

VIKTORIA LLOYD-BARLOW



All the Little Bird- Hearts

**'Lyrical, deft and
devastating.
Full of yearning
and love'**

**Amy Sackville,
author of *Painter to the King***

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About the Author

Viktoria Lloyd-Barlow has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Kent, and has extensive personal, professional, and academic experience relating to autism. Like her protagonist Sunday in ALL THE LITTLE BIRD-HEARTS, Viktoria is autistic. She has presented her doctoral research internationally, most recently speaking at Harvard University on autism and literary narrative. Viktoria lives with her husband and children on the coast of north-east Kent.

Praise

‘What a glorious, unforgettable character Vita is. And I loved Sunday’s voice too, so unique, right from the off. It showed me things about autism that will stay with me. A genuinely valuable book, but more importantly I enjoyed being inside its world’ Melissa Harrison, author of *All Among the Barley*

‘Viktoria Lloyd-Barlow’s is a distinct and poetic new voice. This novel about the complex desires behind our closest relationships is undercut with the darkness of Sicilian folklore: the fisherman who promises away his child; the lover who is a wolf; a caged magpie; burning fields’ Clare Pollard, poet and author of *Delphi*

‘Funny, lyrical, deft and devastating. Full of longing and love’ Amy Sackville, author of *Painter to the King*

For my husband, SLB

fire can be mistaken for light

The Lake District

It was only three years ago that I saw Vita for the first time. The day began as my days always did then, greeting a daughter for whom adolescence meant allowing me increasingly smaller glimpses of herself. I woke her before showering and dressing, then, predictably, had to wake her for a second time before going downstairs. I was in a long-standing white-food routine that summer, and my meals typically comprised various breakfasts: toast, cereal or crumpets. On days when food does not have to be dry, scrambled eggs or omelettes can also count as white. I cannot tell if it is a day on which an egg is a white food until I hold one in my hand. It is a small but real joy to me that as an adult I can decide, without explanation, whether eggs qualify as white, and therefore edible, on any given day. Without being told I am making a show of myself. That I am hysterical, attention-seeking and to be ignored until I eat something that is violently coloured.

Occasionally, and only in front of Dolly, I would showily eat something that did not adhere to my assigned list of foods. *You can eat normally then; you can do what the rest of us do without a fuss.* My mother said this, often. I answered her silently when she was alive and I continue to do so now she is dead: *There is a cost, Mother, always a cost to such transgressions, and I am the one who pays.* I am the one whose throat and body burn when I politely swallow down food of the wrong colour; it is my arm that itches when a neighbour greets me by lightly placing a hand on my skin. I wear the marks of these encounters, these painful sensory interruptions.

In truth, though, the cost always felt less when it was my daughter for

whom I performed. Because she is all that I have loved more than adherence to my routines. I was already afraid, then, of what was between us. I thought of it as a well-fed creature who was expanding rapidly, separating us further from one another every day. My response to Dolly's distance had always been to work harder on the illusion of normalcy. Whenever I was able, I concentrated on overriding my natural behaviours in front of her. In a white phase, I daringly added admittedly pale, yet non-white, pieces of food to my meals: chopped and peeled apples pale green grapes, some poached salmon or chicken. During a period when fruit and pink yoghurt were all I found edible, I would make us a plate of cheese and biscuits to share in front of the television, and privately shudder as the dry crumbs spread out like fingers in my throat.

The year before Vita arrived, a cat had taken a liking to our garden. A taut, grey creature that stared fixedly into the distance whenever approached, he was as a little statesman, affronted by contact, but straining to remain polite. Despite this apparent disinterest in our company, he visited us regularly for a time, bringing the small dead bodies of mice and voles. These he placed carefully at our feet, before sitting in apparent reluctance next to us, his body tense and his little face turned away. At first, we tried to pat him, but although he did not move from his chosen position, he visibly shuddered at our touch, and, in his own unhappy way, he taught us to ignore him completely.

