

Mating Week

RUBY COWLING

SHE RAISES THEM from eggs. The adults have a week of life to mate, lay eggs, and die. Last weekend, fourteen of them struggled at last from their cocoons, taking a pause for the blood to pump into their pale green wings, and took to the air. For the last two nights they've flitted around the storm lamps that light Sarah's moth house, making indoor lightning that crackles the cool air as she works. But tonight as she opens the back door and flicks on the switch, she sees all but one of the Luna moths have disappeared.

For months she anticipates these few nights of frantic, mysterious company. When they die, she usually finds bodies on the white gravel floor, down amongst the huddled pots of young birch and alder. She'll pick them up carefully by the tip of a foot, the bodies paper-crisp and somehow lighter than air, and carry them gently out to the garden on her palm to return them to the soil. Now, though, even kneeling with leaves catching in her hair, raking through the gravel to the underdirt, she finds nothing.

The moth house is how she thinks of the small extension, bracketed by her neighbours' clean glass conservatories, that juts into the tiny walled garden at the back of her terraced cottage. She made it herself from panels of black mesh stapled into balsa uprights. Beyond the garden end is a patch of urban wood: for a while an owl used to call from some high branch back there for hours and hours as Sarah worked. Then there

were two, calling to each other, and then after a week or so she didn't hear them again.

She hatches the eggs, feeds the growing larvae and harbours the silent cocoons in a nursery area just inside the back door, and works wearing several jumpers and fingerless gloves at a wallpapering table against the brick back wall of the house, a bar heater at her feet when the night's cold enough. Her movements are so small as she works, sometimes with acrylics, sometimes oil, sometimes pencil: the moths come to rest for a moment on her hair. They're beautiful of course, in their short and glorious mating days, but her artistic interest is the fleshy little concertinas that are their caterpillars, and their long, secretive days of pupation.

Working at night in the moth house, she's free from the daytime jangle of the phone: her agent, her toddler-tied friends, the over-bright world inviting her to come and account for herself. Today, though, no-one phoned, and the four o'clock air grated with a silence so abrasive she was driven to kneel at the bookcase seeking the balm of poetry. *In my dreams I am always saying goodbye and riding away.* When Stevie Smith failed to calm her, she took out her mother's few bits of silver jewellery and the polish, and rubbed at them hard.

She leans into her drawing, uneasy now it's just herself and the one remaining moth who silently panics the air around the middle lamp. She is sketching a late larva, fat and spiny and masked with brown. She hopes that there may be eggs already, that at least there's been time for mating before the moths died. No bodies: they can't have died. So. But what, then? Her thoughts flit in small, stuck circles as she makes tiny pencil marks on the creamy paper.

Unsold works are propped six-deep against the studio wall. Her agent has started to get restless, phoning almost weekly.

"People want to look at nice things, I'm afraid," he says. "The looks on their faces when they see your stuff..."

"I know," she says. Her squirming, bristling larvae and ghostly crosshatched cocoons are not what people want on their walls. "I just – this is what I have to do at the moment."

“Darling, of course. But while you’re in this little phase, how about some pretty ones of the butterflies themselves?”

She’s told him *moths, not butterflies*, ten times already. She bites back the explanation and rings off.

Even she doesn’t know why she’s so involved with this subject – the barrier of the logical *why*, springing up unbidden, stops her even finishing a lot of these pieces – and she won’t know until she gets to the end, whenever that might be.

The larva’s almost-invisible hairs and toes make her squint, and her head aches by the time daylight comes. The phone rings in the kitchen. She’s glad of the interruption, stretching her arms and massaging the back of her neck as she goes in.

The hello comes out properly on her second try.

“It’s me,” says the caller. “Oh, just a sec –”

Sarah can hear two small combative voices deep in the phone’s aural space, their words tumbling over each other and over Melinda’s entreaties: *nicely, Grace, let Oliver – shh, now that’s not nice, give it to Mummy. Give. Grace. Oliver, stop it*. Everything in here is just as Sarah left it. She knows exactly how much milk there is in the fridge, and the battery in the wall clock still needs changing. The clock on the microwave says 08.07.

“Hi,” comes a breathless voice in Sarah’s ear, “What were you saying?”

“You rang me.”

“Oh yes. Not too early, I hope? They were up at five today. Just wondering how you were, you know, and to remind you about tonight. *Oliver!*”

“Tonight.” She eyes the calendar, which still displays the lilac-and-lemon posies of April. Flipping it over quickly, she realises today must be Thursday 5th, as there’s a scribbled—

“Sec.” Melinda’s voice goes distant again as the two small voices rise.

—a scribbled note, Mel & Steve’s 7pm. They want her to meet some work friend of Steve’s, she remembers, and she suddenly feels tired.

Melinda comes back, “Sorry – I’ve got to go. See you about seven.” And she puts down the phone before Sarah can say anything, not that there’s a real need for her to say anything.

Sarah notices the kitchen bin needs emptying, counts nine mugs next to the sink. She must do something about the skirt-board over there. Pulling on rubber gloves and swilling the fluffs of old tea down the sink, she hums, but the sound seems out of place and her throat is dry.

A life alone. Her mother used to use the phrase like a curse, but there's beauty in its assonance, its internal rhythm. It makes Sarah think of an owl's cry. She sees her friends *all the time*, she always assured her mother, though it's true that as they've staggered into their thirties and beyond it's become more difficult to fit socialising around the need to prepare lunchboxes and uniforms and get some sleep. Sarah is always pushing back a chair, saying goodnight, she must love them and leave them, get home to the studio and get something done. *I am glad, I am glad, that my friends don't know what I think.*

Night Waves is on the radio on the drive home. Steve's friend turns out to be a type her mother would have approved of; in spite of that, Sarah likes him. Scottish, graceful mover, steady eyes.

