Our new Short Story of the Month is ‘Flowers’ by Emma Timpany.

‘This is the place: four fields in the shape of a rough parallelogram…’

Searching for a space to plant the seeds of her flowers and, indirectly, her future, a woman forges a subtle bond with a man undergoing his own struggle.

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Flowers

This is the place: four fields in the shape of a rough parallelogram. On her left, one part of the closest field is enclosed behind wire mesh. A path runs through long, wet grass towards a gate in the fence. Ahead of her is an open-fronted barn with a caravan parked inside it, a chimney rising from its roof.

She cannot see anyone. She is about to leave when, looking again, she notices a figure kneeling inside the fencing.

She walks over but he does not seem to know she is there. He wears a suit, some kind of woollen weave, not tweed.

Hello.

Hello.

He is young, younger than her. He stands and wipes his hands on his clothes. His hair is flat and yellowish. Despite his smile, his face is the wrong kind of white. He has been ill. Is still ill, perhaps.

Rachel said you wanted someone to grow flowers.

Yes. He shakes his head as if confused. I only just woke up. I still have to sleep a lot. But I remember now.

She doesn’t know what to say. She doesn’t know what she was expecting but it was not this.

Are you cold? he says. It’s cold today.

And bleak, she does not say, this place is bleak.

Let’s have some tea.

The barn smells of dirt and straw, the caravan of damp. His bed is a heap of sleeping bags and blankets; the cups are stained with a thick layer of tannin. Roll-up butts huddle, crushed together in a jar lid.

Sit down. Here. He moves a pile of books from a seat. Rachel said you were a florist.

Well, yes. Sort of. I never meant to be. It wasn't what I wanted.

He lights the camp stove, rolls a cigarette.

My family were. Florists, I mean. My grandfather lost his job in the Great Depression. Five kids and nothing to eat. So my grandmother started growing flowers. She doesn't know why she is telling him this. She doesn't tell anyone this. She shakes her head.

I don't have any biscuits.

It doesn't matter.

I only have goat's milk. Is that okay?

Yes. She has never drunk goat's milk. That's okay.

It is raining. In her mind the earth has a red tint but now she sees that, under the rain, the soil is deep brown, black, almost. He has laid out some beds within the wire mesh, six rectangles of soil. The fence is to keep out the rabbits which will otherwise eat everything.

Look. He points to a line of feathery green leaves. I planted them in December and they're up already.

Are they a type that grows in winter?

No. I was late putting them in because I was in hospital. All this should have been done earlier, in the autumn. This soil must be good soil.

It looks like good soil but she will not know until she starts to work it. The rain is heavy now, too heavy for her to begin.

In the shelter of the barn, he shows her rows of tools. Most are old but some are new, their dull, silver light an oddity amongst the rest, the well-used and the worn.

The next time, there is no sign of him, though she scans the field for a crouched figure in suit. Inside the barn, still air that could mistakenly be called warm but is only the cessation of wind. Through the caravan window, she sees him curled up on his side, blankets heaped around him, holes in the bottom of his socks.

She climbs over the rabbit fence and puts a bin bag, filled with bags of bulbs and packets of seeds, down by the side of the bed of freshly dug earth he indicated, last time, that she could plant. Returns to the barn for tools along the path of beaten grass. Begins to mark out a row.

The rows of vegetables in the neighbouring beds are all perfectly straight. By contrast, the trench she has made wavers. She goes back to her row and tries to even it up, mentally making a list of the things she will need – bamboo poles, string.

The soil smells slightly of iron, of leaves. Small stones appear occasionally but it has a lightness to it. She opens a packet of bulbs – tulips – and looks at them in the dim light. It is three months past the optimum time to plant them. She bought them cheaply from a local discount store but they look in good condition, a bright brown, shiny sheath on the outside of the pure white bulb. Plant at twice the depth of bulb. She lays them out fifteen centimetres apart then covers them.

The beds are larger than she thought. She adds sawdust to the list in her head. The last seeds she plants are poppies. Light, tiny, they are indistinguishable from the soil as soon as she sows them.

You've been busy. He is wearing an old oilskin over his suit.

Yes.

What have you been planting?

Bulbs, she says. Seeds. She fumbles for the packets and hands them to him. Her jeans are soaked from where she has been kneeling.

These are nice. He holds the empty poppy packet.

They were free. I wouldn't have bought them. Because the flowers only last a day or so. Still, I can use the seed heads.

That's a shame. About the flowers.

It's often the way. The most beautiful don't last.

He is looking at her rows.

I should have made them straight. Next time I'll bring some string.

I've got some. Poles and string. Didn't you see them in the barn?

