by your body it might float
away and join the sheep in the sky.

Heather Wastie

A disappearance

I missed the sunset
caught the striated colour palette
second hand or rather
second telling or rather
second sight,

bought your sunset,
our sun, setting, set in
stone, or rather stained,
a chemical reaction,
a meeting of hues,

gilding grasses,
silvering the ocean
or rather holding
a disappearance
of blues

I have not died

I have not died.
Not painfully nor swiftly,
unexpectedly, predictably

My body is not utterly
limp nor starched
in perpetual sleep

I do not have obituary
or mourners, am not guilty
of bereavement

There are no ashes
in this poem, no dust
between my teeth

My bucket remains
unkicked. Death is still
on my to do list.

In one breath

This poem uses words found in an article by James Nestor on nasal breathing published online by mindbodygreen. The article was adapted from Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art by James Nestor published 2020 by Penguin Life.

Can you smell the sea air
Or sense the salty scent of sand
Piled up like pinched snuff
Damp in the fingers of the breeze?

Or think of this: In one breath, more molecules of air
Pass through your nose than all the grains of sand
Deposited on all the beaches in the world.
Can you imagine, trillions and trillions?

Picture the shuffle of seaweed
Drifting away on warm surf
Contemplate, eyes closed, how
Oceans are made

Drop shoulders, jaw, settle yourself
Consider the continuation
One breath, trillions of invisible
Precious particles of life

Imy Brighty-Potts

peach season

nothing lasts –

slick fingers tug the stone from the halved peach on the chopping board as flesh
cringes at
your touch,
you let the fur-covered skin sit on your tongue,
you bought these for her,
“the last good week for peaches this year,” she reckons.

you held them at the farmer’s market, grasping each tender sphere gently,
testing,
squeezing,
trying,

you thought of what she would look like biting down on the pitted skin, juice dripping
from her
lips to her chin, fuzz in the sunlight.

you indulged in the last tart rhubarb of spring, the sweet okanagan corn of july, the
peachy
joy of a scorching august,
you eat the last one alone. you thought of making a cobbler for one, a deconstructed
crumble, or even a vat of iced tea,
but you lay the slices flat, the cool plate resting on your chest as you lay on the itchy
grass,
you cover them in tajin and smile.

stain your fingers with blackberry juice tomorrow.
nothing lasts.

on journaling

ten thousand dreams inhabit these pages,
and five thousand forgotten tasks,
the way i hope you’d think i had ages,
not the seventy years for which i ask.

no, beg.

i beg for the chance to drink in more life, to dance among these spritely words.
as the fat rises on each delicious day, i devour each newly formed curd.

for if all we have is less than a century, how will i spend this innings?

i've seen so much, lived one hundred lives, but in this race time is winning.

when once death loomed a familiar friend, splattered blood on tarmac grinning,
now i beg she stays away,
give me time to do more living.

a souvenir?

a trail of near lucid memories, lies along my pulsing throat.

i wonder what your friends know of this girl-like ghost, haunting your bed?

we left those sheets, sheer, drunk, unloved, pleasure-rippled and laughing and i know
with
contentment i will never see you again.

and i don't want to.

she is lustful bruises, shooting pool, whiskey thrown back like a fool, nights and
mornings
morphing, responsibilities shirked, life set aside.

i am not sure i even like you as a person but i like the version of me i perform to
contrast
your quotidien.

i say i'll call you. i wont. have a good life, we laugh.

in a year you'll be married, in a year i will be another girl's thrill.

i'll think of your hands on my body, my skin, the way your chest rose in the darkness,
the
night ominous, still.

Dorian Nightingale

fade out

and during that time my paint did begin to thin -
 seemed to lose those natural pigments.
those vivid rich tints,
 innately variegated,
 that i'd honed from the home
and was the hue
 of my own likeness.
this picture that was becoming -
 was becoming slightly paler.
 the colours of my lustre white spirited away,
led astray, attenuated -
 turning into a diluted concentration.
bleached and bleached again by the institution,
 as i returned to my schooling
 every turpentine term.

cloudbusting

it must've tricked the physics,
 the mercury falling for a climatic sleight of hand.
fooling the weathermen, confusing instruments,
 infusing a ruse, a gimmick,
 that lightning would strike
within minutes, without warning -
 its spike so precise, so penetrating.
yet as God as my witness, i didn't see it.
 for the sky was blue less a tress of cirrus.
 saw the sun at solar noon

there was no cumulonimbus.
 the air was not water heavy
 its energy wet with electrostatic sweat.
no rumbling booms, no thunderous plumes
no odourless fumes that seep into bones
 that predispose
 a sense in your gut.

that something was up, that something was amiss,
could feel it twist
in the invisible mist.

Sam Szanto

His Death was Sudden

On social media, his never-to-age face,
at the corners of his eyes, the beginning
of laughter lines.

His death was sudden.

The announcement followed
by hundreds
of heart emojis— blue and red and green—
whole and broken.

His name and number remain
on the family WhatsApp. Messages
that end in x's
now cold as clay.

