

Monster Hospital

Sophie Mackintosh

They scream from a distance, legs broken or missing. You can almost hear it. You hum sirens between your lips and tidy the bedspreads. Be good. Rest.

Your sister watches from the side. She plays the nurse and resents it, but you're older, with hair growing in darker every year, though the sun still bleaches the ends. Getting taller and your jeans tight at the cuff, you now have a faint awareness of your body, no longer brushing it off like the pollen that stains when you cut through fields. In the gaping space of the barns where bats and swallows shit their guano everywhere you stare down the palms of your hands until your skin is unfamiliar, running home spooked.

Some patients have wings beaten to tissue. Others are pinioned by rocks, abdomens seeping out a pungent, petrol-coloured blood. Your sister drips sugar water over them as you take up tools; toothpicks and grass-blades. Some drink while others drown, face-down in their medicine. The ones damaged beyond repair have their flickering bodies fed to the rest.

Your ears redden in the sun and later you're in trouble for your sister's skin, worse than yours. You should look after her. You should know. What you do not know, yet, is that one day you will not even tread on spiders. Your hands will cup the bluebottles that hurl themselves, fuming, at your windows; you'll release their bodies outside with a sense of atonement that you cannot place.