"Tell Ray about your paintings," Melinda had prompted as she carried a sleepy-eyed child up the stairs. Steve was clattering in the kitchen.

"Actually they're not paintings," was the first thing she'd said to Ray, correcting him for a mistake that wasn't even his. They talked a bit about her moths, and he made her laugh without her quite knowing how.

"I've never understood why you'd want to buy art just to look at it," he said, as they sat down to eat. "I mean, something that just looks like something. Why?"

Mel and Steve raised eyebrows at each other, fearing controversy, but Sarah felt a little leap, a freshness under her skin, and said:

"No, he's fair enough, if it just mirrors something, it's pointless."

He had hardly talked about himself in the usual curriculum vitae way, and hadn't asked her any of the usual questions

about herself either, but it seemed already as if they were co-conspirators, kids who'd seek each other out in the playground. Mates. When he did talk about his own work, in computers, she was surprised how interested she was. Unlike Steve, he was happy at the company; Steve said – not for the first time – that his kids were his life, that work was just a means of feeding and clothing them, and Mel had nodded and squeezed his hand. Ray was working on something about *persistence*, which he said was a quality your data gains when you tell the machine to save, that is, make a record, until which point it doesn't exist; and although she didn't fully understand how his project was finessing this idea, the idea itself pricked her.

But Steve had leant in and quipped, "You'll need persistence with her," and then one of the children was heard padding around upstairs and since they'd finished dinner Mel took Sarah up to say a final goodnight – for they are fond of each other, Mel's children and Sarah – and they didn't go back to the topic.

As she was pulling on her coat after coffee, Ray asked for her number, and she gave it to him. But if he calls, she's not sure. It's a lot of trouble. You say you'll go for a drink and then after a few months you're sitting straight-spined on separate halves of the sofa blurting horrible gobs of truth at one another and someone starts crying, and it's back to square one.

Once she's pulled into her drive and roughly lined up with the letterbox on the front door she turns off the engine. There's silence and darkness and she takes this moment, as she likes to do, to savour the fact that no-one knows exactly where she is right now; it's as if she *isn't* here right now, and for a few heady seconds she is unchained from the world.

It's in a dream that night that she's back on her knees in the moth house. She pulls aside the drainage stones under the planters, finds nothing. She shoves through the lower leaves

of the young birches, tipping the planters to climb further in. Then she sees something stuck to the underside of a large leaf, hanging there as incongruous as a third ear. It's a cocoon – a moth's – but it shouldn't be out here; she takes care of all those stages in her array of plastic pots and old cordial bottles in the nursery. It's also larger than normal: fatter than her forefinger and nearly as long. She sees another one clinging to a stem, and now look, there are a handful, a dozen. Another pupation is taking place; inside these cocoons the moths are remaking themselves a second time. There's a split in the first cocoon already and she can't resist; gently holding the leaf, she pulls a nail down the split and opens it up. Instead of the moist folds of a new moth, what's inside is dry and white. A scroll of paper. With her nail, she hooks it whole out of its brown shell and it drops to the ground. Her hands are shaking but she picks it up and unrolls it. On the paper are faint markings, not much more than whispers, but they form a familiar image; the most familiar image, in fact: the shapes and outlines of her own face.

When Ray hasn't phoned by Monday, Sarah gets restless, and then annoyed at that, like a bite on top of a bite. If she could admit it, which she can't, she'd say it was the old clamour for a mate, unwelcome and unhelpful and maddeningly compelling. Since the dream, she's flowing, finishing her drawings, but the quiet nights are making her shiver.

Starting her day, in the warm May glaze of 5pm, she takes more care than usual clipping new sprigs of leaves from the growing alders and misting the larvae's tubs with water. She's bothered by the frass on the sheet under the tubs, and she gathers up the sheet and presses it into the washing machine, adding the kitchen tea-towels. She hesitates, then goes upstairs and strips her bed. Turning to come backward down the stairs, she bends and sweeps away the rolls of dust step-by-step with a pillowcase.

Dustpan and brush come out, and a damp cloth and a pine spray and the Hoover. By nine she's attacking the spiderweb corners of the moth house. She pushes a stepladder through

the greenery and climbs to where roof mesh meets wall mesh at the wooden frame. The heat up here is surprising. It muffles things. Then she feels a slice of cool air moving the hair against her neck, like something whispering to her. She touches the skin where it's brushing, and follows the invisible rope of air to the shadowy panel of mesh in front of her. There's a hole. This is where they've been leaving. Her moths haven't been dying and disappearing; rather, they've been flying away from her to freedom: sensing the slim corridor of air by temperature or sound or some mysterious moth-knowledge – it was probably as obvious as a motorway to them – and taking this little doorway into the rest of the world. As they have every right, she supposes as she slowly retreats down the stepladder, to choose to do.

With the end of June come short working nights and a reckless abundance of daylight. Sarah knows she's losing nothing when, after some cautious texts followed by phone calls almost adolescent in length, she agrees to an evening picnic with Ray. She doesn't need so much of the night, anyway: the moth works she's finishing will be her last, and although she never perfected the pencil drawing of the caterpillar it was recognisable, at least; she got it down. There is something of hers to see, now. She has talked her agent into taking all her moth works for a joint exhibition later in the summer, and, maybe, she'll ask Ray to come to the opening. What she will show ought to be enough: her long-flown creatures in their former state, persisting, as if she still held them cupped precious in her hands.