A photo is posted,
his little girl
at the cinema, eating popcorn.

Time yawns
while we wait and don't
for his response.
His heart emoji.

His death was sudden.

His death was

His death

His

Death: the end of the life of a person; the act of dying;
the total and permanent cessation
of all the vital functions of an organism.

Sudden: to happen without warning.

The dying pass
and leave the grief.
There is no warning.

His death was sudden.

The word 'death'
contains a keening.
We are stuck in 'sudden'.
There was no warning.

His death was sudden.

As yet, no one has said
what his life was.
That will come.
That will pass.

His death was sudden.

A Bus Ride in 1987

As always, our mothers were at the front,
the nine-year-olds in the middle,
the eight-year-old behind us.

My nine-year-old friend and I might have chatted
about being famous – him as an architect,
me as a playwright – or about chocolate.

There must have been an old lady
tutting at how loud we were.

The eight-year-old would have gazed out of the window.

The guard may have smiled at the children
as he checked the tickets.

Talking about grown-up things, our mothers nearly
missed our stop, hastily pressing the bell on the ceiling,
gathering their bags, climbing down the back steps.

Four of us stood on the pavement,
an O at the window,
as the bus drove away.

Our mothers never ran, but they did that day.

The Lamb and the Yow

Having walked for nine-and-a-half miles in a circle
on our wedding anniversary, we see, alone
at a roadside, a bright-white lamb throwing itself
against a wire fence, apparently unaware of the gate
it must have slipped through, its mother staring.

*I WILL DIE IF YOU DON'T COME BACK SOON, MUMMY
AND IT WILL BE BECAUSE OF YOU!*
sad emoji, crying emoji, broken-heart emoji.

The yow makes a low muttering sound
as the lamb bangs its head against the fence. Apart
from the mother, the sheep seem oblivious,
sleeping or ruminating the grass.
'Should we open the gate?' my husband asks.
'What if the sheep come out?' I say.
'What if a farmer shouts at us? What if they send dogs
to attack us? We should call the RSPCA.'

*WHY WOULD YOU LEAVE ME?
COME BACK TO ME NOW
I'M CRYING!*
sad emoji, crying emoji, broken-heart emoji.

My husband walks to the gate and the lamb follows,
pushing through the bars and running
to its mother. As it feeds from her, we walk on,
as a car drives too fast
around the bend towards us.

Note: 'Yow' is a localised form of the word 'ewe', particularly used in Cornwall.

Robert McCarthy

Ode: Isolation

And every day the same day.
You rise at the canonical hour,
sing *laudamus te* to the black
dark, to shadow's impedimenta:
chair, desk, bed. The invariant
fixtures drip, as with undersea
luminosity; bright, brighter,
sodium flare!

It is the daystar's
bleak annunciation, and again
you are there, shifting the blankets
at the canonical hour,
singing *laudamus te* to numbed
toes, to blood-flow-
less fingers.

Your day is geometry;
a sequence of plot points:
x-axis,
y-axis (axe-axis, why-axis);
Troughs and peaks mime the flux
of your circadian rhythms:
Bar graphs of naps; of syncopes;
of consciousness extinguishments.

So the days unspool themselves,-- endless

loops of *res extensa*,-- so the days
unspool themselves, lavish
with empty hours, months, years.

And so the changes are rung,
though nothing at all changes:
stochastic intoxications,
flux-y imprecisions . . .are always
the same, the same, the same. . .
and floods of dust rise up
from nowhere,
and from nowhere is from where
no voices sing.

You would
read a little, if your eyes didn't tire,
if you could forget for a while
where you are, will be, have been, were.
And it seems as if you've lived like
this forever, though "seems" is not
correct you have lived like this
forever;
as if, as if, as if...

Take That Back

Counting down the days,
though fresh out of numbers.

One and one and one and one:
the calculus of all alone.

Daybreak arrives, already broken.

Sundown had packed its valise
and gone.

Well, I wished, of course, that I had not
spoken. . .

when all that was said
was done.

David Dephy

The Day Is Gone

The day is gone, and the night is shut.
A woman leaned against her lover's shoulder
whispering in sleepy breath,

we all feel the cold breeze, time to go,
yet we are entwined, no easy ride,

so much behind us, as the sun
dips down low, and time passes
as time does.

We all know who kissed the rain,
spirit of wind.

If Memory Still Serves You

Memories flow around our bodies
from the heart of the rain this morning,
we are divided, empty, but we feel that

the history cannot be trusted, the source is
the survivor, the one who has been the enemy,
sorrow pulses through memories, swallows up

our noisy minds, we are absorbed by water,
water has the sound of heaven's breath,
as the memories of us have the roots

right in the air, in the story of your enemy
no one survives, not even the greatest heroes
who were nearly almighty, the enemy has not

resembled them; they wore different armor,
in the hierarchy of facts, one serves the other,
one is less than the other, if memory still serves

you, remember that you won the battle with
the whole world, that's why you are here,
not every war is based on deception.

