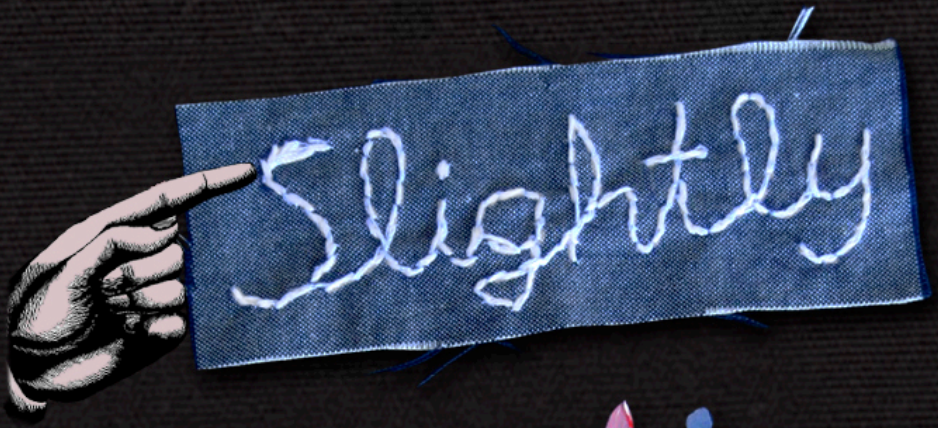

peculiar LOVE Stories

Slightly Peculiar Love Stories

Gathered and edited
by Penelope Todd

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Foreword

Since we are imperfect beings who love imperfect others imperfectly, and since love itself takes a jumbled and crooked path, it's possible that every story of love is slightly peculiar. I didn't have to look far to find those that stray from a formulaic ideal of romance. Appraising slightly peculiar love stories to include in this collection, I wished to be touched, jolted, teased, stretched, heartened, and allowed to feel the weight, breadth, and diversity of love.

The stories I've chosen paint a grand mandala of experience and circumstance: love appears and disappears; it yearns after an old flame or a new planet; it dares to declare itself, or to wait for the *right* one; it aches in the head, the heart, the groin, and all over. Love is characterised in the curve of a hip, in the folded corner of a page; it fondles memories or fast-forwards into fantasy or fetishism, even psychosis. It falls for unlikely people and suffers fits of jealousy; love grieves, forgives, puzzles, and creates its ideal other. Here you'll find love in a time of war; late, old love; love left too late; and mysterious new love that demands a leap of trust. Love amuses and amazes, is bold and timid; it goes the distance. A couple of stories poke into dark corners where love is whittled to a sliver of hope or a single compassionate act.

Love preoccupies writers in Israel and Hong Kong, Argentina and Athens, in the UK, the US, and in NZ. For me as editor, reading and re-reading the stories has been always a pleasure and often a thrill, as I became further acquainted with each writer's voice, and craft, and each one's particular, peculiar take on love.

Of course the story of love fulfilled is no story at all; it's in the gap between longing and completion that the narrative appears. As indicated by these *Slightly Peculiar Love Stories*, love is, for the most part, unequal, ill timed, and as wistful as it is material; but in

those rare hours when love is met and matched, the yearning is vindicated and reinforced. The longing for love never leaves us, or the appetite for its stories. Over and over, love hurts. By degrees it learns. And heals. And hopes again.

The love story endures and I think no one is going to argue that a further twenty-one examples of the timeless quest is a single story too many.

Penelope Todd, editor

Footnote: Our authors have written in both UK and US spellings. I decided to let each stand.

Beyond Pluto

Sue Wootton

Adelaide could never work out whether she would have loved him anyway, or whether it was the wheelbarrow incident, his mother yelling Godfrey*! in such a panic, and suddenly thundering into the room ...*

After the dishes she dries her hands and allows herself to make the phone calls. She always makes herself wait until the final pot is put away, the last piece of cutlery slotted back to its correct division in the drawer. She wipes the bench and glances round the kitchen, almost hoping she has missed something.

This particular evening she has missed nothing. The benches gleam. The table is cleared. Not a solitary toast crumb demands her attention. She drew the curtains at 5.30, shortly after arriving home from work. Her handbag sits on the hall table, near the door and under the mirror. Tomorrow morning she will stand here and apply her lipstick, *putting on her face,* button herself up, and leave. If the forecast is cold, she will wear the navy beret. Well, it's beret-*style.* Not a true beret, because they don't keep the ears warm, and, truth be known, she would feel silly wearing a beret, as if everyone in the street was staring at her with barely concealed amusement. As if she were a child who'd slipped out of the house wearing the juicy contents of the dressing-up box, whose mother had failed to stop her at the door and disabuse her of these fancy notions. *It's just not right for you. It's a bit, well, French. Perhaps it's your nose. Or your hair. It might be the shape of your head. At any rate, young Adelaide, you put that beret back where it belongs. Find something that covers your ears and won't blow off in the wind.*

Adelaide Moss. No longer *young* Adelaide: Miss Moss, efficient and knowledgeable and *absolutely indispensable.* That's what they say at work. They all say it, especially when something unusual crops up, some irregular task requiring manual or mental skills no longer taught to young people. She realises with a shiver that she's become a kind of walking knowledge repository, an information fossil. How quickly forty came! She hadn't seen it creeping up until it pounced. Forty netted her fair and square. It toyed with her for a few years, batting at sudden movements, sucking at fluids. *Young Adelaide Moss* was carried off like a mouse. *Miss Moss* remained, soberly

walking through her days, encountering fifty with a kind of appalled disbelief, looking to sixty now with grim resignation – but not, any more, surprised.

Miss Moss makes one last careful check of the kitchen. Nothing is out of place. Nothing needs wiping down. She folds the tea towel in half and places it on the handrail. She wrings out the dishcloth and arranges it next to the detergent under the sink. For a moment she contemplates cleaning out a cupboard, but just as suddenly is overcome by weariness at the very thought. She clears her throat.

Her telephone lives on a macramé mat at the end of the kitchen bench. Miss Moss takes out the telephone book. Last night she did W. This evening she will choose … her finger wavers … G. She will do G. G for good luck, also for Godfrey, though Miss Moss pushes this thought away. She lifts her cordless phone from its cradle, and peers at the first name beginning with G.

•

Godfrey has lived alone since Valerie left, though he has barely noticed the transition. He spends most of his time in the tower, which he built when the twins were just babies. Accessed by narrow stairs, it pokes up above the roofline of the old villa like a periscope. The floor is strewn with notes and calculations. A telescope is aimed through the skylight. A pair of binoculars sits on the windowsill. The table of periodic elements is on the south wall; Wallace Stevens' poem 'The Snow Man' on the north. *And, nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.* A faded cardboard box holds his childhood meccano set. He can remember how stiff and awkward it was to carry, half his own height. Now he can pick it up in one hand. It's flimsy and battered, but through all the years of constant use he's never mislaid a single nut or bolt.

Up here, the phone never rings. Godfrey hasn't seen or heard it for

so long he's forgotten where it is. It's probably still listed under Valerie's surname in the book; he's never bothered changing it. Day after day he goes to the university and disseminates his ideas to students. That these youngsters keep coming to his lectures amazes him. He doesn't realise that he's achieved a level of notoriety – mad old Prof Becker from Physics, with his wild hair and rambling thoughts. No one can keep up with him, and his digressions keep everyone guessing: is he senile as an egg, psychotic, or a genius? No one is certain, least of all his colleagues, all of whom are younger than him, each understanding only one specialised domain. Prof's ability to quote from Gray's Anatomy, Pablo Neruda and the Prajnaparamita Sutras makes them nervous. Not to mention his party trick of standing on a chair reciting 'The Ancient Mariner' from go to whoa. He doesn't do this standing on his head. His colleagues have no idea that the professor pays them this courtesy.

At home tonight, Godfrey is taking a break. He's doing a headstand in the middle of the room, but not, this evening, reciting poetry. His mood is pensive. He hopes that being upside down will force fresh blood into his brain, pushing old memories deep into the canyons of his hypothalamus. The memories, vague and macrocarpa-scented, disturb his concentration, and he is close – very close, he believes – to finding the planet he's been searching for since boyhood. The planet made of gold. Planet El Dorado.

•

She gets all the way to the last Gale before nobody answers. Every Gabites, every Gaffety, every Gagenheim, answers – either personally or by recorded voice. Her index finger hovers ready to kill the connection. She dials the next number immediately, before she loses her nerve.

It's a torture to her when someone answers. Some people, she has discovered, bark or grunt their hellos. These are the worst. The

words fall out of her in a squeak – *sorry, wrong number* – and she hangs up, sweating. The world seems divided into three telephone-answering camps: the barkers, the Pollyannas – *hi there!* – and the querulous – *hello?* It's really just the barkers she hates, but it's not knowing what sort will pick up that makes her mouth dry and her palms wet.

But the last Gale is not home, and doesn't have an answer phone. As the dial tone rings on and on, Miss Moss begins to relax. After several minutes she becomes confident. She places the phone gently on her left shoulder, inclining her neck to hold it in place as she fills the kettle and makes her evening cup of tea. The phone settles into its accustomed position and rings incessantly in her left ear. Miss Moss walks carefully, so as not to dislodge the telephone, and carries the tea into her lounge. She puts the cup on the wide arm of the chair, and crouches to turn on the heater. She has perfected this manoeuvre and never drops the phone.

Some nights she watches TV. Sometimes she listens to music, or reads. The only thing she needs to remember is to keep an eye on the time. She has a rule – hang up after one hour. She has learned, the embarrassing way, that people eventually come home from their meetings, dinners, nights at the movies, and when they do, they answer the phone. She used to get caught out, sometimes asleep in her chair, even snoring, when suddenly in her ear – *yes?* – causing her to startle, heart twittering. But one hour is usually safe – sixty minutes of contentment, telephone tucked against her ear. She thinks of it as a kitten purring on her shoulder.

She can't remember when this habit became a full-blown obsession. Three years ago she rang a colleague to give her apologies for the staff Christmas party. No one answered. Moving absent-mindedly round the kitchen, the phone pressed to her ear while it rang, she had slipped into a reverie. The humming of the plastic handpiece on her shoulder transformed itself into the purring of little Fox. She could

feel his small warm weight, the way he snuggled in so trustingly.

She was a child again, watching her best friend from inside his house. Outside on the lawn Godfrey was attempting to launch himself out of a home-made rocket blaster. He was wearing his father's motorbike goggles and a Protector Suit, which he'd made by taping sheets of newspaper together. Adelaide had helped him climb into it, and on Godfrey's instructions had taped extra sheets to the sleeves of his jersey. These were wings.

Godfrey had set up the wheelbarrow on the coal-shed roof. Getting it up there was easier than he'd anticipated; his pulley system had worked well. The extension cord trailed from the rusty bottom of the barrow, down the shed walls and over the grass to the house. Adelaide held the plug, waiting to plunge it into a socket. Godfrey, meanwhile, was manipulating the hose into position. His mother had forbidden him to use matches, but he needed enough firepower to get himself into the air. From there it would be quite straightforward. He'd done weeks of weight-lifting with two jars of preserved plums he'd stolen from the pantry. He'd practised wing movements on his bed and in the bath. But you couldn't train for lift-off. You could only work it out in your head. How-much-water + how-much-electricity = how-much-oomph?

