

LBRIS

We know  
books

*Seascraper*

BENJAMIN WOOD



**PENGUIN**  
**VIKING**

LBRIS

We know  
books

*First Low Water*

Thomas Flett relies upon the ebb tide for a living, but he knows the end is near. One day soon, there'll hardly be a morsel left for him to scrounge up from the beach that can't be got by quicker means at half the price. Demand for what he catches is already on the wane, and who's to say the sea will keep on yielding shrimp worth eating anyway. There's all sorts in the water now that wasn't there when he was just a lad. Strange chemicals and pesticides and sewage. Barely a few weeks ago, there was a putrid fatty sheen upon the sand from east to west; a month before, he waded in a residue of foam that reeked of curdled milk as he approached the shallows. Fleeting things, but if you're asking him, they augur trouble – it's been hard to sleep of late. His dreams are full of slag heaps made from rotten shrimp, and he's there in amongst them with a shovel, trying to clear a path.

It's five o'clock or thereabouts. He rises with the sky half-dark between the junction of his curtains, weary with the aches of yesterday. The sea-clothes he peeled off when he came home are slung over the chair beside the open window for an airing: his wool jumper, oiled and mangy at the chest from the persistent wiping of his hands; his trousers patched up at the knees; a shirt gone vinegary beneath the armpits. But no matter. Who'll be sniffing him except his mother and the horse?

He wears clean long-johns and a fresh white vest to balance out the stink; his ma has folded them so small and neat inside the drawer that he could slide them into envelopes and post them back to her. It's Thursday, so a hot bath will be taken when he

gets back home this afternoon. A nip or two of brandy will be needed afterwards to dull the sting of his exertions. Sleep should follow then, till suppertime at least.

For now, he scrubs his teeth and dashes water on his face. His eyes are puffy, jellified. Three days' letting whiskers grow has made a scratchy beard – he'll shave it later, when he feels awake enough to hold the razor straight. His ingrown nails are doubly sore this morning, and his knees crack when he walks – it always takes him half an hour to get his body moving properly. He's barely twenty years of age, but he goes shuffling down the hallway in his stocking feet with all the spryness of a nursing-home resident. The bulb inside the kitchen light is faltering again – a quick tap of the lampshade fixes it. He fills the kettle, sparks the stove beneath it, rinses out his flask, and spoons in mounds of instant coffee and three sugars.

His ma is snoring in her room along the hall. The noise is like a pig slurping its feed out of a trough, and if it isn't getting louder every morning then his tolerance is fading fast. Each snagging intake of her breath grates on his nerves. He makes a good strong cup of tea for her, the bag squeezed in the water till it has the look of casserole, and carries it into the gloom to leave upon her bedside stand. She doesn't stir when he clicks on the lamp; he has to prod her shoulder. All the baggy flesh there wobbles with the jabbing of his fingertip, which makes him recognise how long it's been since he last touched another woman. An awful shudder passes through him at the thought – his youth is coming to an end, and all the lasses he has ever kissed could sit around a bridge table.

The crust on his ma's eyes cracks open slowly, and she levers herself up to rest against the headboard, not a word of thank you, just a nod to mark the furtherance of their routine. Her curls are flattened on one side. She seems as tired as he feels. Her single denture bathes inside a glass upon the windowsill; it makes him mindful of those extra sugars in his coffee, all

the butterscotches from the corner shop he's chewed in secret down the years. He goes to fill his flask over the kitchen sink, knowing she'll be in her dressing gown and moving soon, to fry some rashers for his breakfast.

The horse needs feeding up and harnessing. He gets into his boots on the back doorstep, rolls a ciggie underneath the rusty canopy his grandpa built from corrugated iron – it's hanging by loose screws, and one more heavy rain could bring it down. He's not repaired it yet, as mending stuff like that requires an aptitude he doesn't have. His talent is for something else – his grandpa would decry it as a waste of time if he were still alive to hear him sing a tune, and if his ma knew anything about the pocket watch he gave to Harry Wyeth in trade for his guitar, then she would make a bonfire of it in their own backyard.

The first smoke of the day is always one to savour, but it feels especially good this morning – he's not certain why. A change of weather's coming, he can sense it in the air, the early dampness of it on his face, the low hang of the clouds beneath the waking sky. It looks an average day for shrimping, but he's thought that many times before and come back with his whiskets empty. Standing tall, he can make out the chimney stacks of Longferry a mile away, a line of upstairs windows not yet lit. What do people have to dream about so deep into the day, if not great piles of rotten shrimp? Where do they all go while he's out labouring on the beach?