When I ate non-white items for my daughter, I held myself as tightly as the cat and, like him, I hoped the sacrifice would be appreciated wordlessly and without fuss. Dolly scrupulously refrained from direct comment on my attempts to challenge my style of specific eating. I chose, as I often did, to read her adolescent disinterest in me as discretion. In return, I resisted describing to her how alarming I found the vibrancy and textures in the broad range of foods that she favoured. I realise now that perhaps this gentleness between us was an imagining of my own; all the non-saying, the unspoken compromises, these felt like love to me. But I have come to see that my daughter does not find comfort in silence, that this is only what *I* find there. I know now that we are separate and unlike, in this way as in so many others. I should have remembered how quickly

she came to hate that cat.

Shortly after I woke Dolly that morning for a second time, the door slammed, informing me that she had left for school and that I was now alone in the house. But voices from upstairs whispered insistently down to me in the hall. Her television had been left on, as it often was, to talk into the empty room like an elderly and confused guest. The set was a recent gift from her father, and the austere black boxiness of it was satisfyingly at odds with the otherwise girlish bedroom. These furnishings were her grandmother's choice many years ago, and the Laura Ashley frills had not been to Dolly's own, more sophisticated taste for some time. When she became a teenager, we planned to redecorate her room for her sixteenth birthday, and we had frequently discussed the various paint colours, or wallpapers and the curtains she might then choose. But our plans were made back when 1988 seemed implausibly far into the future, and the idea of my little daughter becoming a young woman was equally illusive. And that summer, when Vita entered our lives, Dolly was already sixteen and our redecorating conversation had been replaced by my silence as she wondered aloud about being off on a gap year or away at university within a couple of years, *How often will I actually return here?* she would ask. This, with a smile and one hand on her pointed Forrester chin, *how often would she actually return here? Because, you know, the travelling . . . and new friends and, well . . . a career, I expect.* When she said the word 'career', she gave a little intake of breath, the giggle of a child made to reference an embarrassing term in a biology class.

Dolly's conversation was often ungrammatical, lacking in clear subject or in structure, yet fraught with meaning. While she spoke in broken phrases about her future, her tone was especially light and lovely. Hers was a pretty song and I enjoyed the music but not the meaning; much of what my daughter said to me that summer met this description. Her conversation was a beautiful diversion, and I only felt the resultant wound later, when she was no longer there. The cheerfulness with which she spoke of leaving was as terrible to me as the sentiment itself.

Although I had entered Dolly's bedroom that morning with the intention of turning off the television, the factual nature of the discussion prevented

me from doing so. An elderly professor was being interviewed by a jaunty woman in a brightly coloured dress, the pattern of which appeared to move and flicker independently, like interference on the screen. The professor was an expert on Victorian culture and apparently spent his summers on a cruise ship from where he gave lectures and sold signed books, one of which he was holding and occasionally managed to get into the shot.

The presenter in the studio was enthusiastic in a bright and uninformed manner, but conversation between them was complicated by their disparate locations. The satellite delay was not referenced or explained, and this created the appearance of hesitancy in the interviewee. In the immediate space after each query – *When did the British first start decorating a tree at Christmas? Why are Dickens's novels so long?* – the professor silently stared into the camera with his features resolutely unchanged. Once each question finally reached him, his expression was transformed, and his face became visibly animated. But his initial, blank expression and delayed answers were painfully reminiscent of my own daily interactions. It took me back to an embarrassed parent elbowing the back of my school blazer as I silently organised perfect sentences in my head but struggled to bring them to the surface, like a deft swimmer trapped underwater. Both strangers and acquaintances regularly repeat questions to me as I fail to respond within a time frame that I have no way of knowing. Their eyes fix on me still, as though their sternness will somehow extract the unvoiced words.

The professor's answers, when they finally came, were minutely crafted. I could pass undetected, I thought, in a place where conversation functioned in this extended period. The delayed conversational response and the accompanying discomfort were so familiar that I reached to turn the programme off. The professor stared impassively back as he faded with the picture, a lone face surrounded by the endless sea as he waited in silence for the words to land.