He ran round the corner of the house to turn on the tap, newspaper flapping.

Adelaide looked out from the bay window, plug in hand, Fox nestled on her shoulder. Godfrey checked the hose and was pleased to see water cascading into the wheelbarrow onto the electric cord. The plan was for Godfrey to climb onto the roof and adopt a launching position by crouching in the barrow with his arms outstretched. As soon as he got his balance, he would give Adelaide the signal – a thumbs-up. He had just placed one newspaper-trousered leg in the wheelbarrow when his mother happened to glance out of the upstairs window. 'Godfrey!' she yelled, bashing on the glass. 'Godfreeeey!'

Vaguely it comes to him, the sound of a phone ringing. ‘Pick it up,’ he mutters. He’s been deep in meditation. Now his focus is scattered. He has the sense that he was nearly onto it, that the whereabouts of his golden planet was about to reveal itself. He’d been experiencing a vision of the solar system, up close and brilliant in 3-D clarity. And now this annoying *bring bring, bring bring*, just loud enough to get under the skin. It occurs to him that it’s a very old-fashioned ring, and this reminds him that many years ago he salvaged the black Bakelite from Valerie’s relentless modernising and connected it up here somewhere.

It goes on ringing.

Slowly, with a sigh, Godfrey lowers his legs and torso to earth. He doesn’t want to come down, but, could it be … is it possible … is he getting a phone call?

Miss Moss is neither reading nor listening to music. Tonight she’s engrossed in the purring of Fox, and, as she sips her tea, is thinking of Godfrey. She can’t remember a time before she knew him. He lived next door, on the other side of the hole in the macrocarpa hedge. The hedge was HQ. A ladder of branches ran up inside, emerging on top. From this prickly nest Adelaide and Godfrey made their plans. Godfrey’s kitten, little Fox, was always with them, nestled on Adelaide’s lap, or perched on her shoulder. Godfrey, talking earnestly and gesticulating, paced the top of the hedge, ankle-deep, bobbing gently. An evergreen tang pervaded everything: clothes, hair, conversation.

In later years Adelaide could never work out whether she would have loved him anyway, or whether it was the wheelbarrow incident,

his mother yelling *Godfrey!* in such a panic, and suddenly thundering into the room to rip the plug from her hands. Godfrey's mother had walloped her across her bottom, then walloped Godfrey.

Adelaide's mother, when Adelaide had crawled home through the hedge, crying and dirty and bruised, had been furious. Adelaide's mother said Adelaide would never be allowed to play at that boy's place again, because the family were liberals and heathens. Adelaide went as often as possible through the hedge after that, returning liberal, heathen and happy. At fifteen, clearly, it had to stop. Adelaide's mother encouraged Adelaide's father to apply for a promotion in another town, told Adelaide it was time to knuckle down. *Do bookkeeping. Get a job in your father's office. Meet some people who've got their heads screwed on tight. A long dose of common sense, that's what you need. You'll just dream your life away otherwise, young lady.*

•

Bring bring. Bring bring. Godfrey has located the source of the sound. Somewhere in the north corner of the room, somewhere behind the model galaxy he's been creating out of copper wire and meccano. Recently he designed a way to demonstrate the complicated forces exerted by each celestial body, and has been wiring the model – sun by sun, planet by planet – into the mains. El Dorado, he believes, orbits the outer reaches of the solar system, far beyond Pluto. He's pleased about this. He doesn't trust human nature. If it were closer – near Mars or Jupiter say – someone would stake a claim, mine it to dust. Beyond Pluto seems safe enough. He just wants to find it. He's not sure who, if anyone, he'll tell when he does.

He's going to have to dismantle the model to get to the phone. Impossible. He cups Earth in one hand, gazing at the region where his planet should be. It will be tiny. A tiny planet made entirely of

gold, dull as dishwater to the untrained eye. So far out it never shines.

The phone will not stop. As if bidden, Godfrey unhooks Earth from the frame, then, one by one, the other planets.

•

Adelaide remembers the day she squeezed through the hedge for the last time. Fox jumped out at her, rubbed her ankles, purred. Godfrey was waiting. She straightened up, dusting greenery out of her hair. He was standing so close she could smell the wool of his jersey, and beneath that, the smell of Godfrey himself: macrocarpa, books, electricity. He was a full head taller than her these days, and his hands were large and strong. He put his right hand on her left shoulder, his left hand around her waist. Drawing her close, he kissed her, lingeringly. She closed her eyes, absorbed in the sensation.

Adelaide's mother was stalking the other side of the hedge. 'Adelaide! We're leaving.'

'I'm never going to let you go,' whispered Godfrey. Adelaide pulled away, feeling burnt, feeling a freezing wind rush into the torn space between them.

•

In the tower, Godfrey unbolts meccano. He wonders who could be phoning, and why they are so persistent. Has there been a death? Valerie? No, too bitter to die. One of the twins? Please not the twins. He remembers the death of their cat, and how traumatised the twins were. His attempts at explanations were poo-poohed by Valerie. 'Cats die,' is what she told the kids. Whereas he wanted to fold the children into his arms and weep. Swimming like an incantation in his head were words he had not spoken in years: *Fox, Adelaide, Fox,*

Adelaide, Adelaide, Adelaide, Adelaide. ‘Just a cat, for Christ’s sake,’ said Valerie. ‘Get over it.’

Godfrey reaches for the phone. ‘Professor Becker,’ he says into the heavy mouthpiece.

•

Miss Moss is shocked out of her daydream, and knocks her teacup clean off the arm of the chair. She whirls around to check the clock. Fifty-five minutes. ‘Sorry, sorry. I’m sorry. Wrong number. Wrong number.’ And she slams the off button. *But I was doing G*, she thinks in confusion. Her heart hammers. *Beck-er Beck-er Beck-er.* She wills her pulse to settle.

•

In the tower, Godfrey stares at the phone. Wrong number. He’s dismantled the galaxy for a wrong number. He hangs up. Crouching, he scoops up the sun and planets. He takes out of his pocket the dun pebble that will represent his planet, when he finds it. It lies in the palm of his hand, plain, but interesting. He folds his fingers over it, rests it over his heart. Thinks of Adelaide. The hole in the hedge, and Fox prowling there for weeks, a moon without an orbit. The scent of macrocarpa drifting on the wind, the wind blowing always through the hollow.

•

More about Sue Wootton

What Exactly Did I Lose?

Lawrence K. L. Pun

... memory is like a fishnet, full of holes.

The butterfly specimen I put on my desk vanished today somehow.

It was a 'sulphur butterfly'. I had its remains sealed in transparent plastic fifteen years ago.

Losing the specimen seems to jettison me from my childhood. Time never travels in a straight line.

My childhood was the brown and grey world of insects. My family was not rich and I had a strict father. I was often home alone, living in my own world. Insects were a very important part of it.

Luwen was touched by the death of Japanese cartoonist Fujiko Fujio. She gushes on and on about Doraemon and Nobi Nobita. Lost for words, I can only lend her an attentive ear. Luwen and I are lovers.

I tell her about my childhood, which lacked things like cartoons, models and toys, pianos, children's tales and electronic games. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, said unfulfilled childhood desires are repressed, lying in wait for the chance to leap into the conscious mind in adulthood. I often feel a sense of loss, yet I am not sure if it has anything to do with my childhood lack.

Luwen is very interested in my childhood. She is keen on everything to do with my past. Often she tells me she loves me, and that she wants to know everything about me. I feel the same about her. But we have missed twenty-five years of each other's lives. We can only pay brief visits to each other's past by means of memory. And memory is like a fishnet, full of holes. What I can summon is but a very condensed version …

My understanding of life probably started with insects. Insects, the recreation of my childhood, the outlet for my primordial creativity.

To destroy a cockroach, I came up with all kinds of mischief.

Dismemberment: from the feelers to the mandibles and legs, severed one by one. I followed the death throes of the cockroach, noting the

function of each part of its anatomy.

Poisoning: mixing soap, toothpaste, soy sauce and all kinds of domestic fluids to concoct homemade poison into which the cockroach was plunged. Wide-eyed, I observed the violent spasms of its limbs and feelers, its survival instinct, then gradual relaxation, loss of consciousness, death, and rigor mortis, like a piece of music that turns from *presto* to *largo*, then *fine*. Death was the unlikely source of my ecstasy and I was only a child

Burning: from textbooks, I learned how to ignite an object by concentrating sunlight onto a single spot through a magnifying glass. I caught a languishing cockroach and set it on fire the same way. For me, it was a great scientific experiment. Death by fire – how spectacular.

Suffocation: I learnt from a science textbook that living organisms thrive on oxygen. I stuffed a cockroach into a tiny, airtight plastic bag, confident that the oxygen inside would be depleted sooner or later. I waited patiently. The cockroach died, the bag becoming its coffin. But I could not figure out whether it was suffocation or starvation that killed it.

Freezing, slinging a rubber band at close range, incapacitating with adhesive tape … infinite means of torture, on a par with the torture chambers of the Qing dynasty. At once destruction and creation. Besides cockroaches, I slaughtered flies, armies of ants, even those vicious crickets.

From insects, I learned torture. How to let them neither live nor die, until their final gasp.

From insects, I realized what is life and death.

From insects, I saw blood. Flies have blood, ants do not. I concluded therefore that flies are higher up in the hierarchy than ants.

From insects, I understood punishment and pardon. Sometimes

seized by a fit of ‘kindness’, I would release them after an extended bout of torture.

From insects, I learned what conquer and escape are all about.

Insects were the universe of my childhood; this universe was so bloody and relentlessly violent …

Since nightfall, I have been looking for my butterfly specimen but it is nowhere to be seen. As I search, I wait for her to call. Luwen is holidaying in Beijing. For the past eight nights, she has consistently rung around ten to put me at ease. Today is the ninth day. It’s eleven and she still hasn’t called. Unable to sleep, I carry on my search. The search keeps killing time, memory unveils in silence …

The insect world of my childhood was not entirely bloody. The sulphur butterfly I made into a specimen had flown into my home, covered in wounds, when I was ten. I caught it and placed it gingerly into a ventilated box I had made, hoping to save its life.

Regrettably, it soon turned rigid. I put the corpse on my palm and went to a neighborhood stationery shop where I had it sealed in transparent plastic for fifty cents. Sealing it, I also sealed my feelings and childhood memories. Experienced separation for the first time and cried my eyes out.

Tears do not change reality. I came to realize that I have infinite power to destroy life yet I was powerless to save it.

How strange. Before this butterfly appeared, insects had been the enemy. But this time, I felt pity for a butterfly. It touched me.