Perennials

What Camus said about the leaves in autumn,
only this will be my eleventh spring
with him; or eight if I include my daughter.

This time of year, when we awkwardly sing,
is best for me; we turn our backs upon
the sun, my finger diligently stroking

the wheel that reverses the hour just gone.
But parallel to this there comes the stinger,
the knowledge that another phase is done,

complete; and while old age is still a glimmer,
with no great changes yet to wonder on –
the evening light only a little dimmer –

I think of all the useless thing I bought, the
things I do not do or say, but ought to.

Preparation

breast milk how to store nhs

breast milk freezer bags reusable

She never complained, not even once,
diligently pumping after each feed.

Seven months (we all knew the deadline)
to fill her freezer with carefully labelled storage bags

– sourced online for their superior capacity
and ability to lie completely flat –

ahead of the big day.
The duty of the working mother

would be to provide in absentia and in advance,
to have already thought of everything;

she knew this like she knew the weight
of the infant on her chest,

the perfect weight of his sleeping head
against the palm of her hand,

all that she was giving up
by reclaiming the mantle of herself.

We had a power cut last week, she said,
lightly shouldering this, too.

June

We left her jumper at the house
and now our daughter
is bare-armed
and slightly too cold
but my god
she is glorious
in her rainbow taffeta skirt,
flying her first ever kite
as if she's spent
a lifetime of unbroken summers
perfecting the art,
pulling the silk-pale string
this way and that
like a partner at a dance,
its sun and moon faces
both beaming.
In the distance
Grandma waves from a bench,
impressed,
while at our daughter's feet
we, giddy parents,
lie back on wind-whipped grass,
hands shading our eyes,
marvelling
at the blue,
feeling festive and delicious
all of a sudden,
the tips of our fingers,
our hips, lifting
and later
we will touch each other
like teens
under the starched
spare-room duvet,
a late breeze
kissing
the curtain's edge and night
never falling

Edward Lee

Thirst

I needed to hurt you
to get tears
worth bottling,
never once pausing
long enough
to wonder why
I needed your tears,
or who had given me
this bottle specifically
made for tears
in the first place,
an ever-widening crack appearing
in its once smooth form
every time I pinched
your skin with the tip
of its ever-sharp mouth.

Rule

The bug
and the boot
at the same time,
frozen in movement,
fate taking a breath
before deciding
who survives.

An End of Childhood

In place
of the wooden toys
in the child's bedroom
there now stands
a forest, the toys given
the wish of life,
returning to the existence
they knew and always wanted
before metal blades
took their shape
and made them playthings
for boys
and girls,
some spoilt,
some not,
all hard and eager
in their love
of these inanimate objects
animated by imagination
and a belief that barely exists anymore.

The way to fly the Atlantic

Clouds and distances, sea salt chapping the faces
of the pilots as they tumbled or flew low
through wind, hail and snow. The tail of the plane

reared up as its nose sank into Derrigimlagh Bog.
“That is the way to fly the Atlantic,”
Arthur Brown shouted to John Alcock, every shock

and shake fobbed off, the mid-air clamber
out onto icy wings to spark the dead engine,
the topsy-turvy trip generating a mix of nonchalance

and elation. Droning in the ears of those
who saw the craft plunge through mist
would soon resound through the hemispheres.

Derrigimlagh went back to what passes for nothing
happening – bog-pools eyeing the rare
clarity of a blue sky, flit of bee or dragonfly, heather

fragrancing the wind, other times the wind
whistling or losing its temper. Enough, when you set
all down together, to show how vast, busy

and enduring even a seeming emptiness is, each
human life – though it teem with adventure
or heroism – by comparison made fragile, small.

Flight

An occasional seesaw, a brief tilt,
a sudden little dip – otherwise
we appear not to move a jot. Clouds
beyond the plane-wings,
the crests of cottony white clouds,
are ours to look down on,
and where they morph into what
must be the Pyrenees, a grey,
narrow road wends in and out of view,
a streetlight glints, a church spire
crops up – but, cooped
in this aluminium tube as we are,
we want to sneak off our shoes
and savour the floor's tingling matrix
against our thrombotic toes,
or riffle through glossies that stick
to our fingers, or order 'hot'
from the menu, or buy chocolate,
or even jewels. Holiday –
a yellow-sanded beach, a hotel's
promise of coddled idleness –
cuts to the captain's
'experiencing slight turbulence'.
Suddenly we know what skin and bone,
heart and brain, most call for,
most love: bouts of sunshine
intermingled with lusty blusters
of wind and rain, just to come home
to slate and stone, to shamble
barefoot around the damp,
immersive grass of an unmown garden.
So we gild the moment
in dreams of dropping blithely off
from everything, as if we each
were a caped crusader or sky surfer
consuming land and sea
in a sumptuous parabola
that might find us instantly landed

at our destination, the body
no less nimble than thought; a snap
traverse, a repudiation
of boredom – a scenario which
would still leave ourselves,
all and only, as the lasting limitation.