I began to tidy Dolly's bedroom, enjoying the reclaimed silence in my home. As I pulled open the curtains, the piercing early light flooded in and dazzled my view of the fields above us. We live in a scooped-out valley of a town (Where orderly roads are buffeted by farmland on one side and

then confronted on the other by the flat lake. The grey water spreads possessively along the length of our town and walls us in.) The street behind ours is met abruptly by farmland that slopes resolutely upwards and away from the town. I have always lived here, so I know the end of summer brings flames to those fields. I am drawn to watch after each harvest as the farm workers set child-sized fires to consume what is barren on the land. The smoke rushes down to the gardens below and it is rotten, but sweet with knowing. And every year, I repeat, '*Bruccia la terra, bruccia la terra . . .*', to myself. This is the way Italians describe the intensity with which Sicilians work their land: *burn the earth*. I whisper this as softly as a prayer, to make the fires seem good and pure. The post-harvest burnings taught me how fire can be mistaken for light and can call to you in the same way.

When my eyes acclimatised to the sunlight, I noticed a small, dark-haired woman lying on the lawn next door. The house was a holiday home, owned by Tom and his wife, who visited each summer and for occasional long weekends. Locals did not typically take to the summer people, whose numbers had increased in recent years, but Tom was affable enough to remain outside this category. He had three children; all were so close together in age that for several years it had seemed he was bringing the same unchanged baby back and that the infants who toddled uncertainly behind him were the real newcomers. Tom's wife was fair-haired, and as soft-bodied and sweet-faced as a child herself. The woman in the garden was none of these things.

Her obliviousness to my gaze immediately moved me. She was on her back with her arms and legs spread out to a degree that looked unnatural, as though she had fallen from a real height or been positioned, unconscious, by someone else entirely. Here was the pleasure of observation without the ambiguity of eye contact, which costs but never confirms what you are being promised or refused. I once watched my baby daughter like this while she floated easily on her back across the screen of a scanning machine. *I have loved you longest*, I would tell Dolly when I felt sentimental, making my case in a contest that she did not, in any case, care to enter. *I knew you first*, I said, over and over to my daughter. *I*

watched you, loved you before you ever saw me. I spoke first to her watchful baby face, and later, I addressed her composed woman face with the same tender and misplaced ownership. Her eyes remained unchanged with age; always, she was suspicious and scrupulous in equal measure.

The woman who would become my own Vita lay on Tom's green-striped lawn, as sweetly motionless in the sunshine as the fruit trees that surrounded her. The previous summer had been a long season, augmented as it was on either side by a warm spring and a gentle autumn; at its peak, the airlessness had confined us indoors in the manner of a belligerent father. The year of Vita, though, began as a demonstration of sunshine, a visual performance of summer without real heat. Those early days were memorably bright with a hazy quality of light promising a warmth it did not provide. On reflection, that time seems now like something of a dress rehearsal for what arrived later that year, for the explosion of heat that paced up and down our hazy streets, with a fixed grin and outstretched arms aflame.

Vita's arms were spread out horizontally and her hands were placed upwards, as though waiting for expected gifts. Her beautifully pinned-up hair and the inky neatness of her tailored clothes alarmed me. Such a formal appearance gave her position the suggestion of collapse or violence rather than intention. I ran downstairs and into my own garden, noisily slamming the French doors and then opening the creaky door of the shed, to check her response. Her head turned towards me, and as she opened her eyes, we looked directly at one another over the low wooden fence, the intimacy of her waking between us. Her lovely face, though, was serene, and she stood up to walk into her house entirely unselfconsciously, as though alone and unwatched.

Then my doorbell rang, and she was there. At my front door, sleepily blinking and stretching her arms behind her in the fake sunshine, fingers entwined behind her back. 'Mm . . .' she crooned softly to herself and then laughed as she saw me. 'I am not – yet – quite awake!' she said.

Kwaite. Awayk! I repeated silently to myself. *Kwaite. Awayk!*

I frequently mimic the pronunciation of others and have learned to keep this to myself where possible. I like to tap along with their syllables and

trace both the emphasis and the softness. The sharpness of Vita's vowels was that of a foreign speaker with an immaculate and studied accent. I listen to dialogue intently; since childhood, this practice has protected me from eyes that are always seeking mine in greetings or conversation. Facial expressions typically tell me nothing more than what is being said. The manner of speaking – the tone, the points of hesitation, the emphases – these are what talk to me.

'Hello! *I am Vita,*' said the fragrant little woman who stood on my doorstep.

