

JESS FLOOD-PADDOCK

When my lover was only three she was stung in her eye by a honeybee.
When the pain went away she could only see in shades of grey; black and white to this day. She lives her life in a higher key, where everything plays out like a movie. The usual conflicts softened by colour, she sees hers like an Ingmar Bergman picture. Her life is hard and getting harder but her voice is soft and getting softer. She'll sing to me until the morning sun as obbligatos go on and on.

Aspirin. Aspirin.

I don't know if this is my story to tell but the queue is getting longer at the gates of Hell. If you're good and get to Heaven, I've heard you can walk straight in.

Now I went out Deptford way and I heard this woman to her husband say, 'I love you. You're out of sight.' And their joy made that night.

I've walked a long, long way and looked back to my last days. I've heard, heard caveats told and for every one my stomach rolled. The tyro now older and wise had to a degree mastered the violin. Rather than a sharp intake of breath, she sighed to inhale Ventolin. Settled down on her lung, the scrofula stung worse than a hive of bees. Stung worse than antifreeze.

Batteries. Batteries.

Quiet and dim the old women turn their heads and climb into each other's beds. The bear lifts its heavy head with every sentence I have read, every moment I have led.

Lightning came as blue blades several metres thick and my skin appeared cyanotic. The thunder had weight and sound. Conditions improved; I descended to the reed beds and lit a fire to be fed. After setting my plate I ate bream, cut the reeds and waded upstream. Like an anaesthetic cure, the water had no temperature. I wonder what I should do now? The swallow slowed for a second look and the fish removed the hook.

A Russian friend came to stay. He looked as if he had been a long distance away. A distance of time perhaps? A different period, another lapse.

His nervous tick was to cover his throat. He told me in Cyrillic script of his Slavic lover just twenty-five, who had been dragged from his bed and policemen tied a pink sash about his head. When his man had gone away, he could only see in shades of grey; black and white to this day. Now he lives his life in a higher key, where most things play out like a movie. The usual conflicts softened by colour, he sees his like an Ingrid Bergman picture. His life is hard and getting harder but his voice is soft, a *sotto voce* reservoir.

Have you seen a greater beauty than an old oak tree? A hundred years and it still grows leaves. Blown away by autumn breeze and in its brown can't recall its green.