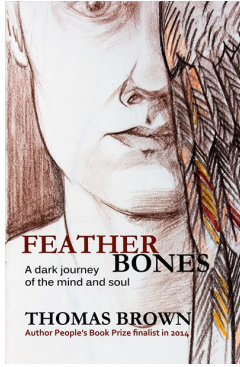


Featherbones



"Featherbones is an ethereal love song to a city by the sea. Thomas Brown's beautiful novel depicts a liminal world of statues, drownings and winged creatures"

By Thomas Brown

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Thomas Brown has spent the best part of his life reading and studying fiction of all kinds, but his heart beats for Horror and Fantasy.

In 2010, he won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition for his short story, 'Crowman'. In 2014, he won the Almond Press Short Story Competition, 'Broken Worlds'. In the same year, his first novel, LYNNWOOD, was a finalist for The People's Book Prize. In 2018, he completed a doctoral degree at the University of Southampton examining the limitations of language and how to navigate them to better communicate meaning through fiction.

He lives and works in a small market town bordering the Cotswolds, where he still writes every day.

About the book

Felix walks the same way to work through Southampton every morning, and the same way home again in the evenings. His life up to this point feels like one day repeated over and over; a speck of silt caught in the city's muddied waters. Sometimes it is all he can do to sit and watch while the urban sprawl races indifferently around him. But when the city stares back at him, one evening after work, everything changes.

He doesn't see the statue's head move, but he feels its eyes on him, studying him from its lofty perch in East Park. From then on he continues to glimpse it, or something like it, encroaching with every visitation. With it come memories, spilling through the streets, crawling through the dark, haunting his night-time flat, until he isn't quite sure what is real anymore and what is imagined, in this hard, grey place where the gulls watch him sleep...

Reviews

"...a unique story and I appreciated that, along with the beautiful writing. Very thought provoking novel." - *Ana Carter, Reviewer, Canada*

"Featherbones ... is beautifully written, with almost lyrical prose. It's the kind of book that sets the mood early and it can be a bit overwhelming in its greyness. Stay with it and you will be rewarded by a well plotted story that twists and wanders so many places. If you like Magical Realism with a touch of Psychological Suspense, this book will delight you. I think it would make an interesting book discussion selection." - *Janet Kinsella, Tacoma Public Library, USA*

"Featherbones is an ethereal love song to a city by the sea. Thomas Brown's beautiful novel

depicts a liminal world of statues, drownings and winged creatures. It's also a real page turner. I love this book.”- *Rebecca Smith, author of The Bluebird Cafe*

“This is an exquisitely written novel; deft, poised, and with a writer’s ear for the rhythms of the world around us. *Featherbones* does the always-difficult job of making the strange familiar, while asking us to attend again to the things we think we know.” - *William May, author and lecturer*

“I loved the use of language, I loved the story and above all I loved the constant sensation that I was walking on the top of the dividing wall between reality and dream and imagination and past and present and future. I want to live on that wall for the rest of my life.” *Bookcrazy blog*

“What to call this experience? Magical realism doesn’t quite fit right. Magical-psychological-philosophical-realism. Maybe. This is a book that will be unlike any other that you have read.

“There are some very well crafted passages in this book, and some amazing uses of language. It is really the beautiful language, in my opinion, that makes this a book worth the time to read and share with others. I liked the characters ... the way the story developed and the way the reader is never quite sure if what is happening is actual reality or just the imaginings of a confused mind.

“If you enjoy reading books that make you think, and make you wonder at the author’s ability to turn every day ordinary into something else, something a bit more extraordinary, then I recommend this book to you.” - *Ionia Martin, Readful things blog*

“In Southampton, England, a grey, rain-filled place, the story of Felix, and Michael’s set. Repeating patterns, like grey days, the same walk through the city every morning and evening, and the sight of birds, characterize the book. What if birds were human, or humans became birds? Remember the classic on Icarus and his father Daedalus, the creator of the labyrinth?

