

Poems

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Nightshift

I follow the beam of torch
across the silent yard. I touch

the outhouse switch: the barn
hangs bright like a lantern.

All the ewes are lying down
content to wait till dawn –

in the candlelight of straw
lamb and mother stir. Before

I sleep, I wander up the road
in the dark without the aid

of the torch and watch stars
bleed into their full brightness –

I cannot measure their depth
nor detect the turn of the earth.

Cattle in Rain

The gateway's a washed out festival site
where cattle sink to hocks –
their knees are caked in clay and shite,
are crusting into rock

and look like the knot of a burr of oak
where the tree's been cropped
or grown around a wire. They stand stock
still, unmoved, looking up,

waiting for the end. Until they're co-opted
into the warm barn, where
through the dark of winter they'll be kept
safe in the knowledge of their

return to grass. A promise made of air.
A promise we'll break
this time next year. We'll think it clear
but the outlook is bleak.

The Ring

Rows of cattle pens –
each one containing the care
and vulnerable life's work
of a farmer.

First lot in –
the calves are confused by the circular
empty space and the wall
of people looking.

One of the hands –
his tobacco rollie cigarette
a smouldering twig
in his mouth –

taps with a cane
each calf in order.
The auctioneer reads everything –
the quality of a calf,

the slightest expression
on the face of a buyer;
this one a stranger, this one
he knows well.

The pen is empty.
Time for the auction ring
to move. The auctioneer
gives the order –

each farmer, dealer,
takes hold of the rails
and all the men and women
walk in unison

and the whole
huge rig of galvanised steel
is moved the few meters
to the next pen.

Out back are stalls –
second-hand books, DVDs, cakes,
and in the middle
an old man

selling watches,
surrounded by trays of cogs and lenses.
He says he can fix
anything that's dead.

Lines

Starting from scratch, resting on the surface,
begin your line. Don't rush, work at the pace
of hands, whispering your words, in touch
with each arc and dip. Don't think too much.

Let your mind drift – memories of a valley,
footsteps, stories the length of a field. Finally,
turn and look back over what you've drawn.
Ask yourself: how curved or straight is my line?