

'Quietly powerful, this is a collection of stories that whisper
their way into one's mind.'

Lucie McKnight Hardy, author of *Water Shall Refuse Them*



AMONG
THESE
ANIMALS

Gaynor Jones

Among These Animals

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ISBN: 978-1-9161076-3-2

Design by Steve Campbell

Cover image by Damien Dufour via unsplash.com

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Côf a lithr, llythyrau a geidw

Prologue

So Shall You Reap

First, plant a seed in your wife. Do not worry yourself with technicalities like emotion; just move. Use the same rhythm you use to aerate the grass. It is both easier and more difficult than you imagined.

Next, watch your wife grow. First her breasts, then her thighs and at last her stomach.

Smell her. When you return each day, wash off the scent of earth and beast and pull your wife's neck to your face. Inhale.

Surprise yourself with longing, with the way the curve of her belly swells under your hand, round and glowing as a harvest moon.

Embrace. Shower her with as much affection as your upbringing allows.

Now, steady yourself as she paces the house. Try to claim back the man you were before the growing seed softened you. Become action. Fetch towels. Fetch water. Look into the strained pools of her eyes, begging you. Relent. Find your neighbour who has had four already and so knows what to do. Weep. Don't hide it. Let your heart crack open like your morning egg. Cry with them. With joy. Your wife is fine. And your daughter is here.

Part 1

One for the Master, and One for the Dame

Counting sheep is the most important job of all and whenever Carys does it, her father ruffles the curls on her head and says,

‘Mind you don’t fall asleep.’

She can count to thirty now, which isn’t enough for all the sheep, but her father says she is doing just fine. Counting sheep is the most important job of all because, although they have other things on the farm, it is the sheep that bring the money. Carys knows exactly how, but she doesn’t like to think about that.

She hopes one day to see a black sheep, like from the song, but theirs are all white, at least when they’re not covered in mud. They like escaping the fence and wandering over to the nearby ditch. That’s fine in summer, when it’s hot and the ditch is nearly dry, but when it’s boggy from rain, the sheep get stuck.

Carys got stuck in the ditch once, her wellies all covered over with watery mud. She thought she might cry, like the girls at the church playgroup when the boys snatch at their dolls, but instead she just stayed very still, watching little flies land on her arm then fly off again as if they didn’t like the taste. Eventually she heard her father shouting and she shouted back. He told her off for wandering and ordered the young farmhand with him to come help pull her out.

Carys lifted out fine, but her wellies stayed behind, and her father had to wade in, tugging at the boots until they came free with a sound like jelly being plopped onto a plate. He was cross about the mud on him, but then back home he gave her a warm bath and an even warmer scone so she thought perhaps she might wander off again sometime, if that is what happens after.

Today, Carys has got muddled with her counting, and she has a funny feeling in her tummy about the ditch. She weighs up the thought of a warm scone versus being trapped in the mud again. She decides to take her father with her.

The animal is in the ditch, but they are too late. Her father sighs but doesn’t cry. Instead of calling for the farmhand to do the dirty work like usual, he wades down himself and lifts the poor thing out, turning it onto its side on the grass. Carys tries hard not to weep, not in front of her father. She knows what happens to the animals at the farm, but she hasn’t seen a dead thing this close before. It is puffed up like a dirty cloud and smells bad.

'Come on now, love. It's part of life. We'll get this away and get you home and warm.'

Carys sniffles up at her father.

'And maybe a scone?'

Her father shakes his head at her, then calls the farmhand over to help him move the body.

Heavy is the Head that Wears the Crown

The dishes have been washed and set aside to drain. Aelwen leans against the cold stone wall, her face flushed with the effort, her stomach newly plump. Carys tries to imagine her mother young and skinny in a daffodil-yellow dress, handing out cucumber sandwiches and jam tarts. It seems impossible.

Her father says that soon the baby will be here, and then Mam won't be so tired, at which Aelwen scoffs. Carys doesn't mind her mother's absence too much. It's no secret who her favourite parent is, though she's more sense than to voice it out loud.

Barefoot in her nightdress in the kitchen doorway, Carys snuffles about the shadows in her room and the noises from the birds on the roof and says her favourite story will surely help her sleep. Derfel relents, putting down his papers.

'The hall was decorated with banners and ribbons we'd made.'

'You made them?'

'Well, the children did.'

'But not me.'

'No, you weren't there. Yet.'

He takes her hand and leads her to her small bedroom at the back of the house. Carys climbs into bed and fidgets under her woollen blanket.

'And there was a big screen.'

'Are you telling this story, or am I?'

Carys laughs and turns on her side, picturing the fruited loaves and slices of Amber pudding from all the previous tellings. Her tummy rumbles.

Derfel sits on the floor next to her bed.

'There was a big screen, and everyone was looking at the new queen, what with her huge cloak and her fancy dress. But I wasn't. I was looking at your mother.'

His eyes flit to the doorway, to the sound of cupboard doors closing and pots clanging.

'Someone was bothering her.'

'That's right. Well, they had been drinking to celebrate, you know.'

Derfel rolls his eyes and sticks his tongue out while wobbling his head. Carys laughs at the sight of her father like this.

'And you helped her.'

'I did.'

'I'd have fought him off myself.'

Derfel laughs, a huge bawdy sound that echoes round the room.

'I know you would, Carys.'

He strokes her hair and pulls the blanket up to her neck, then turns out the light.

Carys tries to picture her mother as a princess from one of her books. Her hand on her forehead, swooning, waiting to be rescued. She can't. She can picture her father easily though, with a crown on his head and a staff in his arms. As she falls asleep, courtiers bow around him, and the people outside the packed village hall wave their flags.

Pecking Order

Aelwen spreads the food on the table in the same scattered manner she spreads the grains out for the chickens – it's a goddamned free for all. Carys likes saying *goddamned*; she likes swearing any way that she can, but especially on Sundays, after church when she is so hungry after the vicar has gone on about the bastarding loaves and the shitting fishes until her stomach is rumbling and she has to squash her small hands right down onto it to try and hide the noise from her mother's pursed lips.

