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For those who live in or around Southampton, the Spitfire is a familiar icon, a telling reminder of the city's engineering heritage and the bravery of the people of Southampton during the Second World War. Matt West's poems celebrate this much-loved symbol with zest, humour and a good deal of affection.

Stephen Boyce

The birds, aeroplanes and pilots of this pamphlet powerfully capture exhilarations of the air where survival, conquest and tenderness endure. What intrigues most in these poems is their subtlety, canny restraint, scientific inquiry and zeal for intense life. Matt West ensures the collection is perpetually refreshed and invigorated by a play of forms that results in an engaging and stimulating experience for the reader.

Daljit Nagra

Seagulls and Spitfires

Matthew West

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Lunch can be a dangerous business. Any gull knows that. Dive-bombing diners can also reap dividends. Following an initial encounter with a Black-headed Gull, a journey takes flight through space and time, leading to Southampton, where characters from the Spitfire story take centre-stage in this chapbook of poems.





Seagulls and Spitfires

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It was just the sort of bloody silly name they would choose.

R. J. Mitchell

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Part 1
Seagulls



Clerihew 1

Reginald Joseph Mitchell
ate sandwiches out of his satchel.
He thought airplane designs were absurd
so he went, for advice, to the birds.

Squadron

They're so still, we don't see them
ranked and rowed on a low sea wall,
heads leathered, strapped in aviator caps.

We sit and unwrap a picnic:
pastry casing chicken and chorizo.
Crust flakes flutter to the floor.

A man emerges from a quayside cabin and calls:
"Any last minute takers?"

We contemplate the short haul
up river tempted by a discounted offer
and April sunshine reflecting on water in the harbour.

I aim a bite at my pasty,
but before it gets to me it's gone,
snatched from my grip
with lightning-strike precision.

I've no idea where the hit comes from.

The pasty lands a foot from where we're sat.
Swift enough to snatch it back I cradle it to my chest
like a mother sheltering a baby.

Air raid sirens echo as the squadron swoop and dive:
flashes of gull-wing, white on a blue sky.

Puffin Billy

Bosun slips the mooring lines
and pushes off from the pontoon.
A thick rope of water uncoils from the bow
as the boat noses out on the river.

We're sat on our own in the stern;
near enough to catch stray threads of diesel
smoke unspooling behind us –

far enough from that petulant boy
who kicked and flapped and screeched like a gull
as his mum hauled him over the gunwales.

Now we're moving the screaming has stopped
silenced by plumes of salt water rising
on either side of the prow. They arc
like rainbows teeming with schools of fry
tossed for the sun to steam in a pan of sky.

Spectators

The skipper takes to the tannoy.
His bass-heavy voice is ballasted with gravel
and navigates attention to clumsy looking vessels

little boats – with cracked paint and rusting hulls –
unlikely heroes that once formed part of a flotilla
evacuating soldiers from Dunkirk beaches in 1940.

The craft carrying us came from the Canberra
a blind spectator in the Falklands War,
Thatcher's iron fist, the rule of Britannia
smashing over the Atlantic and returning home

to pleasure-craft flocking around the Isle of Wight,
fog-horns blaring and flares casting light
on an afternoon sky as flag-waving crowds
lined the shores and docks of Southampton.

But Lymington River isn't done with us yet
and the boy in the bow is screaming
with laughter as our boat hits a wave
and the water breaks, leaving him soaking wet.

Interlude

Once clear of river moorings
saltmarshes open on the starboard side.
Here, skipper says, we might find
culprits guilty of pasty-stealing crimes.

Skipper's Song

Welcome to the home of pasty-stealers
rubbish bin raiders, chip-bag pinchers
low-water waders, aerial shitters
a bunch of bloody wasters
nobody likes 'em, everybody hates these...

screechers, squawkers, thieves and stalkers
refuse revellers, followers of trawlers
they're far too bloody raucous
what did they do before us?
These gobblers of gore
are declining in numbers
declining in numbers
they're declining
they decline...

Clerihew 2

Jonathan Livingstone Seagull
had an incredibly thick skull.
He wasn't like the other birds
and couldn't stop squawking wise words.

Returns

Tarquin puts the knife down
straightens his collar

folds napkin
rolling thick cotton

into White's
silvered holder.

Celery salt goes
back in the cellar.

The duty waiter takes
the plate to the kitchen

where chef unpicks ingredients
and shuts the fridge door.

Eggs go back in the pan
until speckled green in cooling water.

A polystyrene container
is sent to Reception

where Rebecca wipes her name
from the courier's list.

She hands him his clipboard.

He slams the door of his van
hurtles down the M3
to the M27

before turning at Lyndhurst
and cutting through the forest.

At Lymington he's met
an hour after sunrise.