“It’s exactly this fate and circumstance that Thomas Brown as author throws his readers in while reading *Featherbones*. There seems no way out of this storyline. Dream and reality converge. It’s difficult to stay concentrated. Is the reference to the Titanic a clue? Will one of the main characters commit suicide, or turn into a bird at full moon?

“...I’m impressed by the psychologically laden plot and the way a small world becomes even smaller throughout *Featherbones*.” - *Henk-Jan van der Klis, Reviewer, Netherlands*

“*Featherbones*’ is the second of Thomas Brown’s novels that I have read and I think that I enjoyed this more than “*Lynnwood*“, which I loved. Having made this statement, however, the book is going to be hard to review without telling readers too much about the plot.

“Felix, the main character, is a young graduate, living his rather mundane life in Southampton. The highlight of his week is his Friday night drinking binge with his workmate and long-time friend, Michael. All seems fairly commonplace, until an event acts as a trigger for Felix to fall, swoop, descend into unreality.

“The novel looks back to Felix’s traumatic childhood - so many events that could lead to an uncertain future for Felix’s mental health. Looking into the past, we meet Felix’s father, his teacher, his very best friend, Harriet and a man who was supposed to be helping Felix overcome his disturbed childhood.

“What I love about this novel is that it works on several levels and is open to different interpretations. For me, it is about guilt, repression, sexuality and the need for each of us to know ourselves. It is about acceptance, love and trust.

“Thomas Brown writes such beautiful prose; ‘*Featherbones*’ is worth reading for this alone. However there is much more to appreciate - a fine, thought-provoking novel.” - *Angela Thomas,*

Excerpt

Chapter One

The deep mew of a gull draws Felix from his dreams. This close to the sea, there are many gulls. It is their city, as much as anyone else's. Pinching the sleep from the corners of his eyes, he gazes across to the window sill. The bird stands with its back to him, wings tucked to its chest, as though surveying the streets spread out nine floors beneath it. In the morning light, its feathers appear grey, and quite dirty. He makes to move from under the covers and it turns sharply, studying him with one beady eye.

For several seconds man and bird stare each other out. Then he staggers from bed and it screams at him through the glass before plummeting from the windowsill. When he realises it is Monday, he considers doing the same.

Every morning Felix walks the same way down the high street to the offices on London Road, and every evening he walks the same way home again. The sounds of the city wash over him; the murmur of car engines, gull cries, laughter as students trail past him on their way to Halls of Residence, and beneath it all the maritime roar of the sea.

His flat overlooks the docks and it takes him thirty minutes, at most, to get from one end of the city to the other. The walk is generally uneventful. He barely notices the streets any more, the pavements, the faces of passers-by. When Michael and he first took the vacancies with the recruitment agency it was a temporary set-up. He had just finished his History degree and needed money to support himself. He has worked at the agency for over five years now; five years of his life lost to the city by the sea.

The office stirs with morning activity. Years ago, the team numbered eight. Now they are four, including Mr. Coleson. He cannot see Mr. Coleson in his office but he can hear him and his deep-bellied laughter through the door, propped open enough to remind everyone that he is there and they are here to work another week. The rest of the office is a small, communal space. The stationery drawer sits empty, functioning biros as rare as new job prospects. A cleaning rota stares back at them from the cork noticeboard on the wall, detailing precisely whose turn it is to vacuum the carpet, dust the windows, mop the lavatories, and when. No one was especially enthused when this rota was drawn up, but none less so than Maggie, who, on her thirtieth birthday, took Mr. Coleson aside and threatened to leave in a voice not unlike those belonging to the gulls outside, unless he removed her from the rota immediately. It is difficult to call what occurred that morning a conversation, as this implies there was rapport of some kind and at least two speakers. When negotiations concluded, Maggie was relegated to light dusting on Tuesdays and Fridays. She seemed satisfied by this, and Felix remembers suspecting that, for all her protesting, she was in no more of a position to leave than he.

In an ideal world, Maggie begins each day by patiently sorting through her emails, red-lacquered claws wrapped around a vast mug of tea. At her desk a strong work ethic grips her, setting her face into a mask of concentration. Blue eyes narrow. Thin lips seal tight. Loose strands of light blonde hair are dealt with swiftly where they stray across her face.