Carys does not quite understand the meaning of the swear words but she loves the feel of them, loves to curl the vowels and consonants in her mouth and whisper them between cracks in the floorboards. She has sworn a lot more in the years since her brothers arrived. Owain and the twins – nobody ever calls them by their Sunday names. It's as if they have no identity of their own and Carys likes that just fine.

When she was the only one, breakfast was all for her. Warm bubbled crumpets dripping with greasy butter. Thick slops of homemade blackcurrant jam on doorstep slices of bread, sitting on her father's knee, cracking the shell from the boiled egg she'd drawn a face on with warm charcoal from the side of the fire.

'Oh no, his head, his poor head.'

Her father would tickle her, sending soggy crumbs spewing forth from her mouth as they smashed the egg-man together. Her mother would laugh, relaxing, with her tea in one hand and a slice of toast in the other.

But that was before the stupid boys came along. Now, Carys has to sit last at the table. Carys has to scrape the last of the butter from the very depths of the stoneware tub. Carys has to leave the biggest crumpets for her brothers so they can grow strong even though her brothers are so much smaller than her, so much weaker than her. Carys has to be last in everything, except cleaning and tidying.

On Saturdays, she gets up early to sneak down to the kitchen. If she gets a head start on her chores, she has more time to play later. She eyes up the breakfast things and weighs up dipping her finger into the jam pot, but she daren't risk it. Instead she selects the smallest eggs to boil, then lines them up in their wooden pots and draws the ugliest faces she can on them. On Owain's face she draws

spots, oozing with charcoal scribble. On the twins' she draws long, sad mouths, crawling all the way down into the egg cups. When she is happy with her art, she takes a small metal spoon and smashes the tops of the eggs in, smashes them until the faces are nothing but broken shell and stringy white casing. As she carries them through to the kitchen, she mutters under her breath,

'Bastards. Bastards. Bastards.'

Sticks and Stones

‘See now, if you place these twigs like this, just so, you can make the walls and a gap for the gate.’

Owain is a little too young for proper building; mostly he just stacks stones on top of each other and knocks them down. The clatter rattles through Carys’s ears, but it keeps Owain happy and out from under Mam’s feet. Sometimes he is okay to play with, though Carys would rather put her hands on hot coals than tell him that. She likes the messy way he giggles at her until bubbles come out of his nose, and how he waits at the window for her to come home from school, like a pet dog. The twins are in the house, where they’re supposed to be napping, but every now and then a wail carries on the wind. Their mother paces outside the window, popping her head in and out, cigarette smoke trailing behind her.

‘And these berries, well, they can be our sheep, can’t they? Nothing wrong with purple sheep.’

Owain giggles then munches on one of the sheep. Carys lets him have it. She picks up three more and places them inside the sticks.

‘One, two, three.’

Father, Carys, Mother.

The tip of Owain’s purple-stained tongue peeps out in concentration as he mimics her.

‘One. Two. Three.’

Owain starts grabbing more berries, chubby fistfuls leaking juice. He places them into the makeshift farmyard where they loll against the first three.

‘Four. Five. Six.’

He claps, then looks up at his sister, but her eyes are on the gate where a boy on a bike is waving.

‘Just a minute.’

Carys stands and grabs her cardigan, tumbling her brother into the dirt as she rises. He cries out as the crushed berries smudge on his face, a small, pitiful sob.

Carys stands over him, sighing.

‘You need to toughen up, Owain. How are you going to run the farm if you’re crying over a bit of dirt on your face?’

She throws a tissue at him before she runs to the gate. Owain stays on the ground, his tongue reaching out for a squashed berry. It tastes bitter.

The Ditch

‘Remember when I hung you upside down by your legs here?’

The boy stands with his hands on his hips, all bravado, surveying the scene of his triumph, unaware that Carys could have righted herself at any time. If she had chosen to. It was the Easter hunt last spring. This boy and his friends gathered painted eggs, mostly for Carys, hunting around the farm until her basket was overflowing. Of course Carys remembers. She remembers the other girls scowling at her. She remembers the boys, their eyes on her bare legs. The way their laughter soon turned to something else.

‘Yes, you bugger. Had mud in me hair for days.’

She grins, then leaps from the grass edge into the cracked mud of the ditch. Owain rarely comes down here anymore, not since she told him the story of the dead sheep. But Carys is never short of playmates.

‘Oh shit, look.’

She crouches down, her black pumps turning a sandy beige in the dust. There’s a toad trapped there. Dried out flat like a cartoon villain has steamrolled it. The boy crouches next to her.

‘Poor thing.’

Carys picks a stalk from the floor and prods at the crispy body.

‘Definitely dead. Pick it up.’

The boy reels.

‘No way! You pick it up!’

Carys smacks him on the arm and watches his face change at her touch. It’s not the over-dramatic eyeroll she’s interested in. It’s the red blush of his cheeks. The slight twitch of his mouth.

‘Fine.’

He reaches down to the toad. Carys watches as his fingers close around the coarse skin. Her face is close to his, close enough to see a smattering of pimples just threatening his forehead. She forgets about the toad; she is back to that weekend, his arms around her ankles, the gawking eyes around her. Her summer blouse feels tight, the buttons ready to burst. She considers undoing the top one but then the toad snaps.

'Oh, shit! Shit shit shit! The leg!'

The boy shrieks, jumping on the spot and Carys collapses in laughter.

He throws the toad's body at the ground next to her and now it is her turn to shriek.

'The leg! Look at the leg! Get the leg!'

'You get the bloody leg!'

She clambers out of the ditch and bursts into a run, fake-screaming, her skirt flying behind her like a kite in a storm. The boy doesn't run after her. He stands still, watching. Until the plop on his arm.

'Carys! Rain!'

Carys races back to the ditch and the boy but there is no shelter: nothing to do but get wet. The toad's body begins to float away as the ditch fills and Carys lifts her legs to let it pass. She looks down: her cotton blouse is nearly see-through. She moves closer to the boy.

'You can touch if you want.'

'The toad?'

Carys laughs, shakes her head and reaches for his hand, pulling it close to her neckline. The boy snaps his hand back. They stand for a moment, watching the toad float further and further away.

'I have to go home. See you, Carys.'