Troll

I've moved, you know, from cold
and leaky mountain cave,
cancelled the role

of bungling, blustering dimwit
old-ferocious
in a children's fairy tale;

I've broken free
of that growling manifestation
of the obdurate boulder

in all its inertia,
its thwarting weight – the stone
I might have turned into

if struck by lightning.
Now you will be the one
stamping your foot

since I've taken to the virtual air
of the internet, stuck
a spanner in the merry-go-round

of online discourse,
started speaking
out of both sides of my mouth.

Elizabeth Barton

Camellia

A benedictive gesture kindled
from invisible beginnings,
fingers of crimson fire
reach prayerfully from within
unfolding blush-pink buds,
beseeching the new light.

Evocation in a sleeping core,
geometric splendours spread
whispered mantras, miracle-shaped,
the hidden hope of a hundred petals
glow in the heart of winter
to plead a flower of loving colours.

Throop Mill

Full moon over Throop Mill
painted dreamlike, a dark edifice
shouldering the sky in silent vigil.
I wandered neck-deep in thick fog,
a glimmering spectral sea, drowning
dykes and weirs, an old wooden bridge.
I was my own ghost roaming my dream,
entranced by a lucent fogbow hung
on fathomless night. For miles
I followed the elusive phantom, never
quite reaching its kingdom, a netherworld
promised in its midnight smile.

Winter Fragment

Early rain has left feathered drops
on the car. Rain-laden clouds pocket
the sky, a dreamy overcast.

The night was cold, imbued
with an Arctic ache, the stars icicles
hanging from a cavernous sky.

I lay in a fireglow, refuge
from the breath of Winter. Crackling flames
danced reflections upon my face.

Lambent pictures painted warmth within,
reveries flickering a world away,
loosed in ashes upon the waiting hearth.

Whiling away hours into the circling stars
until huddling in cloud pillowed with damp,
whispered rain laced the roof.

Inheritance

Her memories which were sealed away
 dark-light ink wash paintings
shaded with their illegible script
now shift, elusive, beneath my brow
like a negative emerging from the chemical bath
 suspended for a moment
 then dispersing
to dissolve on contact with air and time.

She calls out in her mother tongue
 soundless as sea fog
the fine calligraphy of utterances unknown break the surface of my mind
tendrils of breath spiralling in the rising mist
thorns fenced around castle walls
searchlight beams in the night
fingertips tracing the broken edges of blue numbers.

The crescent moon paces through her changes
egg whites are beaten into peaks
for the wedding cake that was never consumed
the moths flit seamlessly over wasteland
always there is the feeling
of having missed the train
not knowing what it is you've forgotten –

wait

 wait

 I can hear

 somethi –

On Becoming a German Citizen

What did it mean to shrug off a whole continent like a shawl falling from bony shoulders? When we awoke that morning to find we were no longer European, we traced out the half-forgotten story: the refugees coming from places we could no longer name or picture, to safety, for us, their unborn grandchildren, great grandchildren who until now were without question citizens of Europe.

We dutifully filled out paperwork, sent copies of our documents gold-stamped by the notary, though we speak no German nor have any family left in that country. Though we have never visited, though this is our home, and English is our mother tongue. Though only Oma makes the red cabbage and even she can't decipher her Oma's recipe for black forest cherry cake.

The old East German embassy was grand and austere, the people were kind. They asked: how does it feel to be German? I found myself looking over my shoulder as I answered. Our great grandparents thought of themselves as German until they had to leave. The route back is a route out, their escape, our flightpath. What a leap they made, heading into the unknown, their spindly roots trailing, seeking out moisture, feeding on air.

Battleground

Towton, 29 March 1470

She was always told to pick her battles –
but you have to take the adventure that comes.
It must have seemed tragic and inexplicable
to turn north again on the heels of victory
the king in hand – and be defeated.
Two kings means a fight to the death,
in sleet and snow, the headwind in the archers' faces.
The battleweary troops taking up the plateau
treading down the tended lynchets
until all is a bloody meadow of slaughter
and the river runs red, a bridge of bodies
spanning the beck. *Since thou enbraydyst me
with the name 'she-wolf' I shall give no quarter.*
What else would a mother-wolf do with a pup at her side?
She knows it is hopeless, a grisly waste of lives
falling into sediment. There will be no one
to sing a threnody for her, her reputation
forever undone: her legacy a trenchant spear.
In the morning, the blue tit shakes its wings
under the burr elm stumps and a grim-faced
woman sets out north again.

Bus Stand H

What meaning could there be to find in Stand H,
Finsbury Park Station Interchange? I never considered it a place
that belonged inside a poem. Simply a point to pass through
during weekend states of in-betweenness. Concrete psychopomp,
shuttling Saturdays away into the fast-dawning disappointment
of Sunday. Only hope by 3am, a night-bus bound for Hackney.
Wishing bladder empty, spinning head to still and not to meet
testosterone-driven packs of lads, who slam shut windows, opened
to allow miasmas of kebab scented summer air inside. Aroused,
by the dull satisfying thump of inchoate violence. None of this the bus
stop's fault. Zero zone, staked-out with hollow metal poles, bearing
numbered plastic signs. Street lights blinking mutely overhead at pigeons
poking scraps. Nervy presences, feathered pencil smudges, eyed absently
by other restless citizens of night. United in a single purpose – waiting.

