

The beholder

I had been having difficulty breathing so I went to the doctor. He couldn't find anything wrong. My respiratory function tests came out clear and strong. My heart was fine, my blood was fine. My colour was fine.

Tell me again, about the breathing, he said.

It starts slight, then gets sorer and sorer, I said. It's sore at the very top of my breath then sore at the very bottom of my breath. It feels like I've been winded. It's very unpredictable. I never know when it'll come or when it's going to go.

The doctor looked again at his computer screen. He clicked his tongue.

And life generally? he asked. How's life?

Fine, I said.

Nothing out of the ordinary? he said.

No, I said, not really, well, my dad died and my

siblings went mad and we've all stopped speaking to each other and my ex-partner is suing me for half the value of everything I own and I got made redundant and about a month ago my next-door neighbour bought a drum kit, but other than that, just, you know, the usual.

The doctor printed something out and signed it then handed it to me.

Take these, he said. Come back in a few weeks if life hasn't improved.

I went to Superdrug and they gave me a little box. In it was a blisterpack, three months' worth of antidepressant. I read the piece of paper that came with the blisterpack. It said that one of the side-effects was that these antidepressants would make you depressed. I left the pills unopened on the shelf in the bathroom. The pain came and went. When it came I sat very still, if I could, and tried not to think of anything. But it's hard not to think of anything. I often ended up thinking of something.

I thought of us going through the old clothes in a wardrobe in his house and outside all the apples in the grass going soft, just falling off his trees because none of us had thought to pick them. I thought of the liquidizer on the sideboard in the kitchen back when we were married, a thing which we simply used, in the days when things were simple, to make soup. I thought of the sheen on the surfaces of the tables all pushed together in the meeting room and

the way that when I came back to my desk nobody, not even the people I had thought were my friends, would look at me. I thought of sleep, how much I missed sleep. I thought how it was something I had never imagined about myself, that one day I would end up half in love with easeful sleep.

Yes, see that? the unexpected word easeful just slipping itself in like into a warm clean bed next to the word sleep. Easeful. It wasn't a straightforward word, the kind of word you hear much or hear people use often; it wasn't an easeful word. But when I turned it over on my tongue even something about its sound was easeful.

Then one day not long after I had surprised myself by crying about, of all things, how beautiful a word can be, I had just got up, run myself a bath and was about to step into it. I opened the top buttons of my pyjamas and that's when I first saw it in the mirror, down from the collarbone. It was woody, dark brownish greenish, sort of circular, ridged a bit like bark, about the size of a two pence piece.

I poked it. I stared at it in the mirror. I got the mirror down off the shelf and held it to my chest against myself.

I've no idea, the doctor said. I've never seen anything like it. It's definitely not a wart. I'm pretty sure it's not a tumour, at least it's nothing like any tumour I've seen.

He picked a pencil up off his desk. He sharpened

the pencil. He poked me with the blunt end of the pencil and then the sharp end.

Ow, I said.

And it hasn't changed since you first noticed it? he said.

No, I said, apart from that it's got a bit bigger, and then these four little stubby branch things, well, they're new.

He left me in the room with the obligatory nurse and came back with two of the other doctors from the practice, the old one who's been there since the surgery opened and the newest youngest one, fresh from medical school. This new young doctor filmed my chest on her iPhone. The most senior doctor talked her through filing a little of the barky stuff into one sterilized tube then another. Then the most senior doctor and my own doctor each fingered the stubs until my doctor yelped. He held up his finger. At its tip was a perfect, round, very red drop of blood. While all three doctors ran round the room ripping open antiseptic packaging, the nurse, who'd been sitting against the wall by the screen, gently tested with the tip of her thumb the point of one of the thorny spikes on the stub furthest away from my chest.

Really remarkably sharp, she said quietly to me. Have they nicked you at all in the skin?

Once or twice, I said.

Does it hurt when they do that? she said.

Hardly, I said. Not on any real scale of hurt.

She nodded. I buttoned my shirt up again carefully over the stubs. That week I had ruined three shirts. I was running out of shirts.

The young and the old doctor left. The nurse winked at me and left. My own doctor sat down at his desk. He typed something into his computer with difficulty because of the size of the bandage on his finger.

I'm referring you to a consultant, he said.

Actually – you might want to make a note – I'm going to refer you to several consultants at the following clinics: Oncology Ontology Dermatology Neurology Urology Etymology Impology Expology Infomology Mentholology Ornithology and Apology, did you get all that? and when you see Dr Mathieson at Tautology, well, not to put too fine a point on it, he's the best in the country. He'll cut it straight out. You'll have no more problems. You should hear in the next ten days or so. Meanwhile, any discomfort, don't hesitate.