Carys stands alone in the ditch, in the rain. She watches the boy run until he is out of her sight. She bends down and pulls the toad's leg free from the mud, then holds the tiny limb close to her chest. She thinks of the painted eggs in the basket, smooth and firm. She thinks of the eyes on her. She smiles, presses the limb tighter to her chest.

Embers

The pockets of Carys's dress are filled with tufts of sheep's wool that she and Owain have collected from the barbed-wire fences. Some of the wool is tinged red from the nick on Owain's hand, but Carys can still use it. She has boxes lined up and waiting at home. She makes them as soft as she can, and then puts her carved wooden dollies to sleep in them, though her mother says she should be growing out of dollies by now. She has told Owain she will let him play with her dollies later, if he helps to collect the wool, but maybe she won't. His hands are always sticky with something and he's clumsy, like now, cutting himself on the fence.

One of their father's young men is also tracing the edges of the field, looking for problems, looking for places where things might escape. All of the farmhands are young men, but this one really is young. He wears a flat cap and has a sly smile.

'What you two up to, then?'

Owain starts to speak but Carys stops him.

'None of your business.'

The young man laughs and rolls up his sleeves. His arms are coated in dark hairs, and the left one bears a tangled scar from wrist to elbow. Looming over the two of them, he puts a leg up onto his wheelbarrow and leans forward.

'You're up to something then, for sure.'

The balls of wool in Carys's pockets feel warm, like something that could catch fire if she wasn't careful.

'We're not, we just—'

Stupid Owain. Carys pushes him and he falls to the floor with a cry. The young man makes no attempt to help him and Carys feels a nip of guilt.

'Aren't you a little old for playfighting?'

Carys tilts her chin to the sky.

'I'm thirteen.'

Something passes over the farmhand's face then, something Carys doesn't understand. He stands up straight, and his tall shadow stretches across the grass. Owain picks himself up, pats down his shorts. He speaks to the man.

'What happened to your arm?'

The farmhand shrugs, sweeps his hands at the wheelbarrow full of tangled wire

loops.

'Accidents happen.'

Still, he shakes his sleeve a little so that it falls over the white marks. Owain nods, though he knows little of the true risks of farm life. Carys stands still, clutches her balmy hands tight around the wool in her pockets.

'Well. I'd best be getting on with this fence then. Wouldn't want your father to know I've been slacking.'

'We won't tell him.'

The farmhand smiles.

'I know you won't.'

As they walk away, Carys looks back. The farmhand is watching Carys with dark eyes and she thinks of the story her mother has been reading to the twins:

All the better to see you with.

Yolk

The letters are carved like a secret. The base of the thick tree trunk at the entrance to the farm now bears her name forever. It will stretch and grow with the tree, the letters reaching skyward, growing as the boy who carved it grows, until the leaves reach the clouds and she is nothing but a memory.

Owain had tried to climb the tree but Carys shooed him away. She can hear him bashing stones together at the top of the drive. She wants to be alone to feel the carving under her fingers, to imagine the hand behind it.

Carys does not know which farmhand it was; it could be any of them. She has heard them whispering about her as she passes in the yard in her summer shorts. She could stop and join in with them, could watch their cheeks turn crimson as she leans over to roll a marble or toss a jack, but she is not interested in such games. Instead she roams the fields after school, shirking her work, beheading dandelions that have no right to be growing there anyway, looking for the young man with the dark eyes and the scarred arm. Lately he lingers when he drops off the keys after his work, taking warm cups of tea or slices of honeyed toast, whatever her mother offers.

Carys is leaning down in the late autumn sun, tracing the letters of her own name, when she feels the body behind her. A hand moves onto hers, the sleeves rolled up above it just enough to show the criss-cross pattern of wire in flesh. The hand flattens out her own until it covers the carved letters, and a voice whispers her own name into her ear. She feels a peck-peck-pecking low down in her groin as though there is an egg in there, something trying to get out. When he turns her around and presses his mouth onto hers, the egg bursts open, and it isn't a bird in there, but the white, and the yolk, viscous and warm, flooding her body.

Her eyes are closed. She is gone. She doesn't hear Owain drop his stones. She doesn't see him run towards the fields. She doesn't feel the rain, thick and heavy, falling onto her skin.

Carys arrives home to her mother cracking eggs into a pan for the morning batter. The shells pile up, jagged edges slotting into each other imperfectly. The twins are in their pyjamas, tearing at pages in a comic book. Carys grabs a towel and rubs at her hair. Her father looks up at her and then up at the clock, and then

back at her. Carys drops the towel and keeps her hands at her side, refusing to flatten down her skirt or check her arms for tiny scratches from the tree.

'Come on now, boys. Let's get you to bed.'

She looks back over her shoulder at her father at the kitchen table, rolling an egg in his hand. He is moving it gently, as if he knows how easily it might be broken.

Part 2

Counting

It's not the bitter cold that causes Derfel's body to tremble, nor the longing for the whisky in his coat pocket, but the sight of the bird above. He keeps his eyes on it, watching it hover below the clouds, then swoop down to a field in the distance, though it is too far away to reveal its catch. A quick kill, no doubt. Derfel watches the bird because he fears if he looks at the ground, down into the small trench that has been dug, he will collapse.

His neighbours are here. His workers are here. He must stay upright. He raises his face back to the sky and blinks. The prayers and the songs and the sobs from his wife pass over Derfel like a cold breeze as he watches the bird again and again, counting the seconds it hovers in the air as if this mantra will keep the tears locked behind his eyes and the straight line drawn on his mouth. He is still counting when something touches his arm.

'Da? We can go now.'

Carys tries to put her hand on his, but he shrugs it off. Derfel continues to count, as he watches his daughter walk over to a group of men, awkward in their stiff suits.

Derfel counts the number of bedtime stories he has read her, the times he has bounced her on his knee, the times he has loved her and not told her so.

One of the young men slips an arm around Carys's waist.

Derfel counts the times he has shouted at her, the times he has ignored her, the times he has pushed her aside for something more pressing on the farm.

Carys removes the man's hand, nodding over to her father. The man smirks and pats her, low down on her back. Even here. Even now.