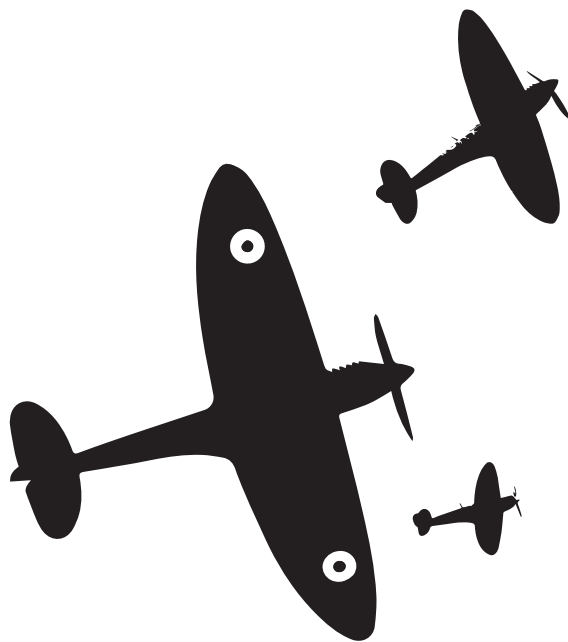
On the darkening estuary
a dinghy steals out

holding a man wearing wellington boots
and an oilskin jacket who

reaches a hand over
the Common Cord-grass

and returns the eggs
to nest.

Part 2 Spitfires



Limerick 1

Noel Pemberton-Billing began
making seaplanes from technical plans.
He sold to Scott-Paine
who made Commander James
Bird the aviation works' main man.

Nameless

It could've been called Snipe or Shrew
for all we cared on the factory floor.
Like as not it was bound for the scrap heap
same as the last one – Type 224.

Who'd imagine this landing on water
like a Southampton or S6B?
Why should the men get excited
working to spec for the Air Ministry?

D'you remember that day up at Galshot
after Dame Fanny helped bail us out?
When we conquered both sky and ocean
with 400 miles an hour or thereabouts?

Or when crowds gathered over at Woolston
to see Biard received by the Mayor
or when Mitchell first showed us that Seagull
of his and we all chucked our hats in the air?

This one wouldn't be winning us trophies.
It lacked dignity, majesty, flair
even McClean coined it after his daughter
drove him round the bend in despair.

Sheet metal riveted fast to a frame.
To us, it was just a bloody aeroplane.
We came to build boats that flew from the sea.
K5054? It meant nothing to me.

Limerick 2

Jeffrey Kindersley Quill, OBE
won the Air Force Cross, aged 23.
But perhaps he's known best
as the pilot who'd test
Spitfire prototypes over Eastleigh.

Test Pilot

The first step puts what you have on the line.
You cross the field, make your way to the aircraft
observing minutiae, how grass buckles

beneath boots, how gravel grates then lapses
to silence. Next, a leap of faith. You climb
into the cockpit, tighten the straps, pull

the hood over as the blades turn and blur,
as the chocks are hauled away, before taxiing
down the runway with the windsock waving

goodbye. Each flight cuts fresh stairs in the sky.
Going and rising. *Always stretching for something*
just out of reach before returning with tweaks

for technical drawings. *We'll get there in the end*
he says to me, and I always find myself believing.

26 Ways of Seeing a Bird

*Before eggs hatch, attack is no option.
Nests require defence against
predatory instincts.*

(I)

Gull-winged with trouser fairings
breeds with Merlin.

Population swarms
over coastal margins.

(II)

Southampton nesting ground
disrupted after shelling.

Wings clipped –
Merlin flies faster.

(III)

A better breed emerges. Extra padding
adds protection in event of crash landing.
Vision enhanced. Hunger grows.

(IV)

Griffon subjugates Merlin.
Merlin will come back stronger.

(V)

The Flying V

Attacking instincts altered
Merlin masters low altitudes.

Later migration
to European mainland.

(VI)

Intercepts other predators,
wings extend to pointed tips.
Given thin air, great lift.

(VII)

Altitude peaks like tail fin. Recorded at heights
exceeding 44,000 ft. Species evolves to attack
alien offspring.

(VIII)

Navigation reaches Middle East
Far East, Tropics.
Flies well at all altitudes.

(IX)

Extended wings. Excellent at high speed
manoeuvring. Air supreme and able
to bring down a Wulf.

(X)

Wings revert. Vision improves. Now scouts ground beyond habitual territory. Blunter beak. Few sightings.

(XI)

Minor variation to skull formation.
Flocks in tropical conditions.
Dull acceleration.

(XII)

Griffon returns and drives off other birds.
Attacks at low altitude. Bulges above nostrils on either side of bill.

(XIII)

Merlin lacks attacking instinct.
Numbers dwindle. Recognises rivals from distance.