No.

Before he got ill, he tells her, he was a set designer. Now he works on the field. The quiet here, the growing things. It is his way of making himself better.

Look, peregrine.

She does not want to look but, raising her head, she follows his finger to where the bird flies through veils of rain.

We should go in. Shelter from this. Do you want tea?

No, thanks. I'm soaked. She is cold now, having been still for so long. The thought of sitting in the caravan is not a pleasant one. I'll be back next week.

She knocks mud off the spade and fork and carries them back to the barn. He opens the caravan door; warmth from the camp stove drifts out. Condensation fogs the windows. He is smiling at her, and she wonders what he is going to say.

Could you bring some milk when you come next time? I can't have dairy. Goat's milk. Or soya.

Sure, she says.

Back at the car she takes off her gumboots, her soaking coat, and loads them in the boot. Strips off her jeans and wraps her lower half in a blanket. Drives home that way.

From the highest point, where she now stands, and the high point opposite her, the land creases down, as if it has been folded on the diagonal, into the corner farthest from her. Because he is working near the bottom of the crease, it is hard to make out what he is doing.

She has forgotten the milk.

It has already started to bother her that it is his soil, his earth, his rules. That she is merely scratching, borrowing a few centimetres of surface. And yet she cannot imagine belonging to this place, it being hers. It is not what she would choose for herself. It is too high, too exposed. The jumbled boulders of the carn seem, at times, a reflection of her confusion. And then there is the cold, a deep earth-and-stone cold, the kind that gets in your bones. She wonders again what is wrong with him, what was wrong with him.

The quiet, though, also has a way of its own. In the way her life is away from this place, it feels like nourishment. Every action she initiates proceeds, un-thwarted, until it is complete. No-one else to consider except for the too-thin man she sees out of the corner of her eye.

She is planting *Liatris spicata.* The bulbs are dark, knobbly, a light hair of old, dried roots on their bases. Their hairiness reminds her of sea potatoes, found on the nearby beaches at low-tide. When she looks up she notices two parallel rows of bamboo

canes, joined at their apex, stand in one of the beds. Supports for beans, perhaps, or peas. Everything he does out here, in the beds, is so neat. But it is not neat in the barn or in the caravan.

No rain today but it is cold. Smoky-yellow light crouches at the edges of the sky. Next, she plants a row of *Camassia leicthinii*, a cultivar of quamash. The bulbs are white and smooth, small green shoots already sprouting from their apical points. It is far too late to be planting them. She tries to think of May, when these bulbs will produce long, straight, green stems, and then star-shaped flowers, blue and cream.

She hears the soft sound of his boots on the grass. As she turns, reluctant to stop her work, she briefly wonders what he thinks of her. Her neck aches, so she rubs it.

More bulbs.

Yes. Look at these. She lifts an *Eremurus stenophyllus* tuber from brown paper, holding towards him the flat disc with leggy roots, like the dried limbs of a once fleshy spider.

And they'll stay in the soil? Or will you lift them?

No. They'll stay. They form clumps. Bulbs like these, perennials, reproduce themselves asexually. Clone themselves, basically. So you get more flowers year on year.

This seems to surprise him. She has no idea what he knows or doesn't know about flowers.

The next time there are lots of people at the field. It takes her a while to find him. People talk to her, seem interested in what she is doing. They tell her things about the man who owns the field, assuming she knows more than she does. Without her prompting, his secrets spill out on the grass. They all seem excited by the fact that their friend has this surfeit of space. Many of them live on boats, in vans and caravans squeezed into corners of fields, fringes of towns and villages.

She sees him in the distance, reassesses his age down a notch and then down again. How aged he is by illness, by the experience of illness. It makes him more like her; it is the bridge that links her on one side and his friends on the other.

She has found out, quite recently, that her brother has been lying to her. For years, he has stolen from her, from the joint assets left to them by their parents. He calls what he did an act of love. It is not love. There is a chance that she will lose her house, lose everything she has worked for.

The friends start dragging dead wood into a circle. Some-one sets light to it. Bottles appear and a keg of beer. She plants *Nectaroscordum siculum*, an onion-paper fine sheath over its bulbs, which will one day be a handful of purple and green striped bells dangling from a wiggly stem. By the time she finishes, darkness is come. She looks over to the circle of light. The flames give his face the colour it normally lacks. She catches a glimpse of how he must have looked and how he might, perhaps, look again one day.

In the weak sunlight, the green tips of the first bulbs she planted poke through the earth, cast tiny purple shadows on the soil, and she sees what he has described to her but she has never really believed. There is a view of the sea. Distant, complex with lines of trees and land in the foreground and further back a skewed triangle of mint green water, a violet horizon.