When Michael is late, however, she is forced to begin the day with his photocopying. Long talons tap the cheap plastic cover of the machine while it makes its own Monday protests beside her. Sometimes, if the photocopier is taking particularly long, she touches up her make-up in a hand mirror while she waits. Tiredness vanishes from her pale face beneath a mixture of concealer and rouge; a clown, all set for another day at the circus. He smiles to himself at the

comparison, before wondering what that might make him.

Staring around him at what could be any morning of any week in the last five years of Mondays, he wonders what Maggie would do if they ran out of teabags, or if the photocopier began working properly, or what would happen if Michael was actually on time for work one day.

His friend cuts a dark silhouette as he hurries past the office window. The cold air chases after him, his black pea coat fluttering in the wind. Inside the office, he strides to Felix's desk, shrugging the coat from around his slight shoulders. Its absence reveals his white slim-fit shirt, navy blue tie, and a pair of grey trousers that Felix has long considered a touch too tight for the office. The coat flaps like a great pair of wings from around him.

"Morning," says Felix tentatively.

"My head feels like a Greek Tragedy."

Aside from the fact that he is dressed for work, the casual observer might be forgiven for thinking Michael has come straight from a bar. By the unforgiving brightness of the office lights his features seem pale, made sharp by his dark hair, scraped into a tight bun behind his head. His eyes are thin, cheeks slender, narrow nostrils quivering as they filter the scents of printer ink, carpet cleaner and stale dust that make up their surroundings.

"Have you slept yet?"

"Yes." Michael seems to reconsider. "Briefly."

"You're hopeless."

"There's always hope."

"Three years of studying philosophy and you sound like a fortune cookie."

Friday night swims behind Felix's eyes; shining spirit bottles, the shadows in the bar's rafters and the rush of the sea filling his head. He struggles to recall the face of the woman with whom Michael spent the best part of the evening, and most probably the rest of the weekend. For a moment he thinks he places her; sitting at the bar, legs crossed, a small, black dress hugging her hips, before the lights, and perhaps drink, distort her face into obscurity.

Then Mr. Coleson is standing in the doorway of his office, except instead of booming laughter the Ringmaster is tapping his watch. The gesture is empty, grown meaningless from years of repetition, but it prompts apologies from Michael and an immediate start to his working day.

The clouds break just before lunchtime. It is April, the month of showers, and Southampton's are as cold and wet as anywhere Felix knows. He spends his morning scanning profiles for suitable job applicants. It is a thankless task. The hours stretch on, during which time he wonders where he went wrong. For three glorious years he had lived the dream at university. It had given him purpose, direction, an aim. The first week he spent drunk. The second he spent recovering, from both the drink and his leg, which he injured slipping down a flight of stairs in a club. He remembers little of the first week, or the ensuing three years, all lost in a sea of liquor. He does remember feeling hopeful and happier than he has ever been, at a time when the rest of the country was struggling to make ends meet. He had even managed a degree at the end, although it hadn't been easy getting there. He owes that much to the city, at least.

And there it is. 'At the end'. There had been no afterwards, no fourth year. University had come to its champagne-popping, Graduation Ball finish and abandoned him, with nothing but a piece of paper and a false sense of hope to show for it.

After work, Felix retraces his steps through the city. The pavement is long and narrow, a pier leading first to the city centre and then the docks beyond. If he walks south through the city, or south-east, or south-west, he will come to water. There is no escaping the sea, which laps its salty tongue against the city and the people who live there.

A low wall follows one side of the pavement, barely more than knee-height, separating the street from the park grounds beyond. The stone feels cool and gravelly against the backs of his legs when he veers from the pavement to perch on it. Overhead, heavy clouds fill the bright sky, spears of sunlight struggling to pierce the swollen grey, reminding him of the hymns he used to sing when he was a boy at St. Barnaby's. Divine chariots could roll through those clouds, steeds snorting, thunder spilling from the spokes of the wheels.

"Thank God for Fridays, and men like Michael."