Duh-duh! DUHHH dee dee-dee, I imitated silently, searching for patterns that might suggest another county – or country – of origin, or a social position. It helps enormously to use my fingers in the style of a conductor when I listen to conversation, but I have found this can distract and perturb the speaker. At an initial introduction, the speaker typically emphasises first the greeting and then their name, but Vita's deliberate pause on the personal pronoun gave her the air of an awaited celebrity – *Here I am at last!*

My former father-in-law has a long-standing, and often referenced, friendship with a local and mildly celebrated actor. I met the man several times at their house, and on each occasion he greeted me as if for the first time and with a fixed routine: he dipped his head and looked up modestly before announcing his name with a small and twisted smile, as if we were simply playing at formalities, because no one needed to be informed of who he was. Vita, though, was not congratulating herself. The excited tone of her introduction felt like an acknowledgement of something between us; her accented 'I' seemed to include me. It was as though I had been expecting her, or, at least, had been aware of her existence, shared some familiarity with her.

It is always the duty of the established resident to make friendly overtures. If the existing neighbour does not extend an invitation, the newcomer must observe formal practices in any passing interactions and not request or offer personal information. My reference on this subject was a much-consulted book acquired when I was a teenager, with the aim of demystifying some of the ongoing social puzzles in which I found

myself. *Etiquette for Ladies; A Guide to Social Activity* was written in 1959 by Edith Ogilvy, an aged and prolific author of romance novels and a daytime wearer of diamonds and cerise chiffon. Edith was at once socially punctilious and acceptably eccentric, an elusive balance and one that I still hoped to achieve myself. The late Lady Ogilvy married twice, and both husbands afforded her aristocratic titles and a glamorous lifestyle. These happy circumstances were frequently referenced in her writing and in the accompanying photographs. Her concerns, therefore, tended towards the rarefied – the management of staff at one's country house and the appropriateness of address for visiting dignitaries, for example – but the social advice was generally sound. Edith committed a whole chapter to neighbours and new acquaintances. However, her writing did not mention the possibility of you watching a stranger sleep before they awoke and appeared at your front door without invitation.

'I saw you and couldn't wait to introduce myself. I wanted to meet you. My husband says I am so impatient to make friends I don't give anyone the chance to actually invite us anywhere!' giggled Vita. Her laugh was loud and unapologetic, and she did not cover her mouth or try to swallow her amusement, as people do, but instead opened her mouth wider, displaying shiny little teeth.

Calm down, calm down, quiet, quiet, quiet, I had always been cautioned as a child when I made any noise. *Speak up, repeat that, say that again*, I have been told regularly since adolescence, but Vita's admission of eagerness over etiquette removed all blame from me for this back-to-front introduction, and I was grateful. Her accent carried the considered precision of a moneyed life, of tennis lessons, private education and summers spent abroad. The tone was self-assured and soothing; that of a guest ordering drinks from an inexperienced barman. I realised that, far from being foreign, Vita had the most English accent I had ever heard. Her pronunciation was so clipped and perfect that even I, who makes a practice of detecting incongruities, thought at first that it must be a deliberate and carefully executed performance, a parody. But her voice came cleanly and effortlessly to her.

'Why are you in Tom's house? Are you a friend of his?' I asked.

Her slim elegance made her appear younger from a distance, but close up, I could tell she was considerably older than me. Her gently lined face placed her perhaps in her mid-to-late fifties, with sharp eyes and the kind of skin whose upkeep requires regular and carefully oiled exposure to sunshine. *She will not keep that colour in our town much past August. Nor will she have much opportunity to show off a tan here, covered as we mostly are in coats and scarves.* I told myself this in my mother's voice, but even as I silently scolded Vita, I knew that this woman would be tanned all year round, and that she would find plenty of occasions that demanded the kind of clothes that celebrated her sun-touched skin. There was a glittery sheen to Vita's body that I have never seen on anyone else. I do not expect to know another Vita. She was a person-shaped precious stone, something mined and brought up to the surface to live among the pebbles, a shiny reminder of our comparative dullness. Where I am pale and insubstantial, Vita was dark and deliberately formed, as real as a piece of marble. And as cold under your hand. I am a stutter of a person, a glitch that flickers; I am the air blurred by the summer sun.