The draught horse – a well-tempered gelding he's declined to give a name for superstitious reasons – is expecting him. Its big head juts out of the stable door, awaiting his arrival with the buckets. *Stable* is too nice a word: it's no more than a tin-and-breezeblock shack his grandpa made some time ago, just wide enough to house one animal and all its tack, an eyesore that abuts their cottage to the east. Their backyard is a paddock with a mesh wire fence; great dollops of manure abound in it like molehills. It'll be his task to shovel it and spread

it on the rose-beds for his ma, but that'll keep. For now, he trowels some forage in one bucket for the horse and fills another up with water. He carries them along the bald track in the grass and puts them down inside the stable, saying, 'Morning, boy,' and stroking the daft creature's neck. While it drinks and guzzles, he goes out to finish off his rollie and prepares the harness, lifting down the heavy collar from its hook in readiness. It's always a surprise how fast the horse is satisfied and empties out the buckets: a fair-sized animal like his needs roughly thirty pints of water every day, which means a lot of circuits from the stable to the outside tap and back throughout the week. He brushes down its coat to clean away what's left of any grit and sand, then rushes through the sequence of the harnessing, so automatic to him now that he can do the job with bleary eyes and weakened fingers. The horse is gentle and it takes the collar gladly. It'll wait there nice and patient for him while he checks the gear's right in the cart and eats his breakfast.

There's a haze of bacon grease inside the kitchen when he steps back in. His ma stands at the stove, barefooted in a dressing gown that seems to shrink each time she washes it – the hem stops just below her knees, and the old cord's not long enough to tie around her waist without it slipping. There's only half an inch of height between them and just under sixteen years. She's moving like a crab between the gas hob and the breadboard on the worktop, where two slabs of a loaf are lying thinly margarine'd. The wireless is on, but at so low a volume it's impossible to tell what's playing. She hears his boots smacking the floor, and says, 'What's making you so tardy at the moment?'

'Didn't think I was,' he answers, sitting at the table where she's not exactly set a place for him, just shoved a few days' worth of newspapers away to form a clearing.

'I'd say you're half an hour behind where you're supposed to be.'

'I'm going by the charts. Five forty-two, low water. What's it now?' He checks the wall clock. 'Bugger.'

'Told you,' says his ma. It's nearing half past.

'I'd better get this eaten, then.'

She passes him a loaded plate. The rashers are too hot, so he dips bread into the runny yolk of the fried egg. 'All right,' says his ma, 'don't wolf it.'

But he does – he throws it down as quickly as his mouth can work it over. His ma leans back against the sink and lights a ciggie, watching him through slatted eyelids: it's as if she's seen the neighbour's cat stalking a bird and cannot bring herself to intervene. He sits there eating, wearing her attention for as long as he can stand it. There are certain men in town who'd die of gladness if they got a passing glance from Lillian Flett – he'll never understand the fuss. *She might've piled the weight on, but she's still a very handsome woman is your ma*, these fellas like to say when they come over for a drink, a compliment that stings worse every time he hears it. 'I'll be off to town before you're back – I've somebody to see,' she tells him. 'And I reckon if I settle some of what we owe at Pattinson's, he'll let us have a few more things on tick. D'you fancy mince or cutlets?'

'I don't mind. As long as you put something in the meter – I'm not eating it by candlelight again.'

'There's plenty left.'

'All right, then. Cutlets.'

'Good. That's supper taken care of.'

As she reaches round to knock some ash into the sink, she lifts one foot behind her, showing all the grubby flatness of her soles. She has a callus on the joint of her big toe. Her ankles are so swollen up they give her lower legs the shine of sausage casing. He swears he didn't notice things like this when he was just a lad, but now the house is much too small to guarantee their privacy from one another, and his ma still carries on about the place as though he is a guileless boy who won't mind

glancing at whatever parts she leaves uncovered – when the sad fact is, his eyes are drawn to them against his will, the same way they would be towards a burning building or two drunkards brawling in a car park. ‘Ta for that,’ he says. ‘I’d better go and get the cart hitched up.’ He’s not quite finished chewing, but he stands and puts his plate beside the sink for washing.

‘Leave it there, I’ll do it,’ she says.

‘Thanks, Ma. See you later.’

‘Don’t be stopping off at Harry’s on your way back home again. It’s Thursday.’

‘So it is.’ There’s little chance of him forgetting. It’s her night for playing rummy at the church hall with the ladies she’s too stubborn to call friends – she’ll not be home till past eleven. The house will be his own, at last. He’ll go and fetch his instrument from where he’s got it hidden in the stable, wrapped up in the ratty saddlecloth he never uses. He can spend some time beside the fire with his guitar, perfecting his arrangements of the tunes he’s learned. Then he can wander over to the folk club at the Fisher’s Rest and pay his tanner, have a listen to whichever group or singer is performing – maybe he’ll sign up to play, if he can summon up the spirit. ‘I’ll come straight from the badger’s. With a good few bob in hand, if things go right,’ he tells her.

‘Aye, God willing.’

‘See you in a bit, then.’

‘See you, son.’

He collects his flask and pecks her cheek on the way out. In the back room, he puts on his oilskins. It’ll soon be rain-hat weather, but he stuffs it in his pocket and decides on Pop’s old cap instead: his lucky charm. He takes the big tarpaulin with him, too, still bundled in a roll with string, as he was taught to keep it, dry and orderly. The horse seems happy staying in its shelter, but it doesn’t get to choose – they’re more alike than they appear.

