

GAZING

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND: NEW WRITING 2020

Young Davy watches the skies at night, his eyes bright as distant suns. The videobox tells him there are other lives out there, other worlds waiting for him. He thinks he hears voices, he thinks there are fingertips tapping on his window at night, he thinks there are untold stories. So, he builds a rocket ship from the broken boxes his mum takes from work, and sets the destination to Far Far Away.

We watch from uncertain times. In all the years that follow (even as he grows tall and moves to a space of his own, even when he says goodbye to his biscuit-sweet, frail mum and scatters her to the stars), Davy never makes it much further than the city borders. A holiday here and there, of course, trips out for work when required. But with her gone, he is alone.

Then he meets Anne at a house party. All hazy eyes and bitten lips and gentle fingertips, Anne laughs at her own jokes. She twiddles her hair and says wonderful things that Davy doesn't expect about footsteps on the moon. She smiles at Davy, and the planets shift.

"Smoke?" Davy asks her, when he's courageous enough.

Outside, the stars reflect in her eyes. Love At First Sight is a cliché but, to Davy, it feels true. Truer than so many things he's told are real.

Davy says he wants to build a ship that flies through the dark oceans of space. He feels stupid and smitten.

Anne says she wants to lay out on the grass and stare up at the sky. She is drunk and cookie-sweet. Davy is drunk and nervous. And so, besotted, Davy asks for her number.

Davy eyes the phone for days, eager but unable to call. He thinks of his old mum — if she was with him, she'd likely put the receiver in his hand and press the right numbers, forcing him into action.

Eventually, Davy calls Anne with a script rehearsed. She says yes and wonders what took him so long. He wishes he hadn't wasted so much time in nerves. Davy buys a picnic blanket and packs a hot flask to keep them warm.

They meet on the hillside when Jupiter is due to show its face. They chat and drink as though they're old friends, and wait for the night to fall. Anne tells Davy about the constellations, how ancient people made stories about the stars, how they lived and sailed by them.

"Their stories burn and live up there," Anne says. "They'll never be forgotten."

"Let's make our own," Davy says, and that's what they do. Each week, they meet on their hillside and tell tales of children searching for a home in space, star-bound lovers, swans and giants and heroes, little girls who run from home, and poor little boys who lose their mothers but grow wings and fly high to catch stars.

They spend many moons intoxicated by each other. Eventually, Davy catches a star for Anne. He puts it in a box.

"Yes," Anne says. "Of course."

Davy feels like a rocket, all fire and metal, bursting through the stratosphere. Things change.

The years fly: new homes rise on alien landscapes, they kiss and make strange little creatures, watching them grow. Wrapped in protective gear, their troupe ventures into the vast night in unknown directions, for unknown is best. They tell jokes and songs, make stories of other lives and other worlds that may be waiting for them. Davy put on voices to make the little ones giggle: "Bawr stretter, stretterhawl!"

In that simplicity, Davy is content.

He doesn't want change. He doesn't expect it. He cannot imagine life without Anne, but he doesn't have a choice. She is gone quicker than he had found her. Lightspeed. His universe cannot expand anymore, so it collapses.

Their kids grow, they have wings, but they are quiet without their mother's songs. They migrate far far away, build their own nests, fill them with hatchlings. Davy has seen the pictures; he has framed them. They look happy but unreal.

Old Davy has shrunk under the weight of his years, crushed by his own gravity. He slumps in his chair, the blinds closed over his windows. He thinks he can hear lovers kiss and children sing outside, so he turns on the video box, tunes it to snowy static and raises the volume, sinking into the pit of its noise.

"Davy," we whisper, tapping his window.

Davy fiddles with his hearing aid. He pours himself a drink, watches the once-white walls.

"Davy," we say, louder this time, so he cannot ignore us. "It's been so long." Davy is stubborn. He drowns our voices with another drink. But we are persistent, too. We tap again, louder and louder until the pane almost breaks.

Davy is afraid. He wants to call for help. He wants us to stop. But a particle of Young Davy sleeps inside him, tucked up and woozy, but still intrepid.

He opens the blinds.

Old Davy cries when he sees our wings and white light. He races to the hill as quick as his old legs will take him, and he lies on the grass.

Even in his old and faded eyes, the stars are polished gems. He remembers spaceships made from broken boxes. He remembers Anne's hair, her lips and laugh. He wraps himself around his kids, and they sing together.

Davy recites the stories he told. He will make new stories, he tells himself. He feels himself rise, rise, rise into the vast unknown.

Unknown is best.

Russell Jones is an Edinburgh-based writer and editor.