'Tom? Oh, yes, Tom! He is a good friend of ours. Sweet, *sweet* man, isn't he? Sweet. And what is your name?'

Her unexpected presence on my doorstep that day was an awkwardness and I mentally leafed through the files of first meetings in my head. Although Vita was watching me, there was not that familiar tick-tock of waiting; she seemed entirely without curiosity or concern. Her steady gaze was without expectation, and this was both new and pacifying. Eventually, I introduced myself, trying to repeat the pattern of her initial greeting: *Duh-duh! DUHHH dee dee-dee.*

'Hello! *I am Sunday.*' As I said my name, I stepped backwards to create space between us. I am constantly reversing away from people; the whole world is a revolving series of rooms I have walked into by mistake. And I am never allowed enough time to settle, but am instead called out into another room, which demands another, unknown set of behaviours. Sometimes I back myself flat against a wall while escaping from an acquaintance and then I move sideways instead, crab-like and rigid-jointed. *Say how do you do and never, never, say pleased to meet you,*

Edith invisibly prompted. ‘How do you do?’

Vita replied: ‘You’re Sunday? Fantastic, darling! Fantastic. How do *you* do?’ She was all approval, as if we had agreed to make up names and my choice pleased her.

I did not ask Vita to explain her implication of complicity regarding my name; long ago, I tempered the part of me that expects people to be clear. But accepting confusion means living alone down the rabbit hole. It means I must cling tightly to whatever realism and facts can be confirmed, to the accents and voice patterns that speak truthfully. It means a cartoonish life where the impossible and unscientific must not be queried, however peculiar they seem. The owner of my local post office does not greet me with the cheerful ‘Hello’ that he uses with other customers. When I visit his shop on overcast days, he asks, ‘What have you done with the sun?’ He speaks sharply and without humour, as if I am withholding something material that rightly belongs to him. His other greetings for me include querying why I brought rain, or snow, or wind; it is me, rather than the seasons, who he holds accountable for every change in the temperature. His preferred and commonly employed rejoinder is the equally nonsensical, ‘Bring summer with you tomorrow, all right, love?’ and this is reserved for goodbyes. The man thanks me for pleasant weather in the polite and routine tone of someone handed their change.

I have perfected a sound like an exhalation for people who talk like this: *Ha!* This effectively indicates that I am both amused by and understand their point. It is the answer to all social riddles that cannot be solved by stating the alternative option: ‘That’s interesting.’ People like this observation, too, but both responses must only be made during the silences between their statements and not spoken during their speech, even if they are repeating themselves. Do not reference their repetition or correct them, however factually wrong they are. People, too, like eye contact. But not too much. I have a system for this, as I do for many of the social situations in which I find myself. I hold the person’s gaze for five seconds and then away for six, then back on for five. If I am unable to reach five seconds, I try instead for three before allowing myself to look away.

People do not like you to fidget, or tap your fingers, or to move much at

all; they prefer stillness. And smiles. Edith Ogilvy insisted: *A smile can lift even the plainest face into attractiveness. If one cannot be beautiful, one must still endeavour to look kind and happy. A smile will bring social success, while a sulky countenance, however pretty, will inevitably fail to secure friends and new acquaintances.*

But the impending relief is what I focus on when you are speaking, and I frown back at you in concentration. So many rules and reminders that I can hardly hear a word you say.

On my doorstep, Vita took my move away from her as an invitation and walked inside, exclaiming on the similarity of our homes. She patted my wrist as she passed me, and the navy fabric of her suit was surprisingly soft against my skin. Her surety was something like perfume and I breathed it in. She commented favourably on the uniformly white walls that run throughout my house, but it was in the non-possessive manner with which one approves a passing view or a glimpsed artefact. I knew, already, of course, that her own home, wherever it was, would be riotous with colour of all kinds, as well as visitors, pictures, clutter, noise. Edith Ogilvy was stern about interiors being natural and unpretentious, while retaining an air of comfort. *To achieve good taste, residents should avoid ostentatious displays in their homes, such as obviously new or novel items, or photographs whose objective is only to demonstrate social connections.* I have succeeded in this last directive, at least.