For some unknown reason, an ambiguous moral boundary shimmered into shape in my heart. I seemed to divide insects into the kingdoms of ‘good’ and ‘evil’: cockroaches, crickets, ants, flies, beetles, fleas, spiders and the like were atrocious – they deserved death or at least severe punishment; but moths, butterflies, dragonflies were benign creatures that existed in harmony with

people.

In hindsight, this concept of right and wrong appears very childish; it is also far removed from reality. The insect species I have come across in books since then must outnumber the ones I knew as a child by tens of thousands of times. To our knowledge, there are one million species of animals on earth, and of these, more than 800,000 are insects. Species of *flatidae* alone number over 110,000, many of which are pests. For example, the large green slug caterpillar is a deadly pest to crops in the tropical regions of Asia, wreaking the worst havoc on the tung oil trees of Malaysia and Indonesia. But on second thought, this view of good and evil was, after all, anthropomorphic.

When I was little, I did not have the wisdom to understand all this. In a child's world, there is a clear border between black and white, good and evil. But as I grew up, the world I knew changed. There is no longer a clear line between black and white. In its place is a long stretch of gray with vague, murky boundaries.

I continue to wait. The clock strikes midnight. No call from Luwen. She has always been a very responsible person. I start to feel uneasy.

Outside the window, it is drizzling and the wind chime is tinkling. Suddenly a butterfly enters, fluttering in circles before alighting on a white wall. Upon careful inspection, I find that it is a sulphur butterfly exactly like my specimen.

I feel a chill down my spine and goosebumps on my skin. There is something unsettling about it all. A specimen vanishes without a trace. A sulphur butterfly makes its way to my home that very night. Coincidence or premonition?

'When I leave this world, I will turn into a butterfly and keep you company every night,' I remember Luwen saying. The memory strikes me all of a sudden. My heart starts to pound and I get both hot flashes and chills. Her words drag me into the abyss of my

thoughts …

Once I chased away a huge cockroach for her. Terrified of cockroaches, she would scream and run every time she saw one. I can't remember how many times I have helped her get rid of them.

'Don't creepy-crawlies freak you out? Winged ones are the worst. One time, I was staying up to study and in flew a cockroach. I scurried into bed and threw the covers over my head. So much for studying,' she said.

'There's nothing to be scared of. I don't understand you girls. Aren't human beings more frightening than animals?' I paused, then continued, 'Except for nocturnal insects.' Because insects can become something more than insects.

When I was a child my mother loved to tell me stories, including ghost stories.

One particular night, in a particular year, a moth fluttered into our home. Mother told me that insects that appeared at night might be possessed by spirits. Later, I saw a similar story on a TV programme, *Mystery Beyond*, which seemed to substantiate my mother's words. From then on, though I had no way of proving that insects are spirits incarnate, this belief was hammered like a nail into my mind.

When I was really young – I forget which year it was – my maternal grandma passed away. For a long time afterwards, whenever insects like moths and butterflies came to our home at night, Mother would say Grandma had returned and tell me not to hurt them.

I was nineteen when my paternal grandmother died of lung cancer. Mother had stopped talking about spirit possession. Perhaps because I was no longer a child. Yet, in the depths of night, especially at midnight, the insects that visited my home each seemed to be the departed loved one. When my missing of my grandma intensified, projecting it on these winged creatures somehow made it easier to bear.

‘If that is true, I will turn into a butterfly every night and keep you company after I leave this world,’ Luwen said. That’s Luwen for you – unconsciously emanating a brand of romance that is poignant and beautiful. Very moving yet distressing. Why this talk of separation at the height of passion?

I pondered and said, ‘How would I know it’s you?’

‘Go with the flow. You will sense it. Maybe I’ll alight on our picture.’

Luwen, have you fallen asleep, exhausted after an exciting day, and forgotten to call? How would I know? Feelings, I find, are unreliable.

Luwen, without a recognizable face, without fingerprints, smell, voice or breathing, will I be able to sense your existence? My feelings are malfunctioning. Negative thoughts crowd my brain. I wish my feelings were paralyzed. When I’m weak, only touch is tangible and real.

The room is silent. Only the sound of my breathing and the fluttering of the butterfly.

It is three a.m. Still no call. I am weary, my thoughts grind to a stop. I slip into dreams.

A face appears, its countenance hidden under a swarm of insects – layers and layers crammed into a face. Many, many insects. Grasshoppers, crickets, earwigs, cockroaches, termites, yellow ants, beetles, mayflies, and so on and so on. Frantic, I push them away with my hands, yet the harder I push, the more they come. I have tortured and killed countless of these creatures. Now it seems that they are here to denounce me, get even with me.

The phone wakes me from my nightmare. I am covered in cold sweat.

‘Hello.’ It is a male voice.

‘Hello, Kong Sang, I just received news that James was on the plane that crashed in the U.K. yesterday. It’s uncertain whether he’s alive.’

My hand weakens, barely able to hold up the receiver. I’m lost for words. My brain goes blank and tears well up. James is our buddy from secondary school.

Tears do not change reality. I have infinite power to destroy life yet I am powerless to save it.

I only know that I often feel a sense of loss.

Within a day, I lost a specimen from my childhood, and a good friend from secondary school. There seem to be other losses also, indescribable, ineffable.

I seem to be jettisoned from my childhood. Time never travels in a straight line.

And Luwen, where are you now? I am very weak, I desperately need you by my side.

The butterfly on the wall flaps its wings and lands on the photograph of me and Luwen.

‘How would I know it’s you?’

‘Go with the flow. You will sense it. Maybe I’ll alight on our picture.’

I am losing my mind. No, I can’t lose you. I’d rather this butterfly were James.

The sulphur butterfly hangs firmly on to the picture. Feelings, I find, are unreliable. My feelings have completely lost their function.

Then it dawns on me that sulphur butterflies are sexually dimorphic. The difference lies in the black extremity of the wings.

Translated from Chinese by Piera Chen

More about Lawrence K. L. Pun

Statues

Craig Cliff

Lalo crept to the statue, reached out a hand and stroked its thigh.

I

Alfonso Dondolio grew up surrounded by statues but he thought nothing of them. As a young Florentine he cared only for the world of flesh. People joked he used his tongue so much it had swollen to twice the normal size. He played along and earned the nickname Lalo.

In time he settled with plump Donatella, a cobbler's daughter, and together they brought forth two plump daughters of their own.

When work became sparse in the city, Lalo took his family north to his uncle's farm in Veneto. The nearest village was called Metastrano. It had but one statue, a bronze rendering of Adonis by a forgotten sculptor.

The naked, fleshless form took Lalo's breath.

II

Lalo threw himself into improving the yield of his aging uncle's fields. He worked the soft soil on hands and knees. He ground the bones of bobby calves for manure. He coaxed the creek nearer the crops. Anything to keep him from Metastrano and his mind from the hard, pensive Adonis.

Harvest time came. Lalo was forced to take his uncle's cart to market and there he was: pedestal ringed by blooming viole del pensiero, manhood lolling in the summer heat.

Lalo stayed on long after selling all of his maize – until everyone else had taken their carts and canaries away and he was alone in the piazza. He crept to the statue, reached out a hand and stroked its thigh. Nulla può venire di questo amore irrazionale, he sighed.

III

The feeling of a firm thigh beneath his hand stayed with Lalo long after his vigil had passed and another crop of maize had taken root.

Men his age began preparing for war. A club devoted to calisthenics appeared in Metastrano. That's where Lalo met Cheto Ohr. He was different: part-Swiss, soft spoken, slow to anger despite ample prompting.

It was Cheto who asked to meet in the maize. Cheto who took Lalo's hand and showed him what to do. Cheto who wept softly afterwards.

IV

From that night on Lalo knew for sure he was no finocchio, but the Adonis still possessed him. The frozen curls of his hair. The forever-perfect toenails. The piercing recesses of his pupils.

Come winter his uncle's fields were brown and sodden. Lalo rode his daughter's bicycle to town each night to observe the comings and goings of the piazza. One night, in the hour when no one ever stirred, Lalo took the hanging left hand of Adonis and pulled himself onto the pedestal. His head reached the small of his idol's back.

Lalo did as Cheto had done, though he only had to undress himself.

When it was over, Lalo understood why Cheto had wept.

V

Lalo's uncle died that winter and left everything – even his wooden dentures – to Lalo's cousin, Emmanuelle, a soldier serving in Somaliland. Lalo and his family were allowed to inhabit the servants' quarters of the house and continue working the land.

But Lalo's labours soon were clear. His maize was the best in Veneto. Farmers begged him to work their soil, coax their creeks. He

helped to irrigate half the province.

In time he opened a factory to mass produce the brass hose nozzles he had perfected. Lalo earned enough to buy the farm outright. His wealth continued to grow. People addressed him as Signor Dondolio and gossiped about what he got up to in the red barn that only he was allowed to enter.

VI

Not even Donatella knew what her husband of all those years did in the red barn. She had seen the Adonis, of course, but knew nothing of its hold upon Lalo.

Once she had crept up to the barn, pressed her ear to the timber and heard what sounded like pepper being ground. From that day on she believed that Lalo, now the wealthiest man within five villages of Metastrano, feasted in his barn alone. She never cooked for him again.

In fact the sound she had heard was sanding.

The folly of Alfonso Dondolio's dotage was a sculpture. When it was complete he drank a cup of molten bronze and swiftly died.

VII

His note did not waste a word. The statue was to be placed in the piazza, fourteen paces from the steps of the municipio, facing south-west. Lalo's statue was, like the Adonis, to have no plaque or insignia. No one dared question this request. Dondolio's factory was the biggest employer for miles. And besides – the story!

But as it did with the Adonis, time has slowly eroded the whos and hows of the second statue in Metastrano's piazza.

Today not even Lalo's great great grandchildren know it's him

standing in green-tinged bronze, one hand raised to his hat, the other across his breast, forever greeting, forever thanking, forever giving the glad-eye to that bronze Adonis.

More about Craig Cliff

Less than Half a Day

Christos Chrissopoulos

'Do you want salad?' 'Hold this please'
'Yes, separate bills.' Words we could have
spent another way.

net-vibe

1.

Since Tara and I each returned home, someone lives inside my head, sees through my eyes. I feel feet pounding in my chest. I feel them kicking hard and deep against my breastbone.

Vibed by: CC 5 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Thursday, October 18, 2007

net-vibe

2.

I turned to take the bicycle – it was well past two – and I only worried about the cold air surrounding me like melted ice and flowing in through my jacket sleeves.

Vibed by: CC 4 views 2 comments comment | delete | follow
Friday, October 19, 2007

Tara says:
You seem to be in constant dialogue with me.
I'm back home. Terribly tired. I'll be sleeping for a week ϑ)))
How was your trip to Athens ?

CC says:
What are you doing here? Why are you doing this?

net-vibe

3.

'What kind of wine?' 'Do you want salad?' 'Hold this please' 'Yes, separate bills please.' 'This I will give back.' 'You've been before?' Words we could have spent another way.

Vibed by: CC 0 views 3 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, October 20, 2007

Tara says:
Why did you name me Tara?

