

FLARE AND FALTER

Michael Conley

"Conley walks the difficult tightrope between darkness and humour; he is an exciting up-and-coming talent whose work deserves serious praise."

Claire Askew
author of *This Changes Things*



This story is an excerpt from
Flare and Falter
by Michael Conley,
published by Splice.

For further information,
and to purchase the book,
please visit

[www.ThisIsSplice.co.uk
/showcase/michael-conley](http://www.ThisIsSplice.co.uk/showcase/michael-conley)

Anatidaephobia

*"The fear that somewhere, somehow,
a duck is watching you."*

Gary Larson

HE WAKES TO an echoing quack.

In the bathroom mirror, behind his shoulder, a duck roosts on the shower rail. When he turns around, it's not there.

On the way to work he notices the same duck waiting at a bus stop. Something in its expression reminds him of his father.

The duck isn't in any reference books. The closest specimen is a Swedish Blue, but his duck is yellow. He wonders when he started to think of it as *his* duck.

When he gets home, his laptop is on and his internet browsing history is open. A trail of moist flipperprints leads to the kitchen. The breadbin is crumbless.

He turns on the television. He spots the duck in the audience on *Question Time*, wing raised politely above its head, staring into the camera. Dimbleby ignores it.

Sleepless weeks pass. He keeps finding feathers on his pillow.

One morning, in the mirror, the duck seems closer than usual. Without looking directly at it, he shoots an arm out behind him, grabbing it by the neck. He raises it to eye level, studies its empty black pupils.

Quack, it says.

He howls. The neck snaps like a broccoli stalk. He stands in the bathroom for ten minutes, cradling the lifeless body. He decides to bury it in the garden.

When he returns, panting, his fingernails packed with soil, he doesn't notice the full bath, the two large yellow shapes bobbing serenely, watching him dress for work.