The missed bliss of Junior Bent

Junior Bent was an endless riff of Bristol City
player. A stirring jangle of intention, as he sped
off up the wing: electrical in racing red, accelerating
the length of Ashton Gate – desperate to achieve
the crescendo of a goal, but to his regular consternation
and us fans, the finishing was off. He'd jitter, trip,
bundling a shot, or cross. Striving for the stars,
slipping in the mud. Junior's pain and ours united,
when a crowd of eyes rose to trace the flight
of ball, as it skied above the bar. We'd sigh,
throw up arms, tip plastic seats back down. Scowling
at his judas boots, he'd curse the cruelty of a viscous pitch,
turn away from the deepest desolation of the away end:
where Port Vale fans were permanently jeering.

Instances of light

Images are everywhere, visual dust.
Their power is not what it was. Yesterday,
I fished a printed photo from a drawer,
a memory of faces I still couldn't name.

Thought I was clever then, on the Jemaa
el-Fnaa – fuelled on harira from a stall:
stepping back to snap audience instead
of snake charmer. Three rows of locals,

staring down my lens, caught up in
the hustle of an ancient, orange-juice
infested, market square. When I got that
shot, the irritated scowls of those boys

in Marrakesh told a story I overlooked.
The youngest now must be thirty-five
at least. Developed it in black & white,
because that seemed cool, historic.

The pin-sharp contrast, has degraded
into vapid grey. Children on the front row,
smiles instinctive, relishing the act. Teens
at the back, pretend otherwise. You'll see

my unasked models are not happy. Untipped,
unlike the thin guy wrapped in cobras.
Desperate to be traveller, not tourist, I must
have taken them as some kind of proof.

Afterlife

Some days I imagine it might really happen:
orifices oozing with ectoplasm,
Dorises with messages we can't fathom;
transmigration's been the fashion since ages ago
when Buddhists could make it to the sixth Bardo
or lose their many selves in Limbo.
You don't think so?
Of course, it's never on CNN, BBC or Sky,
but something glimpsed in the corner of an eye.

Like shortly after my sister-in-law passed on
my wife sat outside a Melbourne restaurant
where they'd fitted this special netting
to protect the food from birds pecking.
Yet a species of bird, reputed to be timid,
gained entrance and shared the food she was eating.
Then back home when she took our dog and children
to a play park in West Malvern, England,
the birds went mad, chattering, swooping,
flying off at crazy angles, then regrouping,
spooking the dog who jumped the fence round the park,
climbed the steps of the slide, slid down and barked.
Her sister loved birds. My wife loves birds.
Quod erat demonstrandum –
the truth is revealed in tandem.

Now, nobody would think of me as spiritual,
it's the kind of thing I've always ridiculed;
but assuming that I drop dead first
I'm planning to come back as a bird.
A bird who'd be useful to my wife,
but I can't decide which one would be right
to express my love and gratitude,
not just scare dogs and steal the food.
A peacock, perhaps, but all those eyes
are likely to make her paranoid;

a songbird to soothe her when she's restless,
a chicken to lay her eggs for breakfast;
a mynah to call her mind to attention
if she's perched on the brink of dementia.
Rook or raven, chaffinch, she likes a chat;
a cock – she's probably had enough of that.
Penguins have always made her laugh
and when she's bored I could be a lark;
starlings, sparrows, robins, pigeons;
I'm not used to making decisions,
so I left the final word to the missus
and asked her what bird I reminded her of,
what to come back as when I've shuffled off?
Straight from the neck she said Albatross.

FLASH

Jacqueline Schaalje

A Stranger and a Mosquito

The woman said she'd show me the bus station since I was going to Aalsmeer to sort flowers as a summer job. I rubbed my eyes. Due to the fog, my sight was circumscribed by the gutter, littered with cigarette butts, confetti and pink-speckled pills with fish imprints.

'Line 113,' she said, 'it leaves from the Stadhouderskade.'

I knew that too. 'It's leaving in five minutes,' I said, breathless from my jog.

The St Nicholas Basilica's spires and the antennas on the DoubleTree stuck out from the mist.

I clanked her car door open.

The woman started driving westwards. There was a mosquito in her car. With her index finger, she gave three micro pushes to roll down the window.

Her hand was over the other hand, and scratched it, until it turned pink, then red.

We are looking at a few great days this Wednesday and Thursday, the radio was saying.

'I'm Renate,' said the woman.

Then, screeching of tyres.

She bludgeoned the mosquito, which splayed against the glass in a teriyaki drop.

I crouched in my seat. We skidded and bumped over the tram track. I fantasized about

returning home, get an easier job.

Like a light that went on, mosquito bites prickled my skin. I scratched my knee. No welt yet, so the itch was all over the knee.

A 100-kmph sign flashed. I hadn't been paying attention and this was all going much too fast. Or was I too slow? 'Where are we going?' I yelled.