Derfel counts the times he has worried about her, the times he has felt despair with her, the number of days until she, too, will be gone.

Lambs

Carys is pretending to clean up in the back when the boys bundle the poor thing in.

‘Carys!’

The voice sounds urgent, and beneath it Carys hears another noise, a faint bleating. She shoos her visitor out into the yard, re-buttoning her blouse. She peers at her reflection in a hanging pan and smooths down her hair, then re-ties her apron around her waist before she enters the bar.

‘Oh, Jesus, lads. What you bring it in here for?’

The lamb is bleeding onto the circular beige rug, a wash of white fur and red stains that will take more than bicarbonate of soda to shift.

‘We found it on the road. We didn’t know what to do.’

‘You leave it!’

The boys are quiet, desperate. But one of the twins is brave enough to challenge her.

‘We couldn’t leave it, Carys. You know we couldn’t.’

She remembers the twins’ faces, as she told them. Swaddled in blankets with their teddies, glancing over at the empty bed on the far side of their room. She told them in the simplest way she could. She told them nothing of the rain. Nothing of the way the mud at the bottom of the ditch becomes thick as Mam’s porridge when the weather turns. Nothing of the small glove one of the farmhands found floating further downfield. Nothing of the bloody holes in her hands where she had grabbed at the barbed-wire fence as she screamed.

That night the twins appeared in her bedroom, trying to place themselves as far away from their parents’ unnatural sobbing as they could.

‘Will Ma and Da be all right, Carys?’

She had held them close to her under the covers, kissed the wisp of hairs on their gentle heads, as soft as any newborn lamb.

‘Course they will. We all will. Eventually. It’s just the shock, is all.’

She read them stories in bed and stroked them to sleep every night for weeks after. She hid the empty bottles and cans, washed up the glasses and cups newly

dotted around the house and yard and all the places her father should have been working.

The lamb begins to breathe more rapidly, the chest rising and falling. The young boys step back as Carys steps forward. She removes her apron to avoid the bloodstains – a new one would have to come out of her wages – then kneels down, begins to pat the small thing, begins to try and comfort it somehow.

‘Ssh. There, there. Ssh.’

She tries not to think of the mother, searching the pasture for her baby who is taking its last breaths here under her hands.

When it is over, she carries the body to the cold store where they keep the rest of the meat. The wound looks clean enough. If the landlord is willing to serve it, she might get a tip.

She sends the boys on their way and returns to her visitor. While he kisses her, she pictures a lamb, pattering down the road, alone. In the darkness of her mind, the mother sheep circles the empty field, wailing into the moonlight. Carys wails with it, reaching her hands out to grasp at wool and flesh, always coming up empty.

Drowning

Derfel stands in the centre of the room, his hands clutching a chipped mug filled with lukewarm tea the colour of silt. Down at his feet, two children play, passing dominoes to one another. The dots on the wooden slabs look like eyes, peering up at Derfel from darkness.

Across the room, in the kitchen, an older girl stands at a table with her hands knuckle-deep in dough. The girl lifts her hands up and out of the bowl, letting the clotted mixture dangle from her fingers, kneading it back down again, her body heaving forward each time. She shakes flour onto a rolling pin, causing white dust to fall in slow motion.

A woman seated on the couch speaks:

'Leave your father be now, boys, he's to get to work soon.'

Derfel is wondering who the father is they're talking about it when he hears it – a noise from high up in the room. A rumbling, pattering, like thousands of rats running from a storm.

The others in the room carry on. The children knock their dominoes over and the clatter tears through Derfel's ears so that he drops his mug and clasps his hands over them.

The girl throws dough onto the board, again and again, more violent with each slap.

The woman on the couch remains still.

The noise grows louder and Derfel looks up, trying to place the source. Dark mud is creeping from the ceiling beams, slopping and spilling into the room. Chunks of it fall into the dough and are kneaded into the bake, the dominoes are covered so the dots are no longer visible.

The children carry on, still sorting and stacking, though they are covered in reams of muck and dirt.

The woman remains undisturbed on the couch, her hands folded in her lap, while the grime coats her in a brown sheen.

There's a loud crack, and then a hole appears in the roof, the tiles peeling back to let the watery mud fall in from a wide circle, right above Derfel. He holds his arms out wide, welcoming it.

Seesaw

An old plank rests on top of a barrel that's been rolled onto its side. The twins take turns, running and leaping at it, shouting and scuffing their knees in the dirt while the chickens peck mindlessly around them, so used they are to the noise. Toy cars scrape their way through the dirt, a riot of beep-beeps and brrrrumms echoing around the yard. How easily children can move on.

Carys lies quietly on an old towel with a faded rose pattern. The sunshine reflects off the creased book she has laid at her side, something with gold embossed writing and a forlorn-looking woman on the cover. Flies land on the canvas bag at her side and she bats them away mindlessly.

Aelwen pegs the washing on the line, smoothing out trousers and shirts so the creases won't fix. Every now and then she pauses and lifts an item to her nose as if breathing it in, and her lips curve into something between a smile and a sob. Then her face hardens, and she grabs for another peg. And another. And another.

Derfel sits on the front step, watching the scene, noting every detail. The small stones under the chicken's feet, the matching laughter of the twins, the shadows on the floor beneath the washing line, the fine hairs around Carys's face.

A car rumbles towards the yard but stops a fair distance away and beeps. Carys gathers her things, stands up and shouts to the boys to move out of her way. She glances at her father as she passes.

One of the twins has fallen properly now and is crying. Blood seeps from the wound, a red streak in the grey dirt of his leg. Derfel takes a slug from his cup, hands trembling. Eventually, Aelwen puts her peg bag down and moves over to the yard to comfort their son. Once upon a time, Derfel would have gone to his children. Once upon a time, he would have been the one to help them.

Wild Dogs

(1)

Derfel is so used to the farm dogs running wild that at first, he doesn't notice the new one. It's a gnarled, dark thing, with wet gums and yellowing teeth. It shadows him while he works, prowling at his side as he gives out orders, hauls equipment, deals with dead animals. It ignores the wild-eyed rabbits at sunset and the brazen birds at dawn. It only has eyes for him.