Tomorrow, February tips into March. In the soil she finds a lime green grub, curled and sleeping. More seeds have broken through the earth; tiny as watercress, they tremble as if exhausted by the division of their first leaf into two. In the hearts of the hyacinths, flower spikes push upwards.

She knocks on the caravan door. No reply. She opens it, pulls a pint of goat's milk from her pocket, leaving it on the floor where she hopes he will see it.

The goat's milk was fresh today 28/2. See you next week?

She is annoyed that she brought him milk and he isn't here. But she is also pleased. Words have stopped, are trapped inside her. She does not want to talk. She wants to plant flowers, row and rows of flowers, and wait and watch and tend them as they grow.

Thank you for the milk.

I didn't bring any today.

What are you planting?

Lavender. She has bought plug plants and potted them on, hardened them off in her courtyard garden; against the vastness of the field, they seem tiny. She plants them through a layer of weed matting, cutting crosses and slotting one plant into each gap.

How long will they last for?

They'll grow and get bigger for about ten years or so. And then they'll die off.

As the day ends, she hears the sound of cars, footsteps and voices echoing down the track, the clink of bottles. The friends build a fire with new, dry boughs. They distract him, keep him busy, talking. In the fading light, he shifts from old to young, young to old.

Her back aches. She tidies her things and looks at what she has achieved. There is little to see; the bulk of her labour lies beneath the surface of the soil.

The sky is a serious blue, which means darkness is not far away. Through the still air she hears the sharp crackle of flames and smells dry wood burning.

Today she plants the last of the bulbs, some alliums, the *Triteleia laxa*, and the sweet pea seeds, pre-scored. The poppies and the cornflowers are through. The love-lies-bleeding. The soil is warming. The irises have produced grey, strap-fine leaves. A violet ground beetle scuttles away under her hand. An idea, a question, a friend of a friend – all of these things have led her here. Now, the hyacinths are opening. As she cuts through their thick, sappy stems, washes the dirt off the leaves and lower flowers, the few open bells release a clean, sweet scent.

He has also been planning and planting. She has helped him to lift off turf and peel it back, in preparation for a second row of beds.

The weeds have started to grow; the perennial buttercup, its net-like roots spread horizontally, is particularly hard to shift. She tracks the white roots of dandelions, zigzags of light in the dark soil, their wounds leaking a milky sap.

He digs for a while and then he stops and coughs. Whatever is wrong with him is taking its time to give up its hold.

He has gone to drink water, hand resting on the tap until the coughing eases. His clothes still hang on him like the clothes on a scarecrow. When was he last well? When did he last live in a house? She considers this coldness, rising from the earth, his enemy. She thinks he does not do enough to protect himself against it. How can he become better if he is not warm?

How will he get better if he drinks from filthy mugs?

He has seen her looking at him and now he beckons her. She climbs over the fence, her shoulders tense.

He points to a new ridge of earth by the side of the barn. From here she can see thin sticks are planted in it.

Willows, he says.

They'll grow big.

I know.

Why here?

Because this is where the house will go.

You're building a house?

One day.

To live in?

Isn't that why most people build houses?

I thought…But she doesn't know what she had thought.

He begins talking about dwelling rights, planning permission. The house will be built out of straw bales, with wool as insulation.

She cuts the *Camassia leicthinii 'Alba'*, secures five stems with a rubber band and drops them in a bucket. The alliums are ready, tall Gladiator and the squat lavender starburst of *Allium christophii.* Once they are all cut and bunched, she moves them into the shade. Dahlia tubers lie in the trench. She covers them with soil, then plants sedum around the edges of the bed, a type with purple-black leaves and, come September, small, hard, ruby flowers.

She is beginning to realise that he did not think she would plant anything permanent. He expected that she would grow flowers from seed and harvest them, an annual crop. There has been this miscommunication right from the beginning, probably the result of her reluctance to talk, his assumption that flowers were grown in the same way as vegetables.

She tells herself it does not matter. Everything she plants, with a couple of exceptions, can be dug up again and moved. Like people, flowers travel: transplanted with care, they usually manage to re-establish themselves, to put down new roots.

Twice in her life she has tried to run away from flowers, the first time from her family's floristry business, the second time when, out of necessity, she worked as a florist in London. Yet here she is, back among them. They follow her, it seems. Or she, unwittingly, unwillingly, follows them. They present themselves to her as opportunities, the only options.

She knows their common and Latin names. Some have been her companions since earliest childhood, their names learnt alongside her own; they have always been amongst the most important inhabitants of her world. The flowers she grows, that line up wonkily behind her back like a beautiful army, are not as delicate as they look. They are survivors.

