

## RECKLESS PAPER BIRDS

John McCullough's first collection of poems, *The Frost Fairs*, won the Polari First Book Prize and was a Book of the Year for *The Independent* as well as a summer read in *The Observer*. His most recent collection, *Spacecraft* (Penned in the Margins, 2016), was named one of *The Guardian's* Best Books for Summer and shortlisted for the Ledbury Forte Poetry Prize. He teaches creative writing at the Open University and the University of Brighton.



# Reckless Paper Birds

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#### NOTES

‘Soulcraft’ takes its title from both a book by Bill Plotkin and a popular series of action RPG games. ‘Michael’ was written after figures were released showing Brighton has the second largest population of rough sleepers in England, with a quarter of all young people who are homeless identifying as LGBT.



Reckless  
Paper  
Birds



## The Zigzag Path

The day connives and you think you cannot live here,  
in your body, alone and rushing forward all the time

like a silty river. All you wanted was to find a home  
beside the souls of white roses and hurt no one

but the light keeps shifting. An invisible broom  
keeps flicking you out from cover. You roll up

at each destination with a different face, as wrong  
as the beech tree in Preston Park hung with trainers,

a museum of tongues. The day connives, but this dirt  
is proof of trying. The chalk path you never longed for

zigzags through cowslips no one asked to throng.

In the park, a robin has built its nest inside a Reebok,

the shoe's throat packed with moss and a crooked  
whisper of grass that says *I can, I can, I can.*

## Flock of Paper Birds

I needed the God of my childhood to be useful  
so I folded him, shaped his pages into wings.

Cranes at first, then more challenging roosters,  
swallows, owls. I pinched edges, split clauses

to make word plumage. I fractured Leviticus  
with pleats. Now toucans mount doves

on the kitchen counter, near an unholy pile  
of geese, cloacas gaping, beaks jabbing everywhere.

Birds plummet from shelves without bothering  
to flap, remember nothing. Ink blurs,

feathers yellow. They drown in baths, rip luridly,  
turn up mangled in the hallway, footprints

across their necks. Mostly, they're individuals,  
smoothly indifferent to each other's fates,

though now and then some prop up neighbours  
if they topple, and when I lie with a visitor

beneath my quilt, incubating his glorious buttocks,  
the flock discover their throats and sing together

while I guide my tongue along warm creases  
and the tight sheet of his body unfolds.

## Tender Vessels

I keep trying to slip away through the crowd  
but history won't take its mouth off my body.  
What was exacted on someone else's softness,  
his cuttable flesh, is always about to happen here.  
The vague kinship which exists between tender men  
glowing with thirst starts in awareness of this,

how we're unstitched by tongue prints, resurrections.  
Standing in a street party one Pride, I saw a figure  
stomp through, fists raised, and strike three boys.  
They dropped to the ground, clutching their heads.  
I witnessed everything, squeezed a stranger's shoulder,  
then, fifteen minutes on, my body was distracted

utterly by the smell of oranges. The unspeakable  
scrapes a fingernail across my neck but I can only  
concentrate so long before I wind up decanting  
myself into the nearest fizzing light: Instagram,  
house music. It's like those inventors who tried to devise  
a spray-on cast for broken bones, created Silly String.

But there are remedies worse than squirting  
metres of sticky mayhem across a jubilant face,  
outcomes bleaker than attempting, despite the scissors,  
to inhabit this twenty-first-century skin.  
I live in a dream of plummeting from the earth's  
tallest building without ever having felt more beautiful

because I'm not the only one falling. I'm in a crowd,  
a loose democracy of descent, velocity with its hands  
all over our bodies, but not enough to stop us  
gossiping and blowing kisses as we speed  
through the air together, reckless paper birds.  
They will find us with our beaks wide open.

## Stationery

September is going all out to ease us in.

The clouded sky is a whiteboard for helpful diagrams,  
the first cool air as welcome as your hand inside my jeans.

Autumn zips round with its orange highlighter  
and you provide nifty shocks and marshmallows,  
leaving pornographic Post-its that ask me to rendezvous,

please, for hot chocolate. I am the type of man  
who likes unnecessary displays of manners,  
who appreciates thank you cards, warning signs,

a forest of regretful notices for building works.  
I admire rows of ginkgos that lose all their foliage  
in one drop to form a Yellow Brick Road.

I am a desperate Lion today, stalking Scarecrow.  
I chew biros, glimpse at my watch too often. I was so afraid  
of being late to see you, once, I turned up six days early.

Love is horrific like that. First it's a rabbit, then a duck,  
then it's a ravenous, one-eyed sock puppet;  
but the rest is yoghurt adverts. And you fasten my thoughts

with the most beautiful paperclips, even the filthy ones,  
like the time I saw a grove of ripening chilli plants  
become a rainbow of penis trees. *Do you wish to continue,*

says the voice of a self-service checkout. Yes, yes I do.  
Between the shops, the sea snuggles under its blue leaves.  
The clock tower waits patiently for Christmas,

a familiar figure below it wagging his arms  
to lure me over. Succeeding. Your skilful face punches  
a giant hole in the day and I jump through it.