One tired evening it slinks through the back door, pads through the hallway and into the bathroom. Derfel hears claws on stone, and looks at the bathroom door, slightly ajar. He stays in the bath. There is no point in moving to close the door; this is too large a thing to be shut out. The creature approaches the bathtub, sends the empty glass at the side clattering, then climbs into the bathtub with Derfel, fur flattened by the murky water. Derfel does not shoo it, does not attempt to push it away; it is easier to accept its presence in his life. It places its front paws on Derfel's shoulders and pushes him down, down until his face is under the water, until he is reduced to a stream of pitiful bubbles.

Through the water, Derfel hears a whimpering sound that pulls him out, one that could be an animal in pain, or a person about to be. He pads to the window but sees only the flickering shadows of the trees. He looks back at the shattered glass, his wet footprints darkening the stone floor from bath to window, and the lack of paw prints next to them.

Wild Dogs

(2)

To outsiders they look wild, but mostly they are not. The farm children have always known how to play the dogs. They learn early on how to rile them up just enough so that it is fun-scary, not scary-scary. They know the best places to tease them, lead them, escape them and hide from them. But lately Carys is struggling. One looks like it wants to eat her up whole and she is going to let it.

Sneaking through the house, she tells herself it feels good to be so wanted by some wild thing. It feels good to be laid down on the bed and nuzzled. It paws at her flesh, leaves deep scratches on her thighs as it has at her, licking her, nipping her, marking her.

Afterwards she lies very still and very quiet, until it asks her if she's going to be okay. That she's not going to tell her father, is she? Carys shakes her head, no, and pulls the creature back close to her body, because its touch is better than no touch.

In Season

When the day-trippers eat the blackberries, they only take those closest to the path, the ones that present themselves as easy pickings. When Derfel sees them, he nods at the parents, pats the dogs, smiles at the children. They don't know that the blackberries they help themselves to are growing on his land. The things they are taking belong to him.

Occasionally on his walks, he sees an old friend or a neighbour helping themselves to the fruit, as has always been the arrangement. Most let him pass with a simple, understanding nod, but others are full of questions. Like Ffion, who approaches with her matted little terrier panting and yapping at the flies.

'How do, Derfel. How's the family?'

'Aelwen and the twins are good, thank you.'

'And Carys?'

The dog flattens itself to the floor, paws outstretched in the purple dust where blackberries have fallen. Derfel crouches down to it. Strokes it gently from neck to tail. Observes the claws scratching at the dirt.

Ffion fills the silence.

'It's just the age, they're all like it. Impossible to get through to them. You ask anyone round here and we could all tell you stories like...'

Ffion reddens as she talks, her flushed cheeks an echo of the sweet pink juice on the tips of her fingers. Derfel stands up and waves a hand at the sky as if he understands as much about young women nowadays as he does about the particles that make up the air.

'Just the age, is that what it is?'

Ffion puffs out her cheeks and tugs on the lead.

'Anyway, these won't turn themselves to jam.'

Derfel picks a berry from her punnet without invitation, tosses it back into his throat, the tang of it clashing with the ale he had with breakfast.

The branches that hang out over the path are naked, stripped bare. All the sweetness they promised has gone. The others, the ones hidden further back, are left heavy with berries that will soon overripen. If they're lucky, they'll be plucked and shat out by birds; otherwise they'll hang there until shrivelled by the heat. To

reach those berries, you need to roll down your sleeve as far as it will go, weave your hand in and out of the labyrinth of vines, knowing all along that the thorns are unavoidable. To reach those berries, you need to be willing to get hurt.

Better Left Unsaid

Headlight beams stall at the gate. The light sweeps over Derfel's hands, which are shaking despite the warm tea clasped between them and the rum in his stomach. After a few moments, Carys stumbles out of the car and into the lights, caught. Her long shadow is all sticks and spikes, leeching from the car to the house. There is nothing about her that Derfel recognises. His mouth is dry as he speaks, his voice loud in the calm of night.

'Thought you were in your room.'

Carys tosses her hair, and the movement unsteadies her further.

'Mam knew I was out.'

'You been drinking?'

She laughs, a cruel, cold sound.

'You been drinking?'

'That's no way to speak to your father.'

'And what would you know about that?'

Derfel puts his drink down and dips his head. Carys stands, stern, her arms wrapped around herself, chin tilted up to the moonlight. Derfel stands shakily, wraps his arms around his body in imitation of his daughter and nods down to the gate.

'People have been talking, you know.'

'Oh, about me? Going in cars, is it? Or about you and your drinking? About how you haven't shaved in months and you can barely stand and no one respects you any more though they're too scared to say it?'

There's no going back now.

'You're wicked, girl. Nasty. Nasty piece of work.'

Carys stands firm, but tears spill down her face.

'Right you are, old man, get it out. Get it all out.'

'You've no idea - what it's like.'

'I've no idea? Is that what you think? That I don't know what it's like?'

'Oh, you know, do you? If you had any idea ... any at all ... you'd be helping. Instead you're out all hours. Doing God only knows what. It's terrible. Your little brother. My son. My son. And you should've been...'

He pauses, on the brink.

'I should've been what? What?'

She spits the words with a force that sends him falling backwards onto the step.

'Da!'

And then she is there, leaning down to him, holding her hands out for him to take. But he won't. He yells, pride and drink and anger amplifying his voice.

'Don't you touch me, girl. You should've been looking after him.'

'I'm not his parent, am I? Where were you? Where were you when he...?'

Carys sobs, a heaving noise like he has never heard, then slams past him into the house. Derfel rolls onto his side and begins to cry too.

Part 3

The Chain, The Dragon, The Cage

The lovespoon was a wedding gift, though Carys doesn't remember who from. Two hearts sit carved at the top, a symbol of reciprocal love. Carys traces them with her dusting cloth. The wood is shot through with knots, dark streaks bleeding into the entwined shapes.

Below that, the chain – meant to signify loyalty and faithfulness. Carys snorts. It's been under a year, and already her husband disappears for hours on end, returning with drink heavy on his breath and an unwillingness to meet her eyes.

A dragon dangles beneath the chain, one claw raised, its tail darting out. Carys has learned a lot about dragons these past few months. She knows all about sharp claws and fiery breath.