CC says:
Just because. Why did you respond to it?

Tara says:
You seem to be talking about someone else.

net-vibe

4.

Looking at her green t-shirt, I put out my hand; her gaze was fixed on my face the whole time. It didn't last long, I left without impressions. Only with a hunch, or a premonition, that was finally disproved.

Vibed by: CC 0 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Sunday, October 21, 2007

net-vibe

5.

The second time she was sitting in front of me, I looked at her curved spine. At some point she reached for a photo book across the table and started browsing with her left hand, but I couldn't tell… Was she really turning the pages for my sake?

Vibed by: CC 16 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Monday, October 22, 2007

Tara says:
I miss our day together. We're so many miles apart.

net-vibe

6.

I approached her as discreetly as possible, scared, disguising my touch as something inadvertent. I was barely touching her, and she only smiled and shrugged saying, 'I don't know.'

Vibed by: CC 8 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Tuesday, October 23, 2007

net-vibe

home • what others are vibing • about

7.

When she said she didn't want me, and my throat and lungs clenched, it wasn't for love, because how do I know what love is? It was because she drove her fist up, breaking the surface of the night sky. And after that, nothing happened.

Vibed by: CC 24 views 7 comments comment | delete | follow
Tuesday, October 23, 2007

Tara says:
What are you doing here? Some sort of self-pity?

CC says:
Why are you following?

Tara says:
I don't know. You continue to surprise me.

CC says:
You should have said it earlier.

Tara says:
You understood nothing?

CC says:
You only said 'you are nice' .

Tara says:
This thread takes us nowhere.

net-vibe

NO POSTS

Vibed by: CC 5 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Wednesday, October 24, 2007

net-vibe

NO POSTS

Vibed by: CC 5 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Thursday, October 25, 2007

net-vibe

8.

Next time I saw her, I felt like following her. I was still afraid, but this was an opportunity not to be wasted. Again I left alone, but taking something with me. The image of a white handkerchief, twisted in her hand as she was speaking to me.

Vibed by: CC 30 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Friday, October 26, 2007

net-vibe

9.

I will write hastily about the only kiss, which was three kisses in a row, with lips half open, craving to succumb. And hands that were loosened in the last moment. And then a gentle, so polite, turn of the head.

Vibed by: CC 32 views 2 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, October 27, 2007

Anonymous says:
Comment deleted by CC.

Tara says:
What had you written?

net-vibe

10.

When the face is missing, the photograph remains a meaningless image. When the face is missing, how can you be sure that she looked like that? That this was the angle, the shadow, the forehead bending for that only kiss?

Vibed by: CC 6 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Sunday, October 28, 2007

net-vibe

11.

I must have asked for a letter from your moon-white hand. And you wrote me. You wrote me into my room. With walls of books, paper windows, and empty furniture. I read aloud to the apparition you left behind, and gradually it quietens.

Vibed by: CC 40 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Monday, October 29, 2007

net-vibe

12.

We met, walked, got separated in different rooms, looked at each other, walked, sat in different rows and only in the end, when we could endure no more, only then, we touched fleetingly shoulder-to-shoulder.

Vibed by: CC 56 views 4 comments comment | delete | follow
Tuesday, October 30, 2007

Tara says:
Are you receiving my comments?

CC says:
I'm not following you.

Tara says:
How are you?

CC says:
I'm fine.

net-vibe

NO POSTS

Vibed by: CC 5 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Wednesday, October 31, 2007

net-vibe

13.

She had no language to speak to me truly, and I had forgotten all the words I wanted to tell her. So we both abandoned ourselves to trivial talk, and to glances that every now and then stalled around the eyes or mouth.

Vibed by: CC 92 views 5 comments comment | delete | follow
Thursday, November 1, 2007

Tara says:
I like your story.

CC says:
You don't refer to the meaning, right?

Tara says:
Your mind fascinates me.

CC says:
Don't be sarcastic.

Tara says:
Why don't you block me then?

net-vibe

14.

I will write hastily of the only hug, which I remember through my hands. She did hold me, of this I'm certain. Or was it just the kiss; and the gentle turn of the head?

Vibed by: CC 90 views 4 comments comment | delete | follow
Friday, November 2, 2007

Anonymous says:
Comment deleted by CC.

CC says:
This thread does not welcome anonymous comments.

Anonymous says:
Comment deleted by CC.

net-vibe

15.

Now that I know she keeps purposefully silent, the hardest part will be to preserve this feeling. Or rather to persuade myself that she keeps purposefully silent. My desire needs a lie in order to survive.

Vibed by: CC 5 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, November 3, 2007

net-vibe

POST DELETED BY: CC

Vibed by: CC 5 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, November 3, 2007

Tara says:
Why are you deleting?

net-vibe

16.

Everything returns to an unending fractal. The fragile severity of a skinfold, the voice now gone forever, the shape of the rain within the rain. I speak to her in a vocabulary of seven words.

Vibed by: CC 73 views 16 comments comment | delete | follow
Sunday, November 4, 2007

Tara says:
Which are the seven words?

CC says:
They will be destined only for me.

Tara says:
Silly

CC says:
-

Tara says:
Now I understand. You are creating another fiction.

CC says:
Against which reality?

Tara says:
Come now. It's just that we are the only audience.

CC says:
Just us?

Tara says:
You are right. So, we are also the characters.

CC says:
Which character are you talking about? Tara in the posts? Or you who writes these comments?

Tara says:
The posts are written by you.

CC says:
Yes, but against which reality?

Tara says:
Your memory.

CC says:
And you?

Tara says:
Let's not get carried away beyond this fiction.

CC says:
Sure.

net-vibe

17.

Every time sleep loosens me, I lean into her, feeling the insistent pulse of a vein. I hold her as her limbs unlock, and I put her to sleep. In my sleep, I put her to sleep.

Vibed by: CC 79 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Monday, November 5, 2007

Tara says:
Against dreaming... (from yesterday).

net-vibe

18.

Reality asks from me something I do not have. From her I demand something not meant for me. Caught between these two absurdities, I follow what my nature dictates.

Vibed by: CC 90 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Tuesday, November 6, 2007

net-vibe

19.

When the lights came on I turned away from the screen. She was waiting only a few rows behind. 'I had kept a seat for you.' 'It was dark.' A metaphor for the only full day we had between us.

Vibed by: CC 45 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Wednesday, November 7, 2007

Tara says:
I like this a lot.

net-vibe

20.

Now I think that things are not always as they appear, so there is always the chance that you'll surprise me with something fortunate. I understand it is unlikely, but I persist.

Vibed by: CC 90 views 5 comments comment | delete | follow
Thursday, November 8, 2007

Tara says:
And this…

CC says:
Because it is ironic?

Tara says:
I didn't know you could be ironic with me.

CC says:
You didn't understand. Everything here is meant in the first person.

Tara says:
This, yes, is true irony.

net-vibe

21.

POST DELETED BY CC

Vibed by: CC 13 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Friday, November 9, 2007

net-vibe

22.

Mostly I'm trying not to look. The same objects. The same light. The same clothes. Myself trying not to look. I write and my attention is fixed on a soothing fiction.

Vibed by: CC 87 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, November 10, 2007

Tara says:
I'll be away for the weekend.

net-vibe

23.

I pass the same spots searching for unfamiliar details. I talk to myself, explaining that the synapses have now changed. In her book she writes that in old times they cured fevers with a sudden fright.

Vibed by: CC 98 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Sunday, November 11, 2007

net-vibe

24.

When I told her the night was getting cold and we could no longer stand outside the door, she repeated twice, 'I have no heating in my room.' I'm not lying – suddenly I was unable to understand these few English words.

Vibed by: CC 130 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Monday, November 12, 2007

net-vibe

25.

Something I did not find the time to do: to roll each of her hand bones between my thumb and forefinger. And she? Is there something she never found the time to do? I'm thinking that she had many momentary opportunities. But then, so did I.

Vibed by: CC 99 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Tuesday, November 13, 2007

CC says:
Comment deleted by CC.

net-vibe

26.

Everything happened quickly, effortlessly, in a kind of silence. Like when she lost her keys and she asked me to go by the kimono shop. Then she just knelt to the ground and picked them up. Carelessly. Without surprise.

Vibed by: CC 87 views 2 comments comment | delete | follow
Wednesday, November 14, 2007

CC says:
Comment deleted by CC.

CC says:
Are you following?

net-vibe

27.

Did she walk slowly or fast? Was I leading her, or was she dictating our route? If the latter was true, why was I looking at the road and not at her? 'Do you prefer to walk?' 'Yes, let's take a stroll.'

Vibed by: CC 59 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Thursday, November 15, 2007

net-vibe

28.

What is the meaning of her warning: 'When I teach, I take care that my students don't fall in love with me'? Is this a sign saying, 'Be careful?' Or is it a subliminal way to say, 'Yes, you can'?

Vibed by: CC 77 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Friday, November 16, 2007

net-vibe

NO POSTS

Vibed by: CC 5 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, November 17, 2007

net-vibe

29.

I wasn't ashamed that I didn't know how to dance. After all, I stood up only to see her body move. This dance was the closest I saw her to love making.

Vibed by: CC 181 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Sunday, November 18, 2007

net-vibe

30.

This day is scattered in a thousand and two pieces. Like a box of needles spread on the table. And now I have to pick them up carefully. One by one.

Vibed by: CC 67 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Monday, November 19, 2007

net-vibe

31.

A gold wire ring with cloudy red stones. A kimono she never wore in my presence. A hair, some sign, a wish farewell. She left absolutely nothing behind.

Vibed by: CC 83 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Tuesday, November 20, 2007

CC says:
Comment deleted by CC.

32.

We walked in circles around her hotel and I was simply becoming (for her sake) a third party. Or rather, whoever I was capable of becoming. And since I cannot be everybody, here it is: she denied my actual self.

net-vibe

33.

We walked in circles and then she asked, 'Is there somewhere to go at this hour?' I didn't know. I told her to go up because it was cold. She hesitated and I insisted. After that, nothing else remained.

Vibed by: CC 111 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
THursday, November 22, 2007

net-vibe

34.

She said that in her city she loves the clouds. Here, a merciless sun turns her into a shining speck of dust rolling over the floor every time I open the door. Each morning.

Vibed by: CC 190 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Friday, November 23, 2007

net-vibe

35.

Do you understand when I say that I am more silent when I'm talking? Before I even open my mouth, words overwhelm me. And I wonder, why does it have to be so? That everything comes to my mind with such slowness?

Vibed by: CC 174 views 1 comments comment | delete | follow
Saturday, November 24, 2007

Tara says:
I do not have a response to all this.

net-vibe

36.

As your face gets forgotten, your body also loses every vital sign of true existence. Angles, force, temperature. I count our touches with precision. Exactly fourteen. All from me.

Vibed by: CC 197 views 0 comments comment | delete | follow
Sunday, November 25, 2007

net-vibe

37.

A second-hand copy of *The body artist*, $3. Groceries for quick lunch, $15. One movie, free. Restaurant, $23.35. Drinks and cover-charge, $7. The only concrete evidence of a short love story. Ten hours long.

