

Andrew Jamison

**SWANS WE
CANNOT SEE**



Gallery Books

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for Rory and Gus

'Harmoniously'

What was that word you learned this morning
at Radley Lakes as we peered over the railing
and saw the swan, ibis and cormorant
leaving each other alone as I told you
to leave the duck alone, swimming
by itself to the water's edge as I pointed out
the empty beer cans and why they're bad
and shouldn't be there, after you asked
about the noise from the machinery
in the neighbouring quarry, even though
it was so still otherwise, no other walkers
before the moorhen skittered across
the surface, before I told you not to scare
your little brother with all that shouting
especially when he's sleeping or trying to,
before we picked the unripe plums
because they looked so good, before
we closed the gate behind us with a click
and set off home for lunch through town,
through the busy town, with the people,
the people skittering over the surface
of their lives, like birds who share a lake
next to a quarry, next to a town of beer cans
and plums, shouting and sleeping. Go on,
what was that word you learned this morning?

To Abingdon

Quintessence of suburbia, roost
of aspiring middle to senior leaders,
hub of reasonably priced supermarkets,
apotheosis of the all-in-one
retail park, forum of first-time parents,
fount of first-time buyers, epicentre
of the steady, treasure trove of thirty-somethings
growing up reluctantly, still playing
games consoles in Converse and T-shirts
with slogans, consortium of the comfortable,
compromise's capital, mediocre's Mecca,
paradigm of the perfectly fine —

let us drink your ale, eat artisan produce
from your overpriced organic farm shops,
traverse your cobbled marketplace with prams,
talk, outside your coffee shops, of houses,
new play parks, government childcare schemes,
let us, without sarcasm, praise your Christmas lights,
appreciate your one-way system,
the multi-storey car park with one hour free.
Grant us nothing spectacular, console us,
in our cries for attention, with anonymity.

'We returned to our places, these Kingdoms . . . '

. . . to find the townsfolk stuffing their faces
with pigs in blankets, Brussels sprouts, sauces,
one of red, foreign berries, one from bread —
creamy, nutmeggy, not a little divisive —
wearing paper crowns, glued to a king
on a mounted flat screen, delivering
his speechwriter's speech from autocue:
how horrible it must be for everyone,
given the high prices and issues,
he imagines, like feeding a family, offering
his thoughts. Millions hang on his words,
with brandy on their breaths, breaking wind
on sofas in centrally heated rooms —
scents of liqueur and brassica suffuse.

There are presents, wild-eyed, pyjama-ed children
and wrapping paper — we had never seen
so much wrapping. Fake smiles, discarded gifts,
terraces festooned with illuminations,
as arguments break out over word games
in dwellings full of hot, unpeopled rooms,
wi-fi connected voice-controlled devices,
leftovers, and boiling water taps, a people
clutching green bags full of numbered letters,
scoring points against each other.
There are times we long for that manger.

Tenants

I pull up a chair next to my bachelor self,
a little sojourn into the past, Bristol,
the big bay window in the rented flat.
We take note of the building's other residents
returning home: they claim their post,
you can hear them clomping up the stairs,
talking loudly on the phone to loved ones,
making dinner, the clang of pan on stove,
post-work debriefs with flatmates, arguments,
laughter, a bottle uncorked, sighs, slammed doors,
TV and an intermingling of children.
Tenants: have we ever been anything else
but over-paying, get-out clause inhabitants,
here for a bit, before the next place?