In the cage beneath the dragon sits one ball. One ball for one child. Carys places a hand to her stomach. She remembers the lovespoon on her parents' wall, an anniversary gift. Four balls in the cage. She wonders if it is still there. Carys takes the lovespoon from the hook where it sits and stares at the ball in the cage. She begins to polish it, then claw at it, trying to dig it out, but it will not be moved. She spits on it. She spits on the singular little ball, and all the things she cannot say out loud drown it. After a few moments, her sobs subside. She takes the cloth and dries the ball again, now dark-stained. She rises to hang the lovespoon back on the wall, and pictures herself nestled there in the cage. Alone.

Beneath

At dusk, when the sheep are penned in and the twins are snoring, Derfel retires to the bedroom. His hands tremble as he removes the striped nightshirt from the hook screwed into the wooden door, but he will not reach for a drink. He will not.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, where his wife lies like a stone, Derfel begins to rub at the edge of his hairline until the skin there peels away. After a few minutes it flops at his feet, hollow eyes staring up at him. This is the mask he wears the most nowadays. The one with a gently furrowed brow and a commanding jawline. The cheeks are freckle-spattered from days in the sun and there is a small clotted nick from his morning shave. He retrieves the mask from the floor and hangs it on the back of the door with the others: the one with the drawn-on smile for Saturday evenings with the boys, the stern one for when the farmhands need reminding of their place, the tear-streaked one for the rare times he allows himself to think of his son. Then there's the soft one for times with his wife, though it is now dried-out and cracked. They have barely spoken since Carys's wedding.

He watches his daughter from afar. She is standing on the church steps, her face all porcelain and rouge, a world away from the freckled, cackling girl of his memories. Her hair is plaited and crowned with flowers, but still it refuses to be tamed. As she tries to pull a stray flake of confetti from it, her face slips, and Derfel sees it. Uncertainty. And fear.

Derfel steps out towards the church, towards his daughter. He tries to catch the eye of the man in the suit, to send some kind of warning, but it is too late. The car arrives. As Derfel reaches the rear window, he sees his own reflected face, and beyond it, his Carys. She looks out at her father for a moment, and then turns away to her new man, to her new life.

Among These Animals

When he presses her up against the cool ceramic sink her arms plunge into the water. He lifts up her patchwork pinafore, the one that ties oh so loosely at the back. She allows him to part her legs with his knee while he exhales ashy air onto her bare neck. Then his wet mouth is on her and he groans, his weight pushing her forward until her eyes are level with the tray, still charred from last night's meat, that - try as she might - she cannot get clean. Strands of hair from her bun loosen and dip in and out of the water as his familiar rhythm begins.

She feels the sheepskin rug beneath her sliding under their feet and a rough hand searching out her breast through her blouse. Her stomach presses against the curve of the sink, her body a concave silhouette that he uses to steady himself. She hears the lambs bleating from the barn and the noise of them and him mingles together until she cannot tell one yelp from the other. He slows. Stops. Rasps on the top of her back. Then leaves. An apron string dangles. She ties it up again, straightens her hair and her underwear and then the rug. She clasps her legs together and continues scrubbing, but the tray is not going to get any cleaner.

Later, she moves through the house, closing windows and drawing curtains. She pauses in the smallest room, the one at the back full of piles of washing, unwanted books, small dust-covered paint pots in once-bright colours. She moves her hand across the sun-bleached blanket folded on top of sagging cardboard boxes, strokes the faded cartoon lambs nestled under bunches of balloons. She can hear the desperate bleating cries of hunger and separation as she closes the window.

In the barn, the mother paces her small patch, frenzied and bleating. Her babies pull at the gate opposite, walking in circles on gangly legs. Carys goes into their pen, unbuttons her blouse and picks up a lamb. She strokes it for a while, then holds it to her breast and grits herself as the mouth finds her nipple. The small tongue licks and searches for milk that is not there. After a few moments she carries it out of the gate and places it in the pen with its frantic mother, who stares at her with dark, black eyes. She repeats the action with the next lamb, and the next one.

Suckling their mother, the lambs are at last satisfied, and settle down in a milk-drunk stupor. She wants to pick one up again, to hold it close, but the mother

locks eyes with her. They watch each other. She stands up and stretches an arm to reach in. To hold them one last time. To have something that is small and warm and hers. Something to tend and keep safe. But still the mother watches. She pulls her arm back and mouths an apology to the sheep, to her body, to the world. Then she fastens up her blouse and makes her way back to the dark house where her only life awaits her.

Apart from the Flock

Derfel's life for many years has been planned according to the seasons, but lately the darkness of winter lingers more than ever. No amount of light can change it. As he walks, he digs his stick deep into the earth, forcing the grass to give way. It feels good to still have some power, to be able to make something yield. He presses further ahead. Sweet damp heather is crushed underfoot, and he tries not to think of his Carys, of the flowers threaded in her hair the last time he saw her all those years ago, of the ways in which she is now being crushed.

As the sun rises on his land he continues to the small paddock where the sheep rest overnight. Two dozen wiry voices bleat their morning welcome to him and nuzzle at the gate, but today he leaves it closed. Instead he climbs over the fence and kneels on all fours. He surrounds himself with their warmth, with their belonging. Then he begins to howl, a wavering cry that spreads through his face, his bones. The sheep envelop him. He will have to leave the paddock eventually. He will have to try to make things right. But for now he only kneels, in the dirt, in the mud, within the flock.

Some Girls Are Not Meant to be Tamed

Carys is at the sink when the radio clicks into life. It's a glitch that her husband can't solve, and one that she has no wish to. She turns the volume up a little, leaving bubbles on the knob, and steals a glance at the door. The newscaster is a man; his clipped nasal tones are tinny as they echo in her empty kitchen. He describes the women marching past him with a mix of disdain and disbelief and reads aloud their banners in a mocking tone.

Carys tunes out from the interviewer. She has no interest in the things men have to say. She focuses on the women in the background. She feels the light snow falling on them and the banners in their arms. She hears them chant and whistle. She hears life. She pictures the women as a great flock, herded on their way by police instead of dogs. But these women have not been tamed.

