

Joanna Lilley

The Gamekeeper

This far north, midsummer nights are frayed,
unravelling to reveal more light than is decent
At three, the gamekeeper wakes
to brighter than usual lightness
Rolling from his wife and rising to the window,
he watches flakes fall, uncaught by adolescent leaves

This numbing snow is rare in June,
though bar-and-tankard rumoured
Outside, his boots break crystals on brittle soil
as he strides to higher ground
He has never loved a woman as he loves this land,
stroked by wind to smooth contours

Heather and bracken endure
but monthling grouse are less resilient,
their parents' plumpness not yet acquired
Red wattles quiver as he snaps a frozen bog,
walking watchfully, slowing through twisted stalks,
bending to scoop a yellow body to his cheek,
curving his lips to breathe on beak
He has never held a woman as he holds this chick

There are many corpses, stored in heather caves
Robbed, by winter's furtive visit,
of a summer life he would have granted
in preparation for a more glorious end
A skyward soar, gun-broken by a plummet
When, gathering the day's kill,
he would crush the skulls with his fingers
to gauge each bird's dying age,
knowing from lore and experience
that young bone breaks more easily than old