Vibed by: CC 13 views 2 comments comment | delete | follow
Monday, November 26, 2007

Tara says:
Less than half a day.

CC says:
Less than that.

Chips of Stars

Coral Atkinson

Bernie wanted to reach out and touch;
instead, he offered his seat.

‘No,’ he had told them, ‘no. I’ll go to the service but not to the nosh-up afterwards.’

They – sisters, brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews – protested of course.

‘The husband … ’

‘Got to be there … ’

‘People expect … ’

Bernie was adamant. Fifty-eight years together. Man and wife.

Now he was home.

Alone.

Bernie eased the Phillips screwdriver into position in the hinge of the screen door and turned. Fortunately the arthritis in his hands wasn’t playing up today. The screw was a bit rusty, so it didn’t give easily. The slight resistance pleased him. It was just enough to make him feel he was accomplishing something but not sufficient to be a bother. Bernie pulled the first screw out and started on the next.

Val.

Once her name had been enough to throw his whole body into a flurry. He was young then. They both were. Of course.

That first year of the war: Val in a cotton dress holding the rail in the bus. It was summer and her sleeve had fallen back exposing her bare arm. A slender, fragile arm, reaching up, skin with that matt look of soft paper, one or two large freckles on the flesh, leaves resting on water. Bernie wanted to reach out and touch; instead, he offered his seat.

‘Excuse me.’ Getting up, he was conscious of the lumpy army tunic; he wished he were an officer with a dapper uniform and smooth creases in each trouser leg.

Val and Bernie walked on the grass. Leaves stuck to their shoes.

'We're getting our feet wet,' said Val. 'We should go back to the path.'

'Can I kiss you?' Bernie looked with longing at Val's lipsticked mouth, which fluttered like a crimson butterfly.

She said nothing.

'You like me, don't you?' Bernie slid his arm round Val's shoulders.

'Course,' said Val. And they kissed.

•

Bernie was to be posted overseas. His parents were dead, his brother Douglas was in England with the RAF. It was bad enough going to war; unbearable without someone to miss you, someone who cared.

They sat in a special alcove at the side of the shop when they bought the ring.

'Diamonds, you must have diamonds for an engagement ring. They are the most beautiful, the most romantic of all stones.' The jeweller proffered a velvet tray seething with gems. 'A diamond, like love, lasts forever.' The man blushed. 'Once people said they were chips of stars. Not surprising really. See the way the stones dance in the light.'

Val and Bernie saw.

'This one, this one, please,' Val said.

Her face was pink with happiness. 'Wait till the girls at work see it.' She held the back of her hand up to her face as if it were a fan. 'I'll be Mrs Simpson. Married. Just imagine.'

Afterwards, the jeweller came to the street door with them. 'A pleasure to do business with you, sir, and off overseas so soon.' He

shook Bernie's hand. 'Such a lucky man and with this lovely young lady for a bride.'

Bernie took Val's arm as they walked in the Friday night crowd.

'I have a glory box I keep at the bottom of my bed,' Val said. 'Ever since I started working I've put aside half a crown each pay to buy something for when I'm married.'

'What sort of things?' Bernie looked at the thin lace strap of an undergarment, which enticingly appeared and then vanished under the scoop neck of Val's dress.

'Linen, a tea set, doilies, fancy spoons,' Val said. 'You know.'

Bernie didn't.

'There's a supper cloth I'm going to embroider with blue daisies, and a felt tea cosy like a little thatched cottage. Everything's there, ready.'

Bride and groom. In the bedroom of the hotel in Timaru on Bernie's final embarkation leave. Down at the shore the waves came and went and the sea sighed. A full moon embraced the room with light, nuzzling the cupboard in the corner, licking at the clothes hanging over chairs. Bernie stroked the bodice of Val's trousseau nightdress. Ivory satin with lace. Val looked up, but not at him.

He followed her gaze as it slid along the outlines of the water pipes on the ceiling.

'I thought it would be darker,' she said.

Val's breasts were hidden under the satin. Bernie ran his hand between lace and flesh. Surf on sand. God, it was delicious.

He raised himself on one arm. He leaned over and pressed his lips to where Val's breasts met. He drew his finger along the satin cleavage.

'Gorgeous, gorgeous,' he murmured, opening the ribbon tie that closed the nightdress.

Val's breasts were pale whirlpools.

Upstairs someone pulled out a stopper in a bath.

Val lay rigid; her knuckles gripped the white torrent of the sheets.

•

Bernie was to go directly to Egypt but then the destination was temporarily changed. In Scotland he hung over the rail of the moored troop ship and watched the water. The tide was burdened with cabbage leaves, oil, wooden boxes, bacon rinds, bread and sewage. When they left New Zealand the sea had been luminous, like jewellery. Val had come to the wharf to see him off. Her hair had one of the new permanent waves and she wore a felt and feather hat with a short veil. Val's eyes had darted behind the net like captured fish.

•

Later he was in the desert. The tents had been taken down. The army was about to move. The heat was monstrous. Men lay under lorries, guns and stray tables trying to escape the sun. Hair, eyes, nostrils and bodies were caked with dust and desert sand. Bernie pulled Val's letters from his kit bag and read each one again.

'I am well, how are you?' 'It is very wet.' 'The lettuces have been ruined with slugs.' 'I have unpicked that old blue cardigan and am reknitting it.' 'The girls at work are … '

The sweat from Bernie's hands made Val' s writing run. He ached at the thought of her.

•

The war ended and Bernie was going home. He bought the stockings from a Yank corporal on a railway station platform. Cost a bomb but it didn't matter. Bernie took them into the stall in the toilet and opened each packet. Reverently he pulled the stockings out of the cellophane. They fell like syrup over the roughness of his hands. He could see the stockings on Val's legs. He would pull them off, exposing her skin, white and vulnerable against the constraining nylon. He would draw his tongue down her leg from thigh to ankle. He would …

•

'But you've ruined them,' Val said. 'Why on earth did you open the packet? They're all snagged.'

In the hinged bedroom mirror Bernie could see himself and Val reflected three times. He was wearing his demob suit. It looked as if he was clothed in cardboard. Val had her arm up to the elbow in one of the stockings.

•

It was the evening of that same day. Bernie was in his striped pyjamas. He seldom swore but he did now. 'For Christ's sake, I've been at the war for bloody years. I'm home now, this is our bed, you're my wife.'

'Shush,' Val said, 'Dad will hear. He may be old but he's not deaf.'

'But Val!'

She was sitting up in bed in her nightdress. Her arms were locked round her knees, which were drawn up under the blankets to her chin.

'I love you so much. I want to show you,' Bernie said, coming to the

side of the bed. Val with her butterfly mouth and pearly skin was all he ever wanted. He took Val's hand and guided it between his legs.

'You're disgusting,' Val said.

•

How had he borne it, he wondered as he worked another screw free from the hinge. Once or twice he hadn't. Just pulled her to him and did what he had to. Afterwards she wouldn't speak to him. Felt pretty bad himself.

•

When Val's father died Bernie moved into the spare room.

'For goodness sake keep the net curtains closed,' Val said, tugging together the curtains that Bernie had opened. 'The sun will ruin the drapes.'

Bernie was sitting on the bed reading the newspaper.

'And you'll crush the counterpane doing that.'

•

Bernie took a camp bed, his pyjamas, dressing gown, clothes and radio into the shed. He liked it out there. Reminded him of the war and being in hospital in England. He'd been wounded in North Africa and sent back to Dorset to recover. Hated the life at the time but afterwards he remembered it more kindly: sailors sleeping in the luggage racks of English trains, soldiers singing 'Tipperary', and primroses glinting in the hedgerows.

On the wall of the shed Bernie put up a calendar the grocer had given away. He ate cherries in bed and spat the stones into the wastepaper basket. Sometimes he missed. From the window, or

sitting in a deckchair at the door after work drinking his homebrew, he would watch Val as she carried the white wicker basket to the clothesline and took in the washing. She wore a pale blue blouse and an elastic belt that nipped in her waist. She looked terrific, like that Mitzi Gaynor in *South Pacific*. Bernie would have liked to watch Val in the house too. He imagined her stretching up to dust a lampshade, bending to run the vacuum cleaner over the floor, squatting in front of the pot cupboard as she stacked the saucepans, the sweetness of her body jostling her clothes. But he seldom saw her working, not with the net curtains and the screen door that she kept closed over the back porch, winter and summer.

'Shut the screen door,' she would say when Bernie came into the kitchen on his way to the bathroom.

'But you don't need it in July,' Bernie told her.

'You never know,' Val said.

•

At night Bernie dreamt of Val. The dream was always the same. She blew towards him hazy and naked; pale as mist or the tip of a wave. He would reach out to touch and as his fingers closed on her hand or arm he found nothing there.

•

Val's sister Betty brought her youngest son David over. The baby sat on the lounge floor in an embroidered smock top and satin rompers and howled.

'Teething,' Betty said, pulling her foot out of her high-heeled shoe and wiggling her toes on the carpet. 'Done nothing but grizzle for days. Drives me bananas.'

The baby looked up, his face clenched in misery and shiny with tears.

‘Got just the ticket,’ Bernie said, going out of the room.

He came back carrying a child’s toy windmill. He’d found it in the street. It was the colour that had attracted him – caught his eye as he rode his bicycle back from work. Blue, red and yellow tossed together, cartwheeling along the wide gutter. Some poor kid lost it, he thought, picking it up, taking it home. He had shoved it over the mirror he used for shaving.

Bernie crouched down and blew at the coloured sails. David stopped crying. Bernie blew hard, harder still, and the sails moved faster. David thumped his knee with a baby hand, fingers plump and golden as the piece of shortbread he held. David began to chuckle, and Bernie laughed.

Bernie and Val were in the kitchen clearing up. Betty and David had gone. Val was lowering the remains of a sponge into a tin.

‘Beaut kid,’ Bernie said.

‘Did you see all the crumbs he left?’

‘Don’t you ever feel … ’ Bernie said. ‘Couldn’t we … ?’

Val didn’t move; the cake in her hands hovered over the empty tin.

‘You know,’ Bernie went on. ‘Well, neither of us are getting any younger.’

Val’s hands dropped. The cake subsided into the tin. She picked up the lid. On it was a photograph of the Huka Falls. The water was white and strong in the picture, the sky sharp and blue. Val put the lid on the tin.

‘I don’t want to discuss it.’

‘Why?’ Bernie said.

Val went into the bathroom with its matching basin, WC and bath that she’d been so keen to have. ‘Bluebell porcelain for today’s family.’ Val shut the door and Bernie heard the bolt pushed home.

‘Val,’ he said outside the door. ‘Please come out and talk.’

There was the sound of a tap being turned on in reply.

•

Never did understand her, Bernie thought, pulling the last of the screws out. The door frame sagged into his arms. Things would be different these days, he supposed. Now there were all those marriage counsellors and people talking about so-called ‘relationships’. Might have made a difference. He didn’t know.

