



## **The Lowing of Cattle**

by Chris Cottom

We move anyway. Barry reminds me we always dreamt of Dorset, insists that converting the 'byre' will be the reset we need. I'm worried the cowshed isn't the only thing that's crumbled beyond repair. In the lean-to, where they penned the calves, I find a cracked plastic feeding bottle, its red rubber teat brittle and filthy.

We toast my sixtieth as the rain rat-a-tat splats our on-site caravan like a demented snare drum. Barry babbles about 'letting the building speak to us', about 'opening up new vistas', like he once talked about opening up our marriage. I hadn't been keen on that, either.

I wander around our drifts of head-height nettles, our crusts of corrugated iron, wondering how we got here. Sometimes in the gloaming, outside what's supposed to become our home, I hear ghost calves calling for their mothers, the cows mooing back, separated forever on their very first day.

Barry buzzes his power tools, wields his wrecking bars, happy in his workwear trousers with integral kneepads. If he hadn't called time on trying for the miracle we longed for, he might have sired a dynasty to help clear the rubble and crud, the bindweed and ivy. After we heft a mountain of broken breezeblocks, he insists I take the first shower while he does another hour in the lean-to.

I scour and scrub and cry, picturing that plastic feeding bottle, its big rubber teat. I go back out, knowing I can't do this, can't live in this place of cruelty. When I tell Barry about the ghost calves, he just laughs, starts wittering about upcycling some rust-pocked milk churn he's found. But all I can hear is the lowing of cattle: generations and generations of mothers and babies, calling for each other.