She is ready to go. She walks over to where he is working, beside the willow bank.

Goodbye, she says.

I'm going to get a digger in, to grade the earth flat for the house, he says. I'll get them to scoop out a pond while they're here.

I brought you some milk, she says.

Come and see the pond, he says.

A shallow basin has been scraped out below the flower beds, the excess soil tipped at the southerly edge, building it up into a bank; the effect is pleasing, as if the far lip of the pond were somehow floating above the lower parts of the field.

In her childhood garden, there was a stream, dividing the formal beds around the house from the secret spaces of a stand of native bush. A simple bridge, arch-backed, connected the two worlds. She remembers what it was to paddle in that stream, the little beach of pale gold gravel it left before it exited the property, edged by a rustling screen of bamboo.

So water, yes.

Nothing exists without water.

So many things are flowering: *Liatris spicata*, *Eryngium planum*, nigella, cornflowers, sweet peas. She comes early to cut the flowers, weeds a little, covers the soil in mulch to stop it losing moisture to the sun and is ready to leave by midday.

When she hears the caravan door open she looks up, expecting to see him, but a woman emerges and walks towards the standpipe to fill the kettle.

Hello.

Who are you? the woman says.

I'm the one who grows the flowers.

He comes out of the caravan, rubbing his hair.

When you're finished, can you give Jo a lift back to town? he says. Are you finished?

Yes. Pretty much. Just tidying up.

We haven't had breakfast yet, Jo says. We haven't even had a cup of tea.

You can have breakfast when you get home.

Are you trying to get rid of me, Jo says, before I've had a cup of tea?

Of course not, he says. I'll make you some tea. Would you like tea?

No, thanks, she says. I'm going soon. But I brought some milk.

As she carries the flowers to the edge of the track, Jo sits on one of the benches by the fire circle and talks to her. The things Jo says are funny in a pithy kind of way. She's pretty, too.

He brings out two mugs of tea.

I'm off now.

Do you mind giving Jo a lift?

Not at all.

I think I'll spend the day here, Jo says, stretching and looking around. It's going to be a beautiful day.

Do what you like, he says. But you should know I've got work to do.

Don't mind me. Jo lies back on the boards, folding her hands over her ribs, shutting her eyes. I'll be just fine.

The pond water is pale bronze, the suspended particles of soil in it yet to settle. He is wading, thigh deep, forearms immersed, planting marginals below the surface. The scent of water is softly mineral, a note of freshness amongst the dry grass and the dust.

Flower buds form on the tiny lavender bushes; the leaves of the sedum are dark as wine. What is winter? Its memory lies in the earth, beneath the bark of the shrubs, the trees. It lies in leaves which tremble in the light. It lies in pollen, gold and grey, the bees collect and carry with them from flower to flower.

When she looks over to the pond again she sees him floating on his back, arms and legs splayed out, five-pointed as a fallen star.

Years later, on the day she comes to dig up the last of the flowers, he is not there. He has gone to work in Greece for a while, Jo tells her. On a sustainable building project.

Jo stands in the doorway of the house made of straw. I've got a flat in a proper house again, she says. I'm moving on, too.

The wool they'd used as insulation had been full of moth larvae. They'd had a massive infestation, as well as trouble with mice.

What sort of trouble with mice?

They were falling out of the ceiling onto my face, Jo says, while I was asleep.

What can be done?

Jo shrugs. Perhaps the moths have got into the straw. Perhaps the house will have to be torn down, and they'll start again somehow. He's gone away to have time to think things through.

Time to think. She had had it, in the hours that she spent here on her knees, eyes on the ground, hands in the good earth.

The willows he grew from sticks reach above her head. The lavenders have filled out from tiny plugs to dense, thick pads. They will remain, along with some other plants that are difficult to shift. Though she tries to lift them carefully, she is bound to miss some bulbs. After she is gone, they will put up their heads each spring, aiming for the light.

Will he think of them as a nuisance?

Or a gift?

Five years on she has managed to reclaim most of what was lost. Now she is moving to a new house with a garden big enough to hold all these flowers.

She walks over to the pond. On its green-grey surface, water lilies float, white and cream and copper-red, stands of sedge and flag iris softening its edges, and she feels it, as she felt it when she was a child, flowers all around her: a sense of dissolution between here and now and whatever lies just out of reach.

Here.

All that has filtered down into the darkness has given life to flowers that open like a hand; in the centre of each a deepening of colour, which she can hear as if it were a sound.

Nothing exists without water.

She thinks of him and knows that he is well.