

# *Her Birth* by Rebecca Goss



Rebecca Goss' first collection *The Anatomy of Structures* (Flambard Press, 2010) was praised for its 'strangeness, sexiness and occasionally its yearning' (Robert Seatter) but it was [Her Birth](#) (Carcenet, 2013) which drew the attention of the Next Generation judges. A fearless write and a heartbreaking read, the collection honours the poet's baby daughter – not even eighteen months old when she died - with intense and crafted language, one precise and painful word at a time.

## **Palliative**

I knew what it meant, but that didn't stop me:  
I came home from clinic, early in her life,

sat on the stairs with my hardback *Collins*  
solid as a baby on my knee, thumbed quickly

through papery leaves, whispering *l, m, n, o, p,*  
to seek the word they said once

when discussing the flawed mechanics  
of her heart. There, on a gauzy page,

its definition printed across shadows  
of my fingers, I read '*serving to palliate*,'

(from Latin *pallium*, a cloak) and turned back  
to find '*palliate*' vb 1. *to lessen the severity*

*of (pain, disease etc.) without curing*  
and I re-read *without curing* until *curing*

didn't look like *curing* anymore,  
it looked like *curling* and I clasped my hands

around my knees, pulled that book hard  
against my gut. As a student I loved its reams

of indisputable fact, its ability to reveal  
and make clear. Now I bury its bulk

on the shelves, swathe myself in hope.

### **Helpline**

I've been told of women in their eighties  
who dial on birthdays, their story drawn

from the receiver in small damp breaths:  
*'He would have been sixty'*

and a voice wraps them in a blanket of vowels.  
Somehow, a child has slipped from them.

They were unable to stop it, like sand collapsing  
back down the hole, dug on that dry part of beach.

### **Last Poem**

So extraordinary was your sister's  
short life, it's hard for me to see

a future for you. I know it's there,  
your horizon of adulthood,

reachable across a stretch  
of ordinary days, yet I can't believe

my fortune – to have a healthy child  
with all that waits: the bike, school,

mild and curable diseases.  
So we potter through the weeks

and you relax your simian cling,  
take exploratory steps, language

budding at your lips. I log the daily  
change, another day lived

with every kiss goodnight; wake  
relieved by your murmurs at dawn.

Come and hold my hand, little one,  
stand beside me in your small shoes,

let's head for your undiscovered life,  
your mother's ready now, let's run.

## Discussion Ideas

- *Her Birth* is a book-length sequence of poems beginning with the poet's daughter's birth, her short life and her death from an incurable heart condition, and ending with the joys and complexities that come with the birth of another child. Who might the book be for?
- Why do you think the word 'curing' is repeated four times in 'Palliative'?
- What is the 'blanket of vowels' in 'Helpline'?
- 'Last Poem' – the book's final words – strike a very conclusive note. Does it ring true?
- What other narratives of loss have you read – poetry, novels or non-fiction? How does *Her Birth* compare? Is that even an appropriate question to ask?

Rebecca Goss was born and grew up in Suffolk. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Cardiff University and taught Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University for several years. Her first collection *The Anatomy of Structures* was published in 2010 by Flambard Press. Her second collection *Her Birth* (Carcanet) was shortlisted for the 2013 Forward Prize for Best Collection. She is now a full-time writer and lives in Suffolk.

<http://rebeccagoss.wordpress.com/>

## Other books by Rebecca Goss

- [\*The Anatomy of Structures\*](#) (Flambard Press, 2010)

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