Opposite him there is a bus stop, behind him the green expanse of East Park. On his left a man sits cross-legged on the ground. The man's face is long, his eyes half-closed. Hands twist arthritically into the hollows of his overcoat, which is wrapped loosely around him like a second skin, ready to be sloughed. It seems impossible to accurately guess his age. From the look of his face, he might be in his forties. Felix has never seen fit to ask.

"Hello, Sam."

The man stirs slowly, seeming to come back to himself. He glances down, to a handful of change littering the pavement, then right, then up, to where Felix is sitting on the wall. His lidded eyes narrow, then flicker wide.

"Felix!"

He is not sure what first drove him to strike up conversation with Sam, when they spoke one evening last Christmas. He supposes he felt sorry for him. It was two below freezing outside and Sam made an abject sight, huddled beside the wall in the same tired coat he's wrapped in now. He offered to buy the man a hot drink, and they found a café, not far from the park, down an alley at the bottom of East Street. Sam does not like crowds, and Felix does not like what Christmas does to people. So the café became their haunt, their private place where for a short while each week they could escape the eyes and ears of the city. They have been going for coffees there together ever since.

"You'll catch your death, sitting out here. Aren't you wet?"

"I'm waiting," says Sam.

"Waiting for what?"

"The angels." Sam stares behind Felix as he speaks. "The angels are coming."

Felix follows his gaze to a statue, standing at his shoulder. In each hand she clutches a wreath. His eyes travel from her outstretched arms, past her proud face, down the flowing contours of her robes to the base on which she stands. More flowers have been placed in bouquets around her feet and he realises with a twinge of guilt that she is a memorial. Though the flowers partly obscure it, he sees a plaque, and written on it some words, partially hidden by red rose petals.

He reads the words 'Officers,' 'Duty' and 'Titanic' before a young man trips, or is pushed, and falls into the flowers. Mad laughter fills Felix's ears as the man staggers to his feet and flees the broken bouquets with his friends.

Clouds slide before the sun, turning the statue ebony, where a moment before she seemed quite green. Verdigris-copper; the colour he imagined the sea here to be, before he first saw

Southampton's waters. Her austere face reflects his; flesh mirrored in forged metal.

"The rain," says Sam, smiling brightly. Black stubs glisten in his gums. "They love the rain. The water. They sing of it. I'm waiting. Beautiful voices. I'm waiting."

"Do you need to wait here? I thought we could go for a drink. My treat."

"It has been a slow day at the office..." Pinching the scattering of coins one by one from the pavement, Sam places them in his coat pocket, before turning back to the memorial. With his face upturned he could be a small boy, wide-eyed, swamped by his father's coat. "Yes, then, let's."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, yes." He breaks into a smile. "She'll wait. I could use a cup of something hot." Felix looks up one last time at the winged silhouette, thin against the budding backdrop of East Park. A shaft of light illuminates the grey-green hollows of her face, with its tight lips, small nose and empty eyes. Then he hops from the wall, his white shirt blossoming grey with rain, and if it seems to him that the statue turns to face him as he leaves, he knows he is mistaken; a shaft of light, making movement where there can surely be none.

Hands pink from the cold clutch the wall for purchase as Sam struggles to his feet. Reaching down, Felix helps him from the pavement. The hands are much smaller than his own, and hard where they press into his palms. As they walk off together in the direction of East Street, he knows a cup of coffee cannot save those hands. Still, for an hour or two it might help keep them warm.

Chapter Two

Over the next few weeks, Felix feels drawn to the statue as he passes it by on his way into work and home again. In the mornings he has no time to stop and stare, but that does not prevent him from glancing her way as he walks through the shadow of East Park to London Road. Dawn illuminates her silhouette with its cold light, so that her slender arms appear severe, her skin sheer black and as devoid of warmth as the rest of the night-chilled city.