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There had been that do at the RSA. Bernie and his brother Douglas and the two wives went. Bernie and Douglas were drinking at the bar, waiting for the women who had gone to powder their noses.

‘There they are.’ Bernie waved his glass. ‘The girls.’

Val was wearing a velvet dress. It was frosty coloured, mauve as a crocus. Beside her, Douglas’s wife Edna looked like a dressed-up fridge. Heavy and wide.

‘That wife of yours,’ Douglas said, following Bernie’s gaze through the crowd, ‘still a bloody pretty woman. Never expected my kid brother to snare such a good looker. Been green with envy ever since you showed me her photo in Greenock during the war. Rough not having youngsters though, I reckon.’

‘Rough enough,’ said Bernie, looking into his beer.

‘Couldn’t you, you know, do something about it?’ said Douglas.

Bernie shook his head.

‘You could have adopted. Suppose you could have done that.’ Douglas finished his drink and put the glass back on the bar.

‘Never came up,’ said Bernie.

It had, but Val wasn’t keen.

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The week after Bernie retired from work he stood on the front lawn that he mowed every Saturday morning and decided to build a fish pond. And a fountain.

‘People will think we’re showing off, skiting,’ Val said. ‘And what about the leaves blowing into the water. They’ll make a frightful mess. Have you thought of that?’

Bernie just went ahead and did it. He enjoyed tinkering round with the fountain. He loved the way the water soared upwards, an explosion in the brightness. Even now, after fifteen years, it was still going strong.

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The net curtains made the kitchen dim. Val was on the floor when Bernie came in from the garden. What was she doing there? Bernie hunkered down.

‘Val?’ he said. ‘Val?’ But by then he knew. Her heart had been dickey these last few years.

Val’s glasses had fallen off. Her arm was flung upwards like a sleeping girl’s, her hair an eddy of white round her cheeks. Over eighty. Still beautiful.

Bernie stared down at his wife lying spilled across the neat squares on the vinyl. He felt like a voyeur, knowing how she hated him watching her.

‘Oh, Val.’ He dropped his hand into the outstretched palm. The stone of her engagement ring pressed against his fingers. Bernie

remembered the buying of that ring and the jeweller talking about diamonds and love and chips of stars. ‘Val,’ he said again, ‘if only you’d been ugly, if only you’d looked like the back of a bus.’

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Bernie threw the screen door onto the path. He went into the kitchen and took the black-handled pair of scissors that Val kept in the drawer. He got the set of steps from the cupboard and climbed on to the bench. Pain clenched his joints making it difficult for him to kneel on the narrow counter beside the sink but ignoring discomfort he gathered the net curtains into his hand. The fabric was harsh and springy. Bernie crushed it together and began to hack with the pair of scissors as close to the rail as possible. He cut and cut and cut. Finally the whole curtain was free and the kitchen filled with light.

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More about Coral Atkinson

Four love stories

Alex Epstein

Each meeting with the muse is a blind meeting.

The Memory of the Sail, or the Later Voyages of Penelope

From the depths of one of the nights of the twentieth year, Penelope awakens from a dream in which threads of rain whipped her face until they drew blood. The next day the man who called himself Odysseus, but also ‘No Man’, returns. The years pass and Penelope still keeps, among her dresses, the piece of the sail brought to her by her suitors, who claimed that it was all that remained of Odysseus’s ship. When he goes out every night into the alleys of Ithaca, to again meet the man who didn’t recognize him upon his return, or on other adventures, Penelope takes the cloth once again and holds it in her hands. She wrings it into a final twist, and thinks about the man who might be lost in the heart of the sea. She doesn’t know which of the two is real, and who was buried forever in the bottoms of maps. She does not know how long she will continue to be faithful to one of them, to both of them, to neither of them. He returns toward morning, defeated. Penelope is sleeping. Her palms are wet.

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The Name of the Moon

Many years ago, when they first met, they gave the moon a nickname. Now, after they've divided between them all the books and the records and the photo albums, they have yet to decide who will take the ceiling fan.

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Love Is a Paperback in a Foreign Language

The age of electronic paper is already upon us. In the meantime, we are left with our small, comforting rituals, which are not supposed to divert fate, that ghost of the future, from its course: To wander the boulevards and search for some book forgotten on a bench, pick it up, read a bit of it, and before putting it back on the bench, hide between its pages a bookmark found nearby – a twig or a yellowing leaf. (The woman with the withering lipstick, for whom I wrote these lines, said that she once found, in a thin paperback that had been forgotten on a train in a European capital, a metro pass that still had many journeys on it. We sat beside each other, trying to summon the courage to ask the name of the station where the other was getting off. With time we learned to ignore the monotonous voice that declared to everyone else: ‘Caution, the doors are closing.’)

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A One-Book Woman

Each meeting with the muse is a blind meeting. But one night in October, about two weeks after her birthday, she pulled from the stack of new books a book in which one of the characters said to a man she'd been in love with: 'All your life you search for yourself in secondhand books.' For a very brief moment, but clear enough to be called illusive, something in this relationship reminded her of her previous relationship, with the man who felt that his life was souring, even though he knew no dying language. She folded down a corner of one of the pages at the beginning of the book and thought: And if she and I switch here, if one of us takes the other's place, would he notice? She started to read. The chapters were a bit saccharine for her taste (he answered her, finally he answered her: 'And every time I find you.'). Toward the end of the book she discovered another page with a folded corner.

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Stories translated from Hebrew by Becka Mara McKay

More about Alex Epstein

Introducing Deirdre

Lyndal Adleigh

Once upon a time, Deirdre lived in a house with ... a husband who wore a handsome moustache and unconventional ties ...

Her purse is bursting with them. Men. They occupy the entire front zipper compartment where their presence has led to the warping of several credit cards, her library card and, most inconveniently, her Eftpos card. There is, however, not a single one amongst them she'd consider throwing out, or even, for that matter, transferring into the roomy desk drawer at home. She's built up an impressive collection, and never tires from the surprise and delight of seeing their names printed in authoritative ink on conventional 250 gsm business cards.

On Wednesday mornings, she takes them to a coffee shop in the city. She arrives at 10.30 and spends precisely an hour there. She goes through the same routine each time: she orders a single trim latte and a caramel slice from Martin at the front service counter, then helps herself to a tidy batch of extra napkins. She takes up her place at the table in the furthest corner and, while she waits for her coffee, unzips her purse and lifts them out – the men. She carefully unfolds several plastic concertina-type sleeves, and presses their full length out across the table.

She spends a long while gazing at them, oblivious to anyone around her, eyes and thoughts held captive by her company on the table. She runs her fingers across them slowly, shyly, buffing the transparent sleeve with the extra paper napkins held between roughly manicured fingers. And then she removes the individual cards and shuffles them before hastily re-arranging them. This she does with an abrupt and businesslike respect. Every week she settles on a new sequence.

Today, she slips her Polish photographer in behind her Swiss psychotherapist, her rainy-day cello teacher one place ahead of her tall, bearded optometrist. Painter and wallpaper hanger next, then the car valet man. Window cleaner, grass cutter, land agent, and floor polisher. A few insignificant, but no less indispensable, others. She places the dentist's card with its Friday 2.30 p.m. appointment time

face down at the bottom of the pack. This done, she carefully folds the men up, tucks them back into their compartment and drinks her coffee.

At 11.25, she gathers the scrunched paper napkins and stuffs her empty cup with them. She picks up her bag, stands up and walks to the front of the coffee shop to settle the bill. Five dollars. She pays with a clean, flat note. This is the way she does things, week after week.

At precisely 11.30, she steps out into the street, her men and her purse tucked firmly under her arm.

Once upon a time, Deirdre was a little girl. She lived in a cottage by the sea. She collected white-ribbed cowries and plaited seaweed. She built castles and villages in the sand. The world was hers to shape and re-invent. She played on the beach all day, her long hair streaked gold by the sun, her shoulders freckled and her nose perpetually peeling. When shadows lengthened and interrupted her play, Deirdre shook the sand off her shorts, blew hot kisses to the invisible villagers who inhabited her sand dwellings, and ran like a colt up and over the dunes, bursting through the hole in the hedge and onto the front porch of her small family house. After eating, fresh in white cotton pyjamas, she lay on her back on the cut grass, hands folded loosely across her firm, flat belly. Cicadas scratched and shrilled. The sky was deep and reassuring, a sheltering veil of stars that fell towards her as she watched. She made a thousand wishes.

She is a small figure waiting at the intersection for the pedestrian light to turn green.

Once upon a time, Deirdre was fourteen years old. Her father said he was ever so sorry but he had fallen out of love with her mother and would no longer be able to continue living with them in their beachside cottage. (What he meant, but did not say at the time, was

that he had succumbed to the enchantments of another woman. His face was flushed when he spoke to Deirdre though he tried to disguise his distractedness.) When he came to his final full-stop, a shadow slammed into the sun. The beach sand lost its warmth. The white cowries that once rolled up onto Deirdre's beach and into her open hands were dashed against the rocks, delivered to her chipped and broken. The grass pricked and spiked her skin when she lay on it on her back at night. The stars stopped falling. Her wishes dwindled. Later, she observed that the sky in the city was hazy and that stars shrank back from electric lights. Her parents enrolled her at a new school at the northern end of town. Her father bought her a smart new bag with five different pockets. One of them was waterproof for her swimming togs and towel.

She wears a soft grey cardigan and sensible shoes.

Once upon a time, Deirdre went to university. She registered for a BA majoring in English and Philosophy. She wore the faintest freckles on her cheeks and nose. Her hair was straight and shiny, and hung down to her waist in a single thick plait. Nicholas was her second year 20th Century Poetry tutor. Passionate about internal rhyme and Theodore Roethke, he was dark and unpredictable in temperament, uncoordinated as an adolescent around her. Every Wednesday, when the group came together for discussion, she chose to sit in the chair furthest away from his. Nevertheless it was plain to all that she was his reason for entering the room. He told her later that he'd ached at her distance, been captivated by her silence, how this only served to inflame his hunger for her. He longed to loosen her long, straight hair, to knot his fingers in it, find her flesh beneath it. It took him until the final semester to find the courage to ask her out for a drink.

She steps into the road and hurries across to the other side.

Once upon a time, Deirdre went flatting with four friends. She was in her final year at university. She had a bright room with a large

corner window and a separate entrance. Three of her flatmates were girls and the fourth, a painfully self-conscious boy. They drew up a duty roster to ensure things would work out smoothly. Her hair was shoulder length. Nicholas kept her severed plait in an old hatbox beside his bed. He had a house of his own, but Deirdre preferred to come back to her friendly room with her single bed and her denim-blue duvet cover with its yellow shells and green seahorses. She went home to visit her mother once a week, on a Wednesday evening. Her mother was uncommunicative, but had an appetite that never failed to surprise. Deirdre would prepare a roast chicken with roast potatoes and three additional vegetables according to the season. The leftovers would ensure that her mother had two meals guaranteed for the coming week. She didn't get out much any more – aside from the occasional reluctant trip to the supermarket and – once in a blue moon – a visit to the library. The women drank a glass of red wine with their meal. Nicholas accompanied Deirdre once. He didn't know what to say, spent the evening in awkward silence, ate too much chicken, drank too much wine. He later claimed he'd written some fine poetry that night.