By the reins, he leads it up the path to where he's set the cart for hitching. Half a dozen empty whiskets are collected in the back, which he'll be very pleased to fill, and both the nets are folded in a fashion it won't trouble him to disentangle later on. He finds room for the tarp, as well. The horse stands good and still for him as he makes sure the cart's two shafts are snug inside their loops and everything is hitched up tight. He settles in his seat, a few feet off the ground behind the animal, and takes the reins in hand again. 'Walk on, boy.' He clucks his tongue. They roll out of the yard and through the gate.

At this hour, it doesn't take too long to reach the landing at the beach. Fifteen minutes, riding on a curve until the unpaved track behind his cottage joins with the straight line of Marshbank Road, when there's a sudden clamour as the horse's shoes clip on the tarmac, a soft rubber whoosh from the cart's tyres, and all the disparate houses start to bunch together on both sides, with shopfronts on the corner of each block presenting wares that tempt him into yearning for the things he can't afford: good leather boots, a proper shaving brush, a nice wool suit, thick books with gleaming covers, new LPs.

In his grandpa's day, the shankers all rode out in a procession: twelve carts clopping down the promenade, their horses making such a din it could be heard above the ring of church bells. All those fellas have retired or moved away, and some are in the ground at St Columba's graveyard. He's the only shanker left in town who's steadfast to the old ways. There's more profit to be made by using motor rigs and shrimping further down the coast near Broughton. Motor rigs can trawl a pair of ten-foot nets in deeper waters than he'd ever risk a horse in, catching four or five times more than he can manage. There aren't so many sinkpits to be wary of up there. The beach is sheltered by the dunes. The rigs have custom-fitted boilers on their decks so they can cook the shrimp on board and skirt

around food safety regulations, too. His ma – great schemer that she is – thinks he should get a bank loan to upgrade his operation: buy a scrapyard lorry chassis and an engine, add the shed and boiler with a bit of help from a mechanic. But he doesn't have that sort of motivation. He's no empire builder. He's accustomed to Pop's methods and he won't relinquish them so easily. Those ugly rigs are prone to rust, and, if you're asking him, they'd be a waste of money – neither boat nor building, more like someone's outside privy put on roller skates and given a big, panting motor. No, he'd sooner give up shanking altogether than succumb to using one of those.

The promenade is always free of traffic early in the morning. Wind is hurrying the sand along the gullies of the road. In summertime, Longferry is a town where people seem to go on purpose. There'll be day-trippers parading arm in arm here, come July, great lines of coaches parked up in the lay-bys spilling hordes of pensioners in sandals, giddy children dripping ice cream from their knuckles. This is when the shanking season's over and the shrimp are left to breed. It's someone else's playground then, and he can take or leave it. But in early March, it's just another dismal place that folk can pass through on their way to somewhere more appealing, and the beach is where they stop to let their dogs run round.

He brings the cart down to the landing ramp and rides on a diagonal. To the north, the long legs of the pier, aglow with lanterns; to the south, the shores of Broughton and a stretch of grassy dunes receding into marsh. If he hadn't traded in his watch, he'd check how long until the water starts to rise again, but it's not hard to reckon it by sight when you're accustomed to the job.

For now, the sea is just a faint grey runnel, two and something miles away. He rides on undulating sand that gives beneath the wheels as readily as butter. Biting wind and mizzle on his face. There's no one else to talk to but his horse, who

cannot answer back, and wouldn't say a thing worth hearing if it could. Great whorls of steam rise from its flanks as it goes trudging on, the rattle of the harness making accidental music. He keeps his eyes trained on its shoulders, heedful of the slightest change in its behaviour or its gait. There isn't any sureness to the ground hereafter and no promise that a hoof will not land false somewhere and drop. A draught horse could be seventeen or eighteen hands and it might still find trouble in the channels of Longferry. There are sinkpits all across the beach, if you go far enough to reach them. They can drag your horse down by the fetlocks till it cannot move, and if no one is there with you to pull it free, you'll have to cut the straps and leave it there to drown. It happened to his grandpa half a dozen times in nearly sixty years of shanking. There's no sense in getting soft about a horse when you've been raised on tales like that.

Even in the best of weather, it's infuriating graft. He knows that he'll be out here on his own for a few hours, drudging with the seagulls in his ears and shitting on him from above, repeating the same motions as the countless days before. It bores him worse than it exhausts him. Now and then, he'll let his mind stray, whistling out a tune or coming up with different verses for 'The Jolly Waggoner', but when he's less attentive to the job, mistakes can happen: like a decent catch escaping from his nets because he didn't tie the dadding lines up tight. That's just the sort of thing that costs you time and money, gets you scolded by your ma when you return with nothing for the coffers, and she won't be shy reminding you of how you failed her. If your concentration goes out here, you're at the mercy of the unexpected. Habit's all you can rely on.

Now he's out a mile from where he started, give or take, and he can see it up ahead – the sea's white lip, another mile away. The sight of it is more familiar than the wisps of his own