In the evenings she bathes in a different light, and seems the more content for it. Dusk draws a coppery green to the sculpted shallows of her face and robes, an oceanic tint dredged from the depths of the black bronze. It is during this time that she seems most radiant; an angel as he has always understood angels to be, and on more than one occasion he finds himself wondering why such statues are so often shaped like seraphim. It seems the nature of man to surround himself with Heaven, as though by doing so the world might seem more divine, or less hellish, or simply better. He sees only metal, forced into the shape of something that it is not.

When five o'clock on Friday finally arrives, the office empties. Felix remembers speaking to Michael, confirming their customary drinks, then walking home through the city. The high street stretches out before him; an endless parade of shop-fronts, multiplying in the gloom. It has stopped raining, although only recently. The ground glitters black with puddles.

At his flat, he finds leftover lasagne and a half-drunk bottle of red in the kitchen. The mince is grey, the cheese rubbery, but as the dish rotates in the microwave it slowly becomes more appetising, until the aroma of hot fat and melted bechamel makes his insides moan.

Taking himself to the balcony, he sits until the wine is gone, his stomach full, the sky a little softer at the edges. When the bottle is empty, he heads inside to get washed and changed, but not before undoing his tie and releasing it to the sky. The wind snatches the fabric, fluttering, from his hand, and does not give it back.

The walk to Ocean Village passes him by. One moment he is leaving his flat and crossing Queen's Park towards the water. The next moment, he is standing outside a bar. There are a number of bars and restaurants by the marina, each as busy as the next. Laughter spills into the cold night, which has fallen without him realising.

He follows the murmur of conversation towards the nearest of the buildings. Orange light pours from its interior into the darkness outside. One side of the bar is mostly glass doors and these are open to the night air. He makes out the languid shape of smokers, reclining in the cold, and wonders whether Michael is among them. He will be on the smoking terrace or at the bar itself.

As he enters the building he is hit by a wave of warmth and sound. Voices buzz in his ears, and laughter, and the unmistakable clink of bottles against glass. He smells cologne and wine and the freshly-chopped fruit they are slicing at the bar to put in cocktails.

"What time do you call this?" says Michael, turning as Felix approaches. He is sitting at the counter opposite two towering drinks.

"More like what do you call those?" The drinks at the bar are fiercely red, served in a fat glass brimming with fruit and ice.

"Alcohol." Grinning, Michael slides one of the drinks towards him. "Sea Breeze, I believe."

He sits beside Michael and takes a sip through one of several straws. The taste is sharp, though not unpleasant. He relishes the sensation of the cold liquid and the warmth of the alcohol inside it.

"Sorry I'm late," he says, withdrawing his mouth from the straw.

"Your excuse, Mr. White?"

Felix shrugs. "I was eating."

"The world?"

"I was hungry," he says, smiling.

"Aren't we all," mutters Michael, scouring the crowds behind Felix. His heady aftershave fills Felix's nose. "And thirsty, from the looks of things."

"What?"

"I'd know those wine lips anywhere. You are betrayed. One glass or two? Couldn't wait to get started, I suppose?"

He realises that Michael is referring to the red wine he drank earlier that evening. "You've found me out," he says, removing the straws from his drink and taking a large mouthful. Idly, he wonders how badly his lips are stained. He hears Michael laughing, sees his face creasing up over the rim of his glass, then the drink burns down his throat and he does not hear or see anything distinctly for the rest of the night.

Michael's delight echoes across the bar. Felix hears genuine laughter, the kind that bubbles up from deep within before spilling like foam into the air. There is nothing stilted about the expressions on people's faces. Their smiles are savage, eyes sparkling, faces freed from conscious thought and consequence. All across Southampton, people are flocking to clubs and pubs to lose themselves beneath the stresses of modern life.

"Outside." Michael's breath is heavy in Felix's ear and down his neck. "Outside, I need a

smoke.”

They move from the bar, where Michael has been speaking with a woman, and onto to the smoking terrace overlooking the marina. As they step outside, the cold is bracing. Shivers slip down Felix’s spine.

The calm takes his breath away. The blackness, too, stops him where he stands; a stretch of uninterrupted dark, which he knows to be the sea and the sky, though he cannot tell them apart. This is why they come here in the evenings, time and time again to the bar beside the sea: to drink and laugh and lose themselves in the clear breath of the ocean.