As they break into a rowdy chant,

Free Our Sisters,

Free Ourselves,

over and over, Carys turns the radio louder. And louder. And louder still. Beyond the glorious racket, she hears a door slam, heavy footprints along the hall. She braces herself for what's to come.

Cliffhanger

The wind blows Derfel's coat around him and cold air jabs through the holes of his work clothes to poke at his flesh, to remind him that he can feel – that he is, for the time being, alive.

The girl shouldn't be out here, but she is never where she ought to be. The neighbours called her a wild thing and it is only now, watching her running and cartwheeling across the green fields below the hill's edge, that he begins to see the compliment.

But this girl is not his Carys. His Carys is somewhere else. With someone else.

When Carys was small, she would fit on him. Her bare feet on his thick winter socks, no matter the season. Her hands around his waist, her chin tilted up and laughing as he sang to her, lifting his feet to move her around their cluttered kitchen while her mother tutted warmly, and her brothers crawled or cried.

Carys would remember it differently no doubt. She would remember weary sighs when she arrived home once again coated in mud, the times he snapped at her for not moving quickly enough with the breakfast. She would remember only his anger, or worse, his absence. The terrible things he had said. She wouldn't remember how they once danced, their feet moving as one, his hands gentle on her elbows.

The cloud breaks and a dart of sunlight frames the girl in the field. The kind of light that can make a man see things clearly.

Derfel looks down at his granddaughter, but she does not look up. She is moving forward; she is determined to get away. And for the first time he wonders why they ever wanted to stop her.

Thicker than Water

Dear Carys,

I hope this finds you well. We are all good here. You would love to see your niece and nephews playing with the lambs, though they treat them more like teddy bears. Da says they're soft, like Owain used to be. He talks about him now. We all do.

Da is much lighter than he was, you know, I think he likes having the little ones around. It's different from when we were young. He was always so busy. I bet you never thought you'd see him give up working, eh? Or the drink. He gets tired easily still, but that's just the age, I reckon.

Mam is doing well, she loves having the children around. Ffion told her that she'd bumped into you in Bangor. I wish you'd told me you were going; we could have made a day of it. Ffion said you were looking tired. Are you doing okay? Write us soon. The kids would love to see you. Da would love to see you too.

Dear Aunty Carys,

I have sent you a picture of a sheep I made in school. It's not a black one like the song because I don't like that song. Mam once said something about you being a black sheep and Da got very cross with her.

School is boring, but I like when we get to paint because I like being messy. The teacher tells me off when I mix the colours but it's worth it. I like the mess more than the painting, truth be told. And I don't like being told what to do! Da says I'm like you that way! Are you ever coming back to see us? I wish you would. I don't like being the only girl. Grandad is still funny even though he goes to bed early now. He lets me climb under the covers with him when it's cold. Only sometimes he forgets my name. Sometimes he says yours instead.

The Weight of It

She wants to kick a chicken. Just once. She wants to feel the plump weight of it meet her boot. She wants to see how far it would fly, how many feathers it would spill on the way up, and then again on the way down. She is so close to the chicken, she can feel the warmth of it on her fingers. She means to catch it, hold it in between her hands and send it soaring, rugby style, into the beams of the barn. But she is not stupid. She knows that she wants to hurt something, to hurt anything, because she cannot hurt him.

As she scoops up eggs from the floor, lone feathers get caught in the gold band around her finger. It shines at her, in mimicry of the red band around her wrist. The domed eggs are the shape of the fingerprint bruises scattered over her arms. Every piece of hay matches a strand of her hair, torn and thrown to the floor.

She wants to set the barn on fire. She wants to be like the women the others laugh at in the hair salon, the women in the papers, burning their bras on bonfires while she still binds herself into a girdle.

She has nine eggs in her basket when the rage finally overwhelms her. The first one, she sends reeling to the far wall. It smashes against the brick and oozes, leaving a long streak of yellow against the red. With the next she yells,

‘Bastard!’

She throws and yells, throws and yells until she is sobbing and breathless. Until the barn wall is coated in viscous fluid and the floor smattered with broken shells. She barely has strength to throw the final egg and for a moment thinks she might just crush it in her hand, let the white seep over her fingers and onto the floor. But then she thinks of the girl she once was. She thinks of laughing with her brother. She thinks of dancing with her father. She thinks of her body changing, and her mind struggling to keep up. She thinks of carvings in desks and trees, eyes on her, hands on her, the life that is not anything like the one she was promised. She thinks of her husband, leaning on his wheelbarrow, kissing her in church, grabbing at her, taunting her. She thinks of her father, and the letter resting in her bedside drawer. She thinks of home. She throws the final egg, and screams,

‘No more.’

Memory Slips, Letters Remain

The lambs are all gangly legs and mewling sounds, always running the wrong way, always getting underfoot. Derfel sits among them with his grandchildren, laughing as they stroke and pet and fuss. The sun is shining and his stomach is full and there is a folded piece of paper in his shirt pocket, a letter, from his Carys. It contains no apologies, but it is a start. She is hurting, he knows that. He will do his best to make it right. The letter sits right above his chest, right where the pain begins. As his face comes to rest on the stones, he sees his family's feet as they rush towards him. He sees the lambs pelting out of the way, as fast as their awkward legs will allow them, and beyond them he sees a young boy chasing after a girl. The girl has freckled cheeks and wild curls in her hair, and she is skipping through the grass, and smiling.

Reunion

The floor of the bedroom is bare stone and so even though two electric heaters have been bundled in, a chill still races from her feet to her legs. The sheepskin rug has been placed at the side of the bed. Once the pride of the living room, it has now been relegated to this stale room. The mirror is covered over and layers of dust threaten to consume everything else, even the body laid out in the bed.

Carys sits on the wooden stool next to her father's bed and draws a deep breath which she instantly regrets, even beneath the burning herbs. Under his stubble, her father's skin is grey-blue. The word pallid lands in her mind and flops around there like a fish, starving in the air.

She reaches out to touch his face but then leaves her hand hovering, hoping that warmth might ascend from his nostrils. If he could open his eyes, he would see that her wedding ring has gone. Pawned. And the money spent on the dark grey dress she is wearing. There is a letter in the dress pocket. Now the words might as well be dust.

