Astronomy for Beginners

You were eight and fishing for planets and stars, slopping a bucket of rain into the back yard. You were waiting for cloudless dark, expecting the pinpoint reflections of Rigil Kentaurus or Mars to crystallise under your nose, or a constellation – whole and in tact – to glaze the surface like a web of frost. Or what if the moon grew hard and dense in the water’s depths like some knuckle of dinosaur bone – you’d need a landing net. But only Polaris proved itself in the liquid lens, then dissolved when you lifted it out on your fingertip.

A Russian telescope didn’t help: some camera obscura inside the tube flipped the map of the galaxy upside down; in the peephole eyepiece, families dangled from ceilings like bats, and sheep hung from green clouds by their hooves. You were thirty by now.

Tired of the stake-out, tired of panning for sunspots and fool’s gold you traded starlight for bird life, birds with their costumes and songs and shows. Once, in a shoulder of sand on Windermere’s west shore, a dunnock curtsied while eating bread from your open hand.

Old brightnesses, old loves. And now you’re scanning again for omens and signs, apple bobbing for hyper giants and white dwarves, calling down deep space onto a blank page, trawling for angels and black holes with a glass jar, knowing we’re dying, knowing we’ll never make it that far.
Where did that tin of luminous stickers go?
And the solar system mobile spinning
on near-invisible thread? When she left home
you crashed out on your daughter’s bed and woke
in a Navajo cave, a remote language of light
coming steadily into creation overhead.

Simon Armitage

Commissioned by the Royal Astronomical Society in celebration of
their 200th anniversary.