He half listens as Michael tells him about the woman at the bar. There is a name, an age, a rough score out of ten. It is a story he has heard a hundred times before. He is listening to other things: the wind, the sea, an irregular fluttering sound overhead, which he supposes is gulls, settling into the grooves of the building to roost for the remainder of the night.

Gradually his eyesight grows familiar with the darkness and he makes out other details; gradients of grey spilling through the cloud-cover, tiny flashes of light like a sea of scales, where moonlight catches the waves, and small shapes in the distance, more gulls gliding silently in the night. They drink and smoke and laugh until they can do none of these things anymore and then they leave. Arm-in-arm, one silhouette against the night, they struggle into the back of a taxi.

The city streams past them, reduced to small lights, blurred lamps, an endless stretch of black that is the sky, beneath which buildings squat like old men with dour faces stationed by the sea. Felix sees his friend in flashes of illumination: strawberry stains down his white shirt, his eyes thin and wet with laughter, hair loose over his face where it has freed itself from the knot behind his head. In minutes, they are standing outside Felix’s block of flats. Michael pushes a crumpled note from his back-pocket into the driver’s hand. As the taxi pulls away, Felix and he stumble inside.

The brightness of the foyer burns their eyes. For what seems like forever they try to work the lift. Michael falls asleep in one corner, his face pressing against the tarnished metal walls, before Felix abandons the lift for broken. Dragging his friend to his feet, they make the long climb up the stairwell to the top floor.

When they reach his flat, Michael crawls from the corridor to the sofa and falls face down into the cushions. Felix waits until he can hear his friend snoring before taking himself to bed. He does not have to wait long. Stripping, he collapses into the coldness of the covers and closes his eyes.

His rest is fitful. More than once he wakes, entangled in his duvet, as though he has been thrashing inside it. When his bed becomes too hot, he wanders into the kitchen for a glass of water. The coolness of the rest of the flat is refreshing against his slick skin.

He fills a second glass, which he leaves for Michael, on the floor beside the sofa. His friend is facing away, cur-led into his knees, clutching a leather cushion like a swimming float to his chest. He has shed his shirt, and his shoulder-blades jut sharply from the whiteness of his back above the harsh track of his spine. The thought of his face, were he to wake suddenly and find Felix standing nude over him, draws quiet laughter in the dark.

A strange sense of dissonance runs through Felix, as though the sky or the city under it is shifting. The laughter dies on his lips, leaving a hollow feeling in his chest. All of a sudden he feels ludicrous, standing here naked in the moonlight beside the oblivious form of his friend. Turning, he hurries from the room.

Falling back into bed, he floats through the space between awareness and dreams. The sound of Michael’s deep breaths fill his ears, echoing those of the sea outside. Another noise accompanies

it; soft, like a bird crooning, and he imagines the gulls again, settling into the gutters above Ocean Village. Something slightly rotten stings his nostrils.

He has had a pleasant evening. If he is sure of nothing else, he knows this. Friday nights are always satisfying, when for a few hours each week it is possible to forget the rest of the world, drink, laugh and be content. The feeling is quite cathartic. He remembers the New Forest coven he researched for a university project; women who professed to channel the spirit of the Devil, who lived and breathed his name, while they raced naked through the trees. If it is the Devil who delights in dancing, who granted those women freedom from the strictures of their sorry lives, then he was there tonight, feet scratching out steps against the floor, tattered wings outstretched beneath his arms –

Rolling away from the wall, he turns his face to the cold side of the pillow and finds himself staring at a silhouette in the doorway.

For a few uncertain seconds he flaps like a newborn chick in his bed covers, before remembering that he is not alone in the flat. It is impossible to see Michael properly, but he makes out his friend's thinness, his slender arms, the angular profile of his face in the darkness.

“Michael?” he says, but the man is already moving away down the hallway. Sinking back into the covers, his head heavy, he wonders whether he should go after him, and with the memory of the night fresh in his mind falls into the blackness of sleep.

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