I thanked him, arranged my scarf over the bits of the stubs that were too visible through my shirt and left the surgery.

On my way to buy a new shirt, I met a gypsy. She was selling lucky white heather. She held out a sprig to me.

I'm sorry, I've no money, I said.

Well, she said looking me up and down, you've

not got much, true enough, I can see that. But you've a kind face, so money's the least of your worries. Give me everything you've got in your pockets and that'll be more than enough for me.

I had two ten pound notes in my purse and a little loose change in one of my pockets. I gave her the change.

Ah but what about those notes? she said. I can see them in your wallet, you know.

Can you? I said.

Burning a hole in you, she said.

If I give you all my money I'll be broke, I said.

Yes, you will, she said.

She held out the heather. I took it. It was wrapped at the stem in a little crush of tinfoil warm from her hand. She took my money and she tucked it into her clothes. Then she stood in front of me with her hands up in benison and she said:

may the road rise to meet you, may the wind always be at your back, may the sun shine warm upon your face, may the rains fall soft upon your fields, and until we meet again may absence make your heart grow, and I think that may well be a very nice specimen you've got there in your chest, if I'm not wrong, a young licitness.

A young what? I said but a couple of community police officers were strolling up the street towards us and she was busy tucking away her sprigs of

heather into her many coat pockets, in fact it looked like her coat was more pocket than coat.

Give it a few hours of sun every day if you can, she called back over her shoulder as she went, stay well hydrated and just occasionally you'll need to add some good well-rotted manure and cut yourself back hard, but always cut on the slant, my lovely. All the best, now.

What did you say it was, again? I called.

But she was well gone; it wasn't until a bit later when I chanced to be whiling away an early spring afternoon wandering around in the park that I saw what I was looking for and found the right words for it. Meanwhile the letters from the clinics arrived, the first, then another, then another, then another, and as they came through the letterbox I piled them unopened on the hall table. Meanwhile the pairs of little stubby antlers grew and greened and notched themselves then split and grew again, long and slender, as high as my eyes, so that putting on a jumper took ten very careful minutes and I began to do a lot of improvisation with cardigans and V-neck vest-tops. There were elegant single buds at the ends of thin lone stems closed tight on themselves, and a large number of clustered tight-shut buds on some of the stronger thicker branches. My phone went off in my pocket and as I reached in, took it out, pressed Answer, arched my arm past the worst of the thorns and got the phone to my ear

pretty much unscratched, the whole rich tangled mass of me swung and shifted and shivered every serrated edge of its hundreds and hundreds of perfect green new leaves.

Hello, a cheery voice said. I'm just doing a follow-up call after your visit and your tests earlier this month, so if you could just let us know whether there've been any changes or developments in your condition.

Yes, I said, a very important development, I know what it is now, it's called a Young Lycidas, it's a David Austin variety, very hardy, good repeater, strong in fragrance, quite a recent breed, I was in Regent's Park a couple of days ago and I saw it there, exactly the same specimen, I wrote down what the label said and when I got home I looked it up, apparently they named it only a couple of years ago after the hero of Milton's elegy about the shepherd who's a tremendous musician but who gets drowned at sea at a tragically young age.

Em —, the voice said.

Then there was a pause.

The other thing about Milton, I said, is that he was a great maker-up of words, and one of the reasons they named a rose after him, not just because it was an anniversary of his birth or death, I can't remember which, in 2008, is that he's actually the person who invented, just made up, out of nothing, the word fragrance. Well, not out of

nothing, from a Latin root, but you know what I mean.

I waited but nobody spoke, so I went on.

And gloom, I said. And lovelorn, and even the word padlock we wouldn't have, if it wasn't for him just making it up. I wonder what we'd call padlocks if we didn't call them padlocks.

Then the voice began saying something serious-sounding about something. But I wasn't listening, I had seen a bird above the green of me, a swift, I saw it soar high in the air with its wings arched and I remembered as if I were actually seeing it happen again in front of my eyes something from back when we were first married, on holiday in Greece having breakfast one morning in our hotel.

It's a warm windy morning, it must be very windy because the force of the wind has grounded a swift, the kind of bird that's never supposed to land, a young one, still small. In a moment you're up on your feet, you drop your knife against your plate, cross the courtyard and scoop the bird up in both hands; it struggles back against you and a couple of times nearly wings itself free, but you cup it gently back in again, its head surprisingly grey and its eyes like black beads in the cup of your hands; I have never seen and am unlikely ever again to see a swift so clearly or so close. You carry it up the several flights of stairs till we get to the open-air roof of the building, you go to the very edge of the

roof with it and then I see you throw your arms up and fling the bird into the air.