'I'll get you there,' Renate said.

PROSE

Allotments

H has a habit. She likes to say, This pisses me off, or, I hate this. Like, It pisses me off when the sponge is dirty, or I hate it when ants get in the kitchen. Well, excuuuuuse me, I think when she says that. Tell the world. Don't tell me.

This morning, H tells me that the grain is not being ground. Take care of it, she says. Hm, I say. Why me, I think.

I do not mean to say that things are bad with H. The nights in the allotment are silent and dark. We lie next to each other, she on her back, me turned toward her, my palm open on her stomach. We go to sleep as soon as our breaths synch. When we wake, her chest rises when mine falls and mine falls when hers rises.

You're the man, she tells me. She flicks a crumb off her thumb-heel with her finger.

I am, in fact, the man.

The grain is not being ground, she says.

You said that.

Can you do something about it?

H looks the way she would in any possible telling of this story. Slim, with black hair, narrow hips and shoulders and thin hands. She looks good on a good day. On other days, I don't look. When she wants to look tough, she will bend her elbows and put her wrists on her hips with her palms facing out and up. *Akimbo*, I think. H, Kim and Beau. Our allotment abuts a wall of the West College. We can't hear or see anything that happens on the other side of the wall, but we know that things go on. We know that for two reasons. First, well, it's the *West College*. If you want to go through the front entrance of the West College, you climb a long, shallow, wide set of stone steps. The lobby is plastered with signs for government funding available for researchers looking to refract light or fuse water molecules. A cop with white hair and blue eyes sits in a glassed-in alcove just before the doors to the corridor. The corridor – I have heard – is not infinite, because nothing is infinite, but for our purposes it might as well be. As in, nobody has ever reached the end of it.

What about the people who built it, H asked me once.

Ask the people who built it, I said.

Who said anyone built it?

Here we go again.

Anyhow, the lobby, the corridor and all the rooms and sub-corridors that branch off the maincorridor are full of people doing what they do like a bunch of *hormigas*, as my Spanish friends say, or so I hear, because I have never been there, because I am just a guy and I don't fuse water molecules or split light, so we know that something is happening on the other side of our wall, because it is the West College, for fuck's sake. The second reason we know that something happens there is that there is a chute in the wall that goes through our bedroom and a panel door below the chute, and the West College is on the other side of the wall. Every evening if we are living up to the letter as well as the spirit of the social contract, or every other evening if we choose to follow the spirit but not the letter, we dump grain from our allotted space into the chute. We don't hear anything or feel anything during the night, but each morning, flour is waiting for us behind the panel door. That was the agreement. We dump it through the chute. They grind it and give us use of the living-space portion of the allotment. In exchange, they take the vig.

When we first looked at the allotment, I asked H, What's vig. She was reading the print-out of the social contract they had given us. I was measuring the space for the bed.

It's a technical term, she said.

I noticed that we were not the only people here. Allotments ringed the walls of the West College. There were even allotments that abutted the allotments. I could not see any land that was not allotted. We waved at our neighbors-to-be, a young couple with a small, heavy child.

They waved back and smiled.

It has been this way since time out of mind, I said.

Whose time and whose mind?

What do you call vig upon vig, I asked.

Compounding.

In the morning, sometimes a little chaff is mixed in with the flour. I hate chaff, H says.

Hm, I say. Chaff doesn't bother me. Fuck if I even know what it looks like.

I don't know how you grind grain. I guess you put it between two lodestones, grind it up and break apart the good shit from the useless shit. Then you throw it up in the air and the bad shit blows away. Except when it doesn't and H grumbles about it getting mixed up in our flour.

And fuck if I know what a lodestone is.

This morning, when we opened the panel door, it was unground grain. I reached up and poured a cup through the chute. It passed right through whatever tubes or pipes or conveyor-belts or cuckoo-birds or other Rube Goldberg-type shit they have behind the wall and immediately fell into the box behind the panel door, whole as it ever was. A handful of grain will pass through your fingers like sand or crush-run, only it will leave a dust of something white and slightly sweet smelling unlike sand or crush-run, which just leave dirt. If you look at a grain of grain through a magnifying glass, it looks like a football wrapped in brown paper. If a friend holds the magnifying glass for you, you can take two pairs of tweezers and unwrap the brown paper to expose the white, jelly-like center. I was thinking of asking H where I had left my magnifying glass when she spoke.

They didn't do *anything*, H said.

It's not ground, I observed.

I hate that.

Noted, I thought. I kept my mouth shut.

You're the man.

I am.

Ask them what's going on.

How do I do that?

You *ask*.