The door opens a creak and one of the twins looks in.

'Mam's putting some tea on now. And cake. You've never seen so much cake. Mam's no idea where she'll keep it all.'

'People just want to be kind.'

'Aye.'

Carys takes her hand from above her father's face, reaches into her pocket for the letter.

'I'm glad he got it.'

'So was he.'

'I thought maybe, it could go with him?'

'If you like, Carys. But there's no need.'

'I'm sorry I didn't come earlier. I'm sorry.'

'It doesn't matter now. None of it does. You came.'

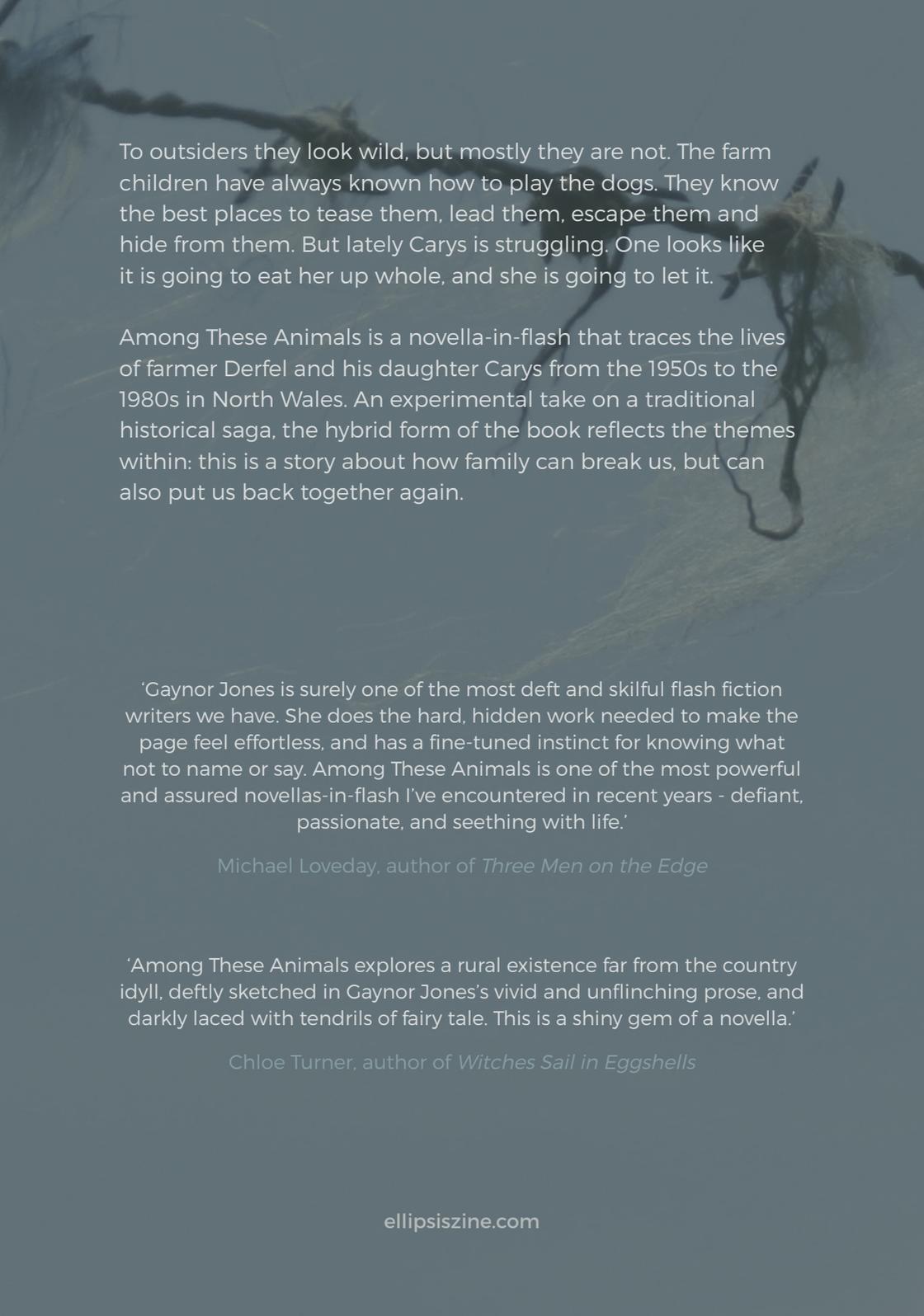
She follows him out into the sitting room, where men and women sit and talk, and children spread faded dominoes on the mat. People look at her kindly, ask her how she is. Beneath the chatter, somewhere outside, the sun begins to set, and the sheep begin to bleat.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Johanna Robinson for proofreading. Any errors in the text are mine, not hers.

Thanks to Michael Loveday for his tutoring, support and encouragement.

An earlier version of the chapter titled 'Among These Animals' was first published in *The Forge Literary Magazine*.



To outsiders they look wild, but mostly they are not. The farm children have always known how to play the dogs. They know the best places to tease them, lead them, escape them and hide from them. But lately Carys is struggling. One looks like it is going to eat her up whole, and she is going to let it.

Among These Animals is a novella-in-flash that traces the lives of farmer Derfel and his daughter Carys from the 1950s to the 1980s in North Wales. An experimental take on a traditional historical saga, the hybrid form of the book reflects the themes within: this is a story about how family can break us, but can also put us back together again.

‘Gaynor Jones is surely one of the most deft and skilful flash fiction writers we have. She does the hard, hidden work needed to make the page feel effortless, and has a fine-tuned instinct for knowing what not to name or say. Among These Animals is one of the most powerful and assured novellas-in-flash I’ve encountered in recent years - defiant, passionate, and seething with life.’

Michael Loveday, author of Three Men on the Edge

‘Among These Animals explores a rural existence far from the country idyll, deftly sketched in Gaynor Jones’s vivid and unflinching prose, and darkly laced with tendrils of fairy tale. This is a shiny gem of a novella.’

Chloe Turner, author of Witches Sail in Eggshells