For a moment it rose, it opened its wings and held the wind. But then it fell, it was too young, the wind was still too strong for it. We ran down all those stairs as fast as we could and went out into the street to look for it, we looked all up and down the street directly below, but we couldn't find it. So God knows whether it made it. God knows whether it didn't.

Hello? the voice was saying more and more insistent, more and more officious in my ear, hello? but I was looking open-mouthed at the first burst of colour, a coiled whorl of deep pink inches away from my eyes, rich and layered petal after petal in the unfold of petal.

The scent was, yes, of roses, and look, four new buds round this opened flower had appeared too, I'd not noticed them till now and they looked as if they were really ready to open, about to any minute.

Yes, I said into the phone. Sorry. Hello.

Urgency, update, condition? the voice said.

Fine, I said. Life's fine. Life has definitely improved.

Yes, but. Results, hospital, inconclusive, the voice said. Urgent, immediate, straight away.

The voice had become implacable.

Surgery policy, the voice said.

Then it softened.

Here, it said. Help.

Well, I said, for now I'm okay though at some point soon I might need a bit of a hand with some trellising.

With -? the voice said.

I'm so sorry, I said, but I'm on a train and we may lose reception any mo -

I pressed the End Call button then switched my phone off because all four of those new buds had opened right before my eyes and I was annoyed that because I had been talking on a phone I had not seen a single one of them do it.

I have never yet managed to see the moment of the petals of a bud unfurling. I might dedicate the rest of my life to it and might still never see it. No, not might, will: I will dedicate the rest of my life, in which I walk forward into this blossoming. When there's no blossom I will dead-head and wait. It'll be back. That's the nature of things.

As it is, I am careful when kissing, or when taking anyone in my arms. I warn them about the thorns. I treat myself with care. I guard against pests and frost-damage. I am careful with my roots. I know they need depth and darkness, and any shit that comes my way I know exactly what to do with. I'm composed when it comes to compost.

Here's my father, a week before he died. He's in the hospital bed, hardly conscious. Don't wake me,

he says, whatever you do. He turns over away from us, his back to us. Then he reaches down into the bed as if he's adjusting one of the tubes that go in and out of him and, as if there's nobody here but him – can he really be – the only word for it isn't an easeful word, it's the word wanking. Whatever he's doing under the covers for those few seconds he takes, it makes the word wank beautiful. He's dying. Death can wait.

A branch breaks into flower at the right-hand side of my forehead with a vigour that makes me proud.

Here we all are, small, on the back seat, our father driving, we're on holiday. There's a cassette playing: The Spinners; they're a folk band from TV, they do songs from all over the world. They do a song about a mongoose and a song about the aeroplane that crashed with the Manchester United team on board the time a lot of them died. That's a modern ballad, our father has told us, and there's a more traditional ballad on that same cassette too, about two lovers who die young and tragically and are buried next to each other in the same graveyard, that's the song playing right now in the car in the July dark as we drive back to the caravan site, the man from The Spinners singing the words *and from her heart grew a red red rose. And from his heart grew a briar. They grew and they grew on the old church wall. Till they could grow no higher.* When

we get back to the caravan and get into our beds in the smell of toothpaste and soap-bags, when the breathing of all the others regulates and becomes rhythmic, I will be wide awake thinking about the dead lovers, they are wearing football strips, bright red, and their hearts are a tangle of briars and thorns, and one of my brothers shifts in his sleep and turns to me in the makeshift bed and says from somewhere near sleep, are you having a bad dream? and then though I don't say anything at all he takes me and turns me round, puts one arm under me so my head is on his shoulder and his other arm across my front, and that's how he holds me, sleeping himself, until I fall asleep too.

Every flower open on me nods its heavy head.

I lie in my bed in a home I'm learning to let go of and I listen to my neighbour playing the drums through the wall in the middle of the night. He's not bad. He's getting better, getting the hang of it.

Every rose opens into a layering of itself, a dense-packed grandeur that holds until it spills. On days that are still I can trace, if I want, exactly where I've been just by doubling back on myself and following the trail I've left.

But I prefer the windy days, the days that strip me back, blasted, tossed, who knows where, imagine them, purple-red, silver-pink, natural confetti, thin, fragile, easily crushed and blackened, fading already wherever the air's taken them across

the city, the car parks, the streets, the ragged grass
verges, dog-ear and adrift on the surfaces of the
puddles, flat to the gutter stones, mixing with
the litter, their shards of colour circling in the
leaf-grimy corners of yards.