She stops on the curb. She opens her bag, checks that her men are safe and sound, firmly zipped up in their front zipper compartment. This bag has four different options. She once had one with five, one of which was waterproof, perfect for carting her wet swimming togs and towel around in.

Once upon a time, Deirdre lived in a house with polished wooden floors. She had a husband who wore a handsome moustache and unconventional ties to work, and three delightful children. Deirdre trained them from a very early age to hang up their towels after bathing and to place their dishes in the dishwasher after meals. She assured them creative mess was good, said they shouldn't concern themselves with colouring within the lines. There was a large cupboard in their kitchen with paints and clay and cardboard off-cuts, wool and string and pots of glue. The table was usually laden

with some or other activity. Deirdre drove a functional beige hatchback, dropped her children off at school more-or-less on time and – in the afternoons – taxied them to a range of desirable extra-mural activities. She could not be faulted when it came to diligence, reliability and scrupulous attention to detail; had anyone cared to look a little more closely, they would have noticed a certain vagueness in her demeanor, the way the light in her eyes dimmed a fraction more with every passing day. But Deirdre was hard-wired to do the right thing; she prepared balanced meals for her family, oversaw her children's homework and kept up with the interminable piles of laundry. She wore 'au naturel' lipstick and flat leather shoes. She carried a deep blue handbag.

A young man in a pin-striped suit bumps her. She stumbles and falls to the pavement, drops her bag. Her knee hurts, but thankfully, nothing has fallen out. The man bends down to help her up. He is full of apology.

Once upon a time, Deirdre woke exhausted. Nicholas's hair – when she saw him, which was not often – was greying at the temples. She'd put a rinse through her own; the children had said they didn't want to be seen with a mother whose hair was grey. As far as she could make out, they considered themselves unfortunate to have parents at all, particularly since they'd screwed up and split up and in all likelihood screwed them *up. Particularly since they knew their mother had been to see their family GP and been prescribed an anti-depressant. Particularly since they'd seen for themselves the psychotherapist's card she'd left lying undisguised beside her keys on the kitchen bench.*

She stands up, dusts the pavement from her skirt. The young man is speaking fast, hands burrowing through his jacket pockets as he asks whether she is alright, whether there is anything he can do for her? Does she need to have her knee seen to? What should he do since he is already running late for an important interview at the Bank that's

still a block away, and how can he leave her on the pavement when it has all been his fault? The whole day has been awful and he is so sorry, so sorry.

Once upon a time, Deirdre was thirty-eight, forty-two, forty-seven. How quickly the years rushed past. Lucky for her, her children were robust, creative, outspoken in their opinions on things. They did well at school and continued to participate in a decent variety of extra-mural activities. They were growing in independence, thank heavens, and didn't need her transport services as much. They walked instead, or took the bus. Occasionally they'd catch a ride with a friend. The oldest child, a daughter, had chosen to dye her hair flaming cherry red just a week before Deirdre's parents-in-law came to stay for their once-in-every-five-years visit. It would be interesting to see their reaction, she said. Perhaps she should pierce her tongue? Deirdre kept her head down and applied herself to re-packing the linen cupboard.

The young man pulls a mobile phone out of one deep pocket, and a business card from another. I'll get you a taxi, he says, and starts dialing before she can object. The card he presses into her hands. Such a charming young man, such a mature face. He doesn't notice that she is beaming now, holding the card firmly, possessively, to her bosom. It all takes just a few minutes. And then he's off, hurrying away to his meeting, still gasping his apologies, begging her from a distance to call him if there are any medical charges, any at all. He feels terrible.

Once upon a time, Deirdre's children had grown up and left home. Her sons called her on the phone once a fortnight and her daughter came to visit her once a week, arriving early enough to prepare a roast chicken, roast potatoes and three vegetables. She didn't get out much anymore, and had become increasingly attached to her telephone. Her yellow pages were well-thumbed. She rang up the AA every so often, insisting that her car didn't sound right*, could*

they check the sparkplugs, the carburetor, the battery acid… perhaps give it a good 'once over'? And would they leave their card for her, please – it had been such a pleasure dealing with them. She made appointments with different carpet cleaning companies and garden services, being careful to cross them off once contacted, and fastidiously packing their business cards away when they left. Occasionally – and only when really necessary – she would whisk through the supermarket, and once in a blue moon, she visited the library. Every Wednesday morning, she visited the same little coffee shop in the city.

Deirdre makes her way to the wrought iron and wooden bench that's a few feet away on the same side of the road. Her knee hurts and her stockings are torn. She sees blood. She walks carefully, limping ever so slightly, one hand fossicking in her handbag. By the time the taxi arrives, she has deftly moved her Polish photographer down to the bottom of his plastic sleeve and slipped the new young man in at the head of the pack.

He's going to be a banker, she's certain of that. He might well find himself seated behind a large polished desk in an upstairs office one day, dealing in foreign currencies. Despite her aching leg, she feels almost contented by the time the taxi driver drops her off at home, sees her safely to her front door.

She cannot stop thinking about the young man. She hasn't had a banker in her bag before. He will be her first.

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More about Lyndal Adleigh

Said Sheree

Tim Jones

Sheree would carry leading New Zealand brands to low earth orbit, and return with a three-book deal.

Sheree and Miranda met at a party. Each left with the other on her mind.

Several weeks later, the Mexican Ambassador, a keen patron of the arts, held a reception. Miranda, ranked as a Tier Two poet for funding purposes, saw Sheree across the room. Miranda made a beeline for her – only to realise that Sheree was with a group of Tier Ones. Embarrassed, Miranda backed away.

That would have been that; but, a little to the north and far beneath their feet, Gaia shifted in her sleep. Poets and patrons alike rushed for doorways and crush-proof spaces. Sheree and Miranda found themselves pressed together against an antimacassar. Their mutual awkwardness was obliterated by fear. ‘You’re beautiful,’ said Sheree. Miranda, plain and tall, was swept away.

Heads were counted once the tremor passed and the tumult subsided. Miranda and Sheree were missing. Separately, from Sheree’s bed, they phoned in their excuses.

Miranda went home. ‘I haven’t seen you for days,’ her flatmate remarked. It wasn’t much of a flat, not really, and the flatmate held the lease.

‘You can move in with me,’ said Sheree.

Having lugged the last of her boxes up Sheree’s steps, Miranda went out on the deck. The harbour view, which she had admired since the first night she spent there, now felt like hers. The weather was grey and cold. Far below, hardy ants, gloved and muffled, scurried to and fro on the beach.

Between Miranda’s job and Sheree’s funding, they had enough to pay the rent, and a little left over. They each had time to write. Sheree wrote in the morning, after Miranda had left for work, and spent the afternoon completing grant applications and working on a project to deliver sonnets by mobile phone. Some platform-specific

issues were still to be resolved.

Miranda wrote on Saturday afternoons, while Sheree played hockey.

They had other interests in common. They both collected earthenware. They both loved tramping. In summer, they joined a party heading south to Nelson Lakes. They were the only writers. It was bliss.

They dealt with literary functions by arriving separately and avoiding each other, though they exchanged sly glances when they thought no-one was looking.

It worked for a while. But, inevitably, word got around. A small independent publisher agreed to bring out Miranda's first collection. 'I want to be with you at the launch,' said Sheree. 'I'm not going to pretend.'

The publisher had hired a church hall. A few bankable names came along. When Miranda read, Sheree stood in the front row. When Miranda signed, Sheree sat next to her. 'You must be so proud of her,' someone told Sheree.

Sheree's third collection was launched at Unity. Sheree dragged Miranda along. That didn't go so well. Miranda hung back, feeling like a fraud. Sheree talked with her friends and cast irritated glances Miranda's way.

Miranda retreated to the outer shelves, looking at a bound edition of Ursula Bethell. Blanche Baughan was reassuringly close at hand.

Sheree forgave her. They forgave each other. They got drunk. They compared royalty statements. 'It's more about grants and residencies,' explained Sheree.

In the autumn, Miranda was up for reclassification. Without the support of a university press, Miranda had no realistic hope of moving up to Tier One, but she was still disappointed when the envelope came.

‘Never mind,’ said Sheree. ‘I love you anyway.’

Sheree’s status was secure for two more years.

Miranda came home from work a few weeks later to find Sheree bouncing off the walls. ‘Look at this!’ she said. It was an invitation from the Northern festival circuit: Nuuk and Norilsk, Vorkuta, Longyearbyen. Four weeks north of the Arctic Circle, reading, writing, workshopping. And watching out for polar bears – they could kill you. ‘I’m to be preceded by a man with a rifle,’ said Sheree.

New Zealand literature had never before been represented so far north. It was a feather in everyone’s cap.

‘I’ll miss you so much,’ said Miranda. She clung to Sheree, tenderly, fiercely.

Sheree bought Miranda a video-enabled phone before she left. Four weeks of Sheree – blonde hair poking out of her fur-lined hood – cavorting with new friends, silhouetted against snow, standing next to oil drums full of burning blubber to keep warm.

Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, was surprisingly cosmopolitan. Norilsk was one giant chemical dump. In Vorkuta, Sheree won the V. I. Morozov Prize for Best Recital of an Individual Work, for her declamatory piece in the style of Gregory Corso. The prize, thanks to a well-connected local businessman, was paid in US dollars. With the news, Sheree sent an air ticket. ‘I’m stopping over in the Caribbean on the way home to thaw out,’ said Sheree. ‘See you in Basseterre!’

It took some nerve to ask, but Miranda’s boss was understanding. ‘I wish I could go with you,’ Miranda’s boss said, and Miranda realised, suddenly, that she meant it.

Basseterre! Miranda had never heard of it. Palms shaded the beach, the locals talked about cricket, and once they had circumnavigated

the island of St Kitts, there was nothing to do but eat, drink, sleep, and make love. Sheree kept Miranda entertained with tales from the frozen North. Longyearbyen had been the wildest of the lot. ‘Those Norwegians!’ said Sheree. They were crazy up there on Spitsbergen. So were the bears.

They came home to the wind and the rain. Sheree set to work completing her fourth collection and editing podcasts from the festivals. She had secured funding for a G5 workstation, her latest pride and joy. Miranda had three poems published in *Takahe* and two more accepted by *JAAM*. She read at the Angus Inn. It was a wet night in the Hutt Valley, and some of the locals stayed away. Her collection, which was now heavily discounted, sold three copies. Not bad, considering. She was given a voucher for petrol, though she had conscientiously taken the train.

Sheree’s poem about their week together in the Caribbean became justly famous and has been much anthologised.

Miranda’s boss gave her a promotion. Miranda and Sheree joined a football team. Sheree was the centre-forward. Miranda was a holding midfielder.