So, that's how I ended up walking up the thirty-nine shallow steps leading to the lobby of the West College. People passed me while I climbed them, leaving the building and sprinting past me toward the glass doors that sit at the top of the steps and lead to the lobby. Most were stewed-cats who looked like they studied at the West College. Some, a little older, looked like they worked there. Most carried bags full of books and other shit you need to break light apart and fuse water molecules. All of them looked like they had somewhere to go. I envied them that. I didn't know where I was supposed to go. I just knew that I had a bunch of grain that hadn't been ground, and that H was on the warpath. Fuck if they would take advantage of me just because I am a guy and I don't split light or fuse water molecules, I thought. I said that to myself several times as I climbed the steps. Fuck if they will take advantage of me. I am just a guy, but I'm a guy, OK? A guy is a *guy*. I was good and mad when I swung the glass doors open and entered the lobby.

Can I help you, a man with orange hair, a beard and oval glasses asks me. At first, I think his hair is red. It is actually orange. He stands just past a couch, which a dog is sitting on and a woman is standing next to. The woman is blonde and thin, and stands slightly off to the side of a clump of people between us and where the grain grinder has to be.

I don't have grain, I say. Or – I have it, but it's not being ground.

These two are getting married, he tells me. *Don't bother us with your pissant problems*, he means. *We have our own shit to do. Important shit, as important as shit can get. Do not bother us with your shit.*

This is a college, he says.

You grind my grain, I say.

I do not.

Well, someone does.

You will have to excuse us.

I look over at the woman. She is, in fact, lovely. She has thin, pink lips, long, sensitive-looking hands and wispy blond hair. She is wearing a sun-dress and looks toward something at my eight O'clock. The dog doesn't look bad, either. He is large and well-behaved, with short gray hair. *Fuck if I'll let him push me around*, I think. *I'm the man.*

I need to get inside the doors, to speak with the guy who grinds our grain, I say. I point at the doors to the hallway. He works there. I square up, face him directly. Our shoulders form a box.

No, he says.

No, what, I say.

He doesn't work there.

Who doesn't work there?

The guy you say.

What guy, I say.

The guy you say you want to find.

Well, *someone* grinds our grain, and he's not doing it now.

Do you *know* that?

Oh, Jesus.

I think that he will sit down. Time favors him, of course. But he stands there, box-to-box with me.

We have a problem, I say. Who can solve it?

Stum, he says, although he pronounces it 'shtum'.

What?

Stum.

And just like that, I turn around and walk back down the steps. I am not going to be like the poor sap who sat on a stool in front of the door to the palace of justice for the whole of his allotted time waiting for the wheels to grind like a couple of lodestones or a groundhog. I'll spend that time at home, thank you very much. And anyhow, I don't know where the palace of justice is. They tell us about it, but I think it is only make-believe. The only building we can see is the West College and the living quarters on the allotments that radiate off it. If you drew a picture of me walking down the steps, there would be a speech balloon above my head with a bunch of squiggles in it, or just some black space, filled in with magic marker. The stewed-cats and the professors walk past me both ways same as when I walked up, but this time I don't look at them because I am too angry to do that without punching or kicking at them and also because I don't give a shit about how they look or what they are carrying under their arms. When I get home, I will need to tell H that, yes, I am the man, but I am just a guy. I don't split light beams and I don't fuse water molecules. And if she has any money saved up in our allotment account, she needs ask to have it freed up to place an order for a magnifying glass, a bunch of tweezers, some hand cream and a bucket of Ibuprofen, because we are going to need them for when we pick the grains apart piece by fucking piece. I'm the man, I think. If you need someone to separate wheat from chaff with needles and tweezers, I'm your *man*.

Heather D Haigh

Every Aspect Of Chelydra Serpentina's Life is Aggressive, Even Their Breeding

I read that in the biology lab. There's a quiet corner where you can hide at lunch break, surrounded by books and the tanks of fish and terrapins Mr Green claims help us all relax.

My parents are snapping turtles.
'You're always on my back,' she'll say. 'Pull your bloody weight.'
'And who the hell's got my back?' His eyes turn cold, reptilian.

But today, Dad's all tongue and beak as the muffled shuffle of slipper boots, which denote she's in tired mode, is swapped for the slap-scuff of kitten-heeled sliders—like the clack and scrape of claw on shell. She's swapped the floor-length candlewick for a scallop-edged thing she calls a negligee. Both are pockmarked with holey brown reminders of Players Number Six—circular, like barnacles.

I bend lower over my cornflakes as he moulds himself around her and fastens his teeth on her scrawny neck. My sister Kelly's grizzling in the high chair. I spoon her a dribble of sugary milk. I want to tell them Kelly needs changing and I have to go to school, but Dad's growling into Mam's ear and she's grinning like she's already made a start sinking the vodka.

I keep my head down as I slip by, shouldering my backpack. I won't be late today. We have pottery first period, and I've almost finished my kraken. Moulding the tentacles took ages. I wanted them to look exactly long enough and strong enough to wrap themselves around a boat and cradle it, or drag it below the waves. I just have to finish the painting. I'm going with a scarlet and gold kraken. If there was a monster in the ocean, I'd want to see it coming.

#

When I arrive home at half four, the house is full of a droning whimper and the stink of piss. Mam's slumped in the armchair by the telly, mouth gaping, stale breath and nicotine a cloud around her.