(XIV)

Griffon thrills with stability and speed.
Many sightings through pear tree canopies. Delights in dive-bombing.

(XV)

Nests on boats at sea. Lands infrequently.
Pecks decks.

(XVI)

Cohabits with North American variant.
Packard likes pears. Wing-length alters.
Aggression formidable in large numbers.

(XVII)

Underbelly thickens. Behaviour tames at sea. Less deck pecking.
Increased range through muscular wings.

(XVIII)

Extended flight. Weight gain on frame.
Photographic eyesight.

(XIX)

Not fit for fighting. Last official sighting in 1954. Only 225 remaining.

(XX)

Hybrid of XII. Reverting to type.

(21)

Wing ellipsis caves to blunted tip.
Heavier mass. Population continues decline through loss of habitat.

Limerick 3

(22)

Deformed. Tail feather abnormal.
Tough enough to fight. Limited flight.

(23)

Rumours of tongue blade
touching alveolar ridge.
Never sighted.

(24)

Species levels critical.
Extinction warning.

(25)

Replicate. Replicate. Replicate.

(26)

Genetic reform.
New breed:
Spiteful.

Captain Joseph 'Mutt' Summers would pee
like a dog marking territory
on the rear wheel of planes
that he christened with stains
for full bladders caused fatalities.

Ginger Lacey Writes Home

The alarm could sound at any moment.
I lie like a fledgling under wing,
sweating beneath an eiderdown of overalls
when the sun finds me hiding,
or reading, or writing letters home.

What to say? I woke to a new face
in the bunk beside me this morning?
Mum won't want to hear it, or about

clear skies we're experiencing this summer,
and apparitions I've seen at Angels 15,
me with a Colt in one boot, map in the other,
an Icarian treasure hunter
quarrying the sun of its gold.

Better than ghosts and shadows.
I'll spare her that, just say how we woke
to the sigh of rain, smiled, rolled over,
returned to sleep again.

Limerick 4

Eric 'Winkle' Brown bettered Mutt Summers
in his tally of prototype numbers.
He took 487
new planes to the heavens
landing Seafires on aircraft carriers.

Glove

There was only love.
Slipping into that skin -
expanding to become
more than a sum of parts.

Then came the dance.
Hands turned to wings.
The higher we climbed
the simpler it all seemed.

People shrank to ants,
motes of dust,
and there was no difference

no way to distinguish
us from them

until descent

when the ground rose up
and the gloves came off.
Then we fell apart again.

Cundell's Quest

*'We've done some pretty silly things
in our time, but the silliest was burying
spitfires'* – WW2 Veteran

It was ridiculous wasn't it?
Spitfires buried in crates
at the end of a runway in Burma?

Just rumours circulating
amongst engineers
who cleared up camp
at the end of the war

Then a Games company gets wind
of an ophidiaphobic adventure;
the holy grail waxed and wrapped
in packing cases, each worth
two or three million.

A squadron of them, so he said,
the Lincolnshire farmer who parked an idea
like this in the media head space. A case
worthy of a Private Eye story;
detective work and a salvage mission

set in jungle swamps –
just what a newspaper wants
to get readers
engaged for a couple of days –
but it was ridiculous, wasn't it?
Spitfires buried in crates,
at the end of a runway, in Burma?

Mitchell

after Ben Wilkinson

For you, Reg, spit wasn't held inside jaws
with the cat-caught tongue, the forced confession.
It didn't belong on saw-dusted floors
with dummies, insults, Doctor's instructions.
It wasn't restricted to wood in a blaze
or fat from a frying pan escaping heat,
a unit of measurement made by a spade
or interruptions that took you from your seat.
It wasn't a land-finger poking the sea –
a pointless activity facing the wind,
it wasn't a mistaken identity
or *just out of reach* as you proved in the end.
No. Your projectiles would conquer the air
propelling your name through time. Landing it here.

Spitfire Court

Today the Itchen Bridge is in the way,
its ache of concrete where Lowry's chain-
link ferry carried matchstick men in flat caps,
holding bicycles and smoking cigarettes.

In Woolston there's a housing estate
and a memorial garden with silver benches
where a feather towers over day-time drinkers
curling hands around cans of Pilsner.

Mitchell Close leads off and to the left.
Two Polish boys are fishing, their rods
resting on railings that stand between
a footpath and the water's edge. Turn
left again there's a small memorial plaque
for those who built Spitfires and Seagulls.

Supermarine is long gone, its gates shut
for the last time in 1960. Spitfire Court
has taken its place. And here the plane
lies in brickwork mosaic on the ground.

It's an image that's easy to miss if you're
not looking for it, like the stray bombs
unearthed by contractors working
on the other side in the centre-less city.