My house and Tom's are lone twins on the quiet street, two early Victorian buildings huddled together amongst a collection of mid-twentieth-century semi-detached family homes. Tom's, the first to be built and positioned at the far end of the cul-de-sac, enjoys the most private position. The builder of our two houses went bankrupt before he could realise his plans to replicate the solid red-brick houses, with their elaborate porches, along the street. The two detached Victorian buildings, with their square and serious lines, then, are incompatible with the smaller rendered houses surrounding them, and this shared difference affords our homes an air of considered solidarity against their subsequent neighbours. The feeling I have for my home is painful; that of a spouse who has married

above themselves and whose love is frequently interspersed with the cold panic of possible desertion. A house is something I could not have acquired for myself, and I think, often, of the parallel life I might have had, housed in a disapproving institution, or homeless and unwashed on the streets, frightening myself and others. My parents' hard-working and modest lifestyle meant they paid off the mortgage some years before they reached their tenth wedding anniversary, an accomplishment that astounds me when I consider my own paltry income.

Vita and I entered my kitchen, which still features the turquoise cupboards with amber crackled glass that my father fitted when I was a child.

'What a beautiful colour!' she said, stroking the units without self-consciousness, and as I might have done myself.

But it was already too late for me to change what I had planned to say. On meeting for the first time socially, I have found that people typically ask where you live and what your job is. Vita already knew where I lived, therefore I had prepared a line that described my work at the farm. I certainly had not expected this topic deviation into interior décor, and it takes time and considerable effort for me to adjust my conversation or focus. I do not envy other people's ability to adapt; I find it alarming. Their minds are like caught fish, shining and struggling and engaged in a perpetual and pointless circular motion. Those like me swim on, unaffected by the change in currents around them.

'I work at a farm. In the greenhouses.' It was involuntary speech; once I had said what I planned, I would be able to continue along her route of conversation. But I knew she would find the timing of this information peculiar, so I deliberately said it quietly, almost to myself. Then I spoke again, more loudly: 'My father built those cupboards himself. They have been here since I was a child.'

The freestanding units remain an incongruous burst of colour in my white, white house. My mother had no interest in interiors. The thing she loved was the water waiting outside and gently swaying; it was one road away and visible from her bedroom window. Whenever my father asked her what colour she wanted any room painted, she always chose white.

If he continued to ask, she would say, 'You choose, then, Walter,' and go silent on him.

He could not bear her silences. So, he decorated according to her first answer, and we had a white house, with all furniture and fittings chosen and arranged by him. He worked in silence to build the turquoise kitchen, while my then eight-year-old sister and I, just one year younger, watched him from the hall for hours at a time. We reported his movements to one another in a formal, hushed tone, as if we were anthropologists examining a strange and ancient ritual for context. *He is drawing on the wall with a pencil, he is holding a hammer, careful, he just saw me!*

Vita nodded approvingly at my father's décor; she was also enthusiastically counting the collective characteristics of our two houses. The architect and builder responsible had apparently been keen on embellishment, and Vita noted each twinned flourish, each elaborate archway and fireplace that corresponded with those in Tom's house. She was apparently pleased rather than disappointed by the reproduction of her temporary home; she told me this while she looked around and patted my arm distractedly, as casual as an intimate friend. I offered Vita a chair at the small table but not a drink. *Etiquette for Ladies cautioned that it is bad form to attempt entirely new practices when hosting an unfamiliar guest. The host ought to give the visitor a flavour of one's own habits rather than adopting pretentious ways which are then impossible to keep up.* Lady Ogilvy despised pretentiousness even more than bad manners. In my imagination, Edith's gauzy pink frills rose and resettled around her soft body (*physical exertion is generally an undesirable practice for ladies, excepting social activities, e.g., tennis or croquet*) as she lectured on the danger of showiness, warning against this above all else. She was also strict on the topics one might discuss with new neighbours: *I recommend one talks about the local area, the shops and the houses and so on. Never comment on the personal traits, behaviours, or habits of existing neighbours: such conversation is in very poor taste.*

I told Vita the story of our matching houses and the builder who was bankrupted by optimism. I had always imagined an earnest man with a flimsy moustache, aspiring to house his community and shamed by his