I place my kraken on the coffee table, his bulbous head staring around his new home, and lay Kelly's changing mat on the carpet. Her bottom is angry red and blistered. I dab on dollops of thick white cream from the pot on the hearth.

I make us both a bowl of chocolate Ready Brek. I'm feeding Kelly hers when the front door slams open. Pub's shut then. I hear Dad stagger straight into the room.

The crash is like every egg—every single turtle egg dropped by their hapless mothers into holes in the sand, left to fend for themselves until they hatch, when they can drag themselves into the sea and swim away—every single egg—just got smashed before it even had a chance.

'My kraken.'

'You left the fuckin' mat out for me to trip over, you moron.' Dad's kicking stuff around. I didn't have time to clear up. Kelly was hungry. She's whimpering now, her bottom lip wobbling like she's going to cry. She doesn't like it when Dad's voice gets mean.

A tidal wave is surging in my ears.

'And the shitty nappy.' He slouches in the kitchen doorway, dangling the perfumed bag by the handles. Sneering.

Mam sidles up behind him and wraps her arms around his waist, like they're one, like she's his shell.

My flesh starts straining, cracking, tearing, splintering—I need out of my body.

'It's not my job, you bastards. You're supposed to do this. You're supposed to be mammals.' I hurl the empty dish at the two-headed beast.

The ocean rushes in, threatening to drown us all. Their maws open in unison—ready to bite.

Just before they rip me apart, I look from Mam to Dad, then to the brown sticky globs dripping from the wall to the broken shards on the lino and realise that, if it lives, a baby turtle makes its own way to the depths of the ocean.

Longhorn

The advice I gave was non-committal, though I was dressed as a cow at the time. And not just a Friesian cow. I was a longhorn. When I'd first placed the massive head of the costume over my own, I'd almost had someone's eye out.

'Watch it!' my boss had said. He was leaning against a grey coupe. And now here I was, outside the car showroom on the trading estate, being asked about duvet covers.

'To be honest', I said, 'I grab the corners and hold on to the duvet inside, then I climb up on the bed and I jump up and down. The duvet cover just slides right on, but you've got to keep jumping, Mrs. Henderson, you've got to keep jumping. You might not think that you're making much progress, but believe me, you are. Jump up and down and that cover will just slip right on'.

'I didn't catch most of that', she said. 'You're very muffled'.

'That's because of the cow costume'.

'I'm sorry?'

'The cow costume!'

I was dressed like this to hand out leaflets advertising an exciting new range of towing bars. These towing bars had been designed for the modern motorist and were said to be more ergonomic than previous iterations. That's the word that my boss had insisted I use, ergonomic. Ergonomic and economic. They were streamlined, and had been tested in wind tunnels. On his way out that morning, Alex had slammed the front door. Usually after a row we would make up immediately so that neither of us went to work with the memory of that morning's disagreement unresolved. But that morning, there had been no such resolution. Also, it had been impressive of him to slam the door like that because it was on a fire hinge.

'I'm going back to Newcastle', Alex had said. 'I can't stand much more of your pedantic attitude'.

'It's Newcastle-upon-Tyne', I'd said.

And that's when he'd left.

So arriving at work and discovering I would have to wear the longhorn cow costume and stand out on the forecourt handing customers leaflets could not possibly have come on a worse day. Mrs. Henderson had come ambling over.

'Aaron,' she'd said. 'I'm going to have trouble with a duvet cover. I just know it. I can never quite get the hang of them and I can tell that this one is going to be trouble'.

'How do you know it's me?' I'd asked.

'Well, I ... Just assumed'.

About a week before my boss had demonstrated to me the ergonomic capabilities of the new towing bar.

'Light as a feather', he'd said. 'But strong as an ox. Which, hmm, gives me an idea.'

'Will it tow a caravan?'

'It will tow anything that it damn well pleases. Listen', he'd said. 'My wife is having one of her dinner parties. We were wondering if you and Alex would like to come over. No need to bring anything. Just turn up, and we'll take care of everything else'.

'I'll mention it', I said.

'And remember. Ergonomic, and economic!'

I could imagine Mrs. Henderson in the department store buying the duvet cover. She would have been filled with dread, because she always had difficulties putting the duvet covers on the duvets. It's weird how people keep these things bottled up. The bright flights of the department store would have made everything seem so vibrant and stark, including her own sensitivities, her own doubts. Perhaps Alex would have served her at the cash desk. He would have been professional, all smiles and showing none of the effects of that morning's disagreements.

'Thank you, dear', she would have said.

With a big queue behind her, she wouldn't have felt it appropriate to ask Alex about his preferred method of fitting the duvet cover. Often, people don't want to admit to any kind of weakness or vulnerability. Alex would have been the same, hiding his sorrow from the world. And I was inside the longhorn cow costume, of course, which is just as well, because there had been a frost.

'Can I give you a leaflet?', I asked Mrs. Henderson, 'about our new towing bar. It's ergonomic, and it's economic.'

She waved away my offer.

I had forgotten to tell Alex about the party.

'I don't like your boss,' he'd once said, which was fair enough.