Delivering sonnets by mobile phone had not been a complete success, but the project hit the jackpot with haiku. Haiku were back, said Sheree.

People grow and change. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. A new funding category, Tier Four, was introduced. In consequence, Tier Two poets became eligible to be mentors, and Miranda took on a mentee. She was young, tiny, a wounded bird. Her name was Caroline. She lived in Johnsonville.

Nothing might have come of it, had Sheree’s success at Vorkuta not been noticed in high places. It took a public-private partnership, with a mixture of tagged funding, corporate sponsorship in three bands, and matching Government contributions, but at last the deal could be

announced. Sheree would be New Zealand's first poet in space! She would carry leading New Zealand brands to low earth orbit, and return with a three-book deal.

It was on for young and old. Sheree became public property, meeting the Prime Minister, appearing on *Takatäpui* and *Kiwifruit*. In months, in weeks, in days, she was off to Star City to train for her mission.

'I love you,' she told Miranda, from the airport, from Moscow, from Star City. Photos: Sheree in a centrifuge, her compact body whirling round. Sheree hanging weightless in the hydrolab. The two cosmonauts who would be flying her to the International Space Station, Valentina and Vsevolod. Their brave little Soyuz spacecraft. I love you, Miranda, said Sheree.

Miranda's mentee was promising but needy. Miranda allowed herself to engage in conduct which was inappropriate to the mentor-mentee relationship and breached the terms of her contract with the funding agency. She reproached herself late at night, as she watched Caroline sleeping.

Sheree appeared on BBC World, CNN, and Al-Arabiya.

Miranda kept writing. A second published collection would be something. Not everyone made it that far.

Live streaming video of the launch, with Russian-language commentary, was available. Using high-speed broadband on Sheree's G5, Miranda was able to hear the countdown, see the rocket on the launch pad, watch it vault upwards into space.

Sheree made contact. Docking had been successful, and she was aboard the space station. Three months to do nothing but write, and sleep, and float. (And help around the place; tidiness was especially important in space.) Every 92 minutes, she would pass overhead.

The mentoring period finished. Caroline could now be revealed as Miranda's girlfriend. She had dependency issues, but that meant she

was usually home.

Miranda broke the news to Sheree by scheduled uplink. Sheree did not respond immediately. One orbit passed, two. Then Sheree said she was sad, but not surprised. Also, two nights ago, she and Valentina ...

Miranda had three poems published in *Bravado*. *Sport* and *Landfall* regretted to inform. *Trout* did not reply.

As a result of Miranda's excellent mentoring, Caroline was reclassified to Tier Three. She sold a poem to *Poetry New Zealand*. You're going places, girl, thought Miranda.

Caroline had an empty room and a double bed. Miranda decided she was going places too. She moved her boxes out of Sheree's house, down the steps, and off to Johnsonville. She promised Sheree that she'd continue to water her plants. Sheree had already asked Miranda and Caroline to come for dinner the first weekend after she got home from Russia. I want to be your best friend, said Sheree.

When the last lot of boxes was safely in Caroline's van, Miranda returned to stand on the balcony for one last look across the harbour. Oh, she would miss the view! On the promenade below, hardy ants rode skateboards, walked dogs, and ate products containing dairy, gluten, and traces of nuts.

Above, the stars shone steadily. Among them was Sheree. Miranda could see her clearly. She was looking out of a porthole, smiling fondly down.

More about Tim Jones

The Ache

Elena Bossi

The man just wants to see them together, to see the moment when the boy takes her about her waist ...

Lethargic, looking without looking out the window of his fourth-storey office, he longs for an adventure that would take him away from this place that has become unbearable.

This afternoon a boy is cleaning the big windows down on the street front. Whitish froth sprays out from the glass and spreads across the pavement, the way the pain in his shoulder does; it travels through his vertebrae to his feet, which are flattened by the weight he's accumulated over recent years. 'Go to the doctor,' his wife reproaches him. 'Walk every day, eat less, and most of all, rest. Don't work so much.' But if he stops working even for a moment, the pain is there. He doesn't really know where it comes from or even where it hurts. He wonders if its deep source is his conscience, his back, or his neck because in the end they might be the same thing. For years now his head and shoulders have seemed frozen into one block, which also makes it hard to distinguish mind from body.

The boy is cleaning the windows with frank, confident sweeps, putting joy into each one. This work is pleasure to him; but not so absorbing that he doesn't check every moment up and down the street. He's expecting someone.

The man recalls the tenderness of his love for his wife and the constant desire that used to go with it, so fierce it was like a pain in the centre of his being. It was a marvellous, indecent pain, which gave him no respite. That desire which he thought would last forever has dwindled, like a big catch cooked on a slow fire. Where did it go, that paradise of lips, teeth and tongue? Now kisses are avoided whenever possible; it is in the lips and tongue that love begins to spoil, where distance makes itself apparent.

He thinks that he wouldn't be able to live without her, that he owes her his life and everything he has. Gratitude and who knows how many other tangled sentiments have taken the place of passion. Indecency has been replaced by respect. He only wishes that his lips

would lose their lush appearance and settle rather into the smile of a man who has realised all his plans.

Each night he finds a different excuse not to go to bed with her, or not at the same time, because what is the body's surrender without desire? It's well known that in the dark bodies seek and open to one another, revealing and discovering the secret that terrifies them.

And then down on the street it happens as he knew it would: the dark-haired girl coming along, so young, her skin alive, breasts brimming; it's all coming up at him from the street, emanating from these two. She is the one the window-cleaning boy is waiting to embrace.

The man just wants to see them together, to see the moment when the boy takes her about her waist, when she puts her arms around her lover's shoulders, to know from them the forgotten happiness; and maybe a caress will fly off and make its way to his own back and heal, at least for a moment, this ache. But the umbrella that is opening suddenly breaks the line of his gaze; it doesn't matter, he can move left and when the man with the umbrella passes, he'll be able to see the embrace anyway, or just after the crucial moment, but both of them will still be there. Except that now another umbrella is opening, and another, and the rain is not about to let up, and of course with this wet and all these umbrellas his back will go on aching.

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Translated from the Spanish by Georgia Birnie

More about Elena Bossi

Earth-One, Earth-Two

Bryan Walpert

He can suddenly move fast, faster than
he has ever moved, faster than he imagined
anyone could move.

His name is not Barry Allen. He knows that. It takes him a few minutes to recall the name; it scratches at his memory like a dog at the back door. Barry Allen, the secret identity of the Flash. More precisely, the Flash on Earth-One. He knows he isn't Barry Allen.

But he also knows things have been happening, odd things. He can suddenly move fast, faster than he has ever moved, faster than he imagined anyone could move, even Jesse Owens whose faster-than-possible movements he once saw on film, faster than any automobile, any jet. He suspects he has become the Flash. On this earth, at least. It is hard having this new power, being able to move so quickly that he becomes invisible, that he exceeds even the sound barrier. As an experiment, he does his shopping in seconds. He enters Kroger's, swoops up a basket and whips so quickly through the aisles that the soup cans rattle on the metal shelves, the paper displays whisper in his wake.

His name is Martin. He knows that. He is trying to reconcile his new powers with his day-to-day life. It is one thing to read about it, another to live it. He casts about his collection, hunts for a role model. Bruce Wayne could outfit his cave, purchase equipment with the millions he inherited from his parents who were shot when he was a boy. Martin doesn't have that kind of money. His parents are alive and well, working-class in Toledo. Clark Kent lost his parents when his planet exploded, after they sent him to earth in a rocket. His work, at least, dovetailed with his superhero life. He could go out on a newspaper story and become the story. The same with Peter Parker, freelance photographer; when his bank account dipped, he would plant his camera and take photos of himself as Spiderman webbing criminals to the wall. He was driven to it; the one crook he had allowed to slip away killed his uncle.

Martin knows he, too, should probably be solving crimes with his new-found speed, but he is trying to balance being the Flash with his

day job; a night job, really, driving a Yellow Cab. When he's not working or trying to sleep with the shades drawn at 2 p.m., Martin looks for help in his comic books, which he has been collecting since he was a boy. It has become more challenging to do this because prices have become prohibitive. When Martin was a child, he could pick up four comics for a dollar. He walks out of a comic store now three dollars lighter for a single issue of the *X-Men*.

Taxi driving feels incredibly slow to him now, nearly unbearable. How to explain? There is a ramp into town from the beltway. You have to drop from 70 to 30 by the end because a cop waits at the bottom. It has always felt so slow to him once he has dropped his speed within the city limits. It is that kind of feeling now, only more intense, since the speeds he travels are exponentially faster than any car can drive, even at a top speed, even when you let it out on a country road between calls at three in the morning to see how far you can push the needle. It is excruciating to be chauffeuring this taxi so slowly across the city, which in morning rush hour, as he wraps up his night shift, can take up to ninety minutes. By foot, now, he can make the same trip in just under nine seconds; this includes dodging pedestrians, which is not difficult to do because to his eyes it appears as though each one – the old woman walking her three poodles, the man glancing at his gold Rolex, newspaper under his arm – is standing still, lost in thought. Dodging them delays him by microseconds here and there, he's certain, but he can't measure it. His watch slows, loses time as he gathers speed, Einstein's law. He forgets to reset it, so he is frequently late. It is an irony that is not lost on Martin.

It is an irony lost on Joe, his supervisor and dispatcher, who would prefer Martin arrive for his shift on time. 'I don't want to push you,' Joe says one evening when Martin arrives two hours after his shift has started. 'But we have people waiting. They have planes to catch, trains.' Martin apologizes. Just make an effort, Joe says, and pats him on the shoulder, looks away.

Martin does not tell Joe about being the Flash. He tells no one, isn't ready. He does not repeat the Kroger experiment. But it is difficult to avoid taking actions that could reveal his abilities. Tuesday night, for example, Martin received a call to take a customer to the airport. When he pulled up to departures, Martin popped the trunk, and walked around to unload the bags. The man pulled out a roll of bills so thick it was barely contained by the gold money clip. The thick wad got stuck in the clip. When the man finally pulled the clip from the roll, the bills blew into the air, some of them fifties and hundreds. To the customer, they probably appeared to scatter quickly around him. But to Martin, each hung in the air, floating under the pool of light outside the airport like a two-dimensional hummingbird, or as if waiting to be plucked from the air, like a petal from a daisy. It was tempting, but Martin let his heart settle down, as he had learned to do, and soon speed picked back up and things returned to normal. The bills settled to the ground. Martin helped retrieve them and got a ten-dollar tip.

Martin's wife, Deborah, argued with him about taking this job; she had to spend nights in bed alone. Sometimes Martin wonders what his wife would say if she knew he were the Flash. She might ask why it takes him so long to get around to mowing the lawn or taking out the garbage – her sense of humor. Or she might make a sexual joke. The second time they were together, afterwards, she said, 'Baby, you have got to linger.' But that's about the only scenario in which she wanted Martin to move more slowly. Mainly, she expressed a clear preference for him to get things done faster and earlier. For example, it took Martin a long time to ask his boss for a raise. This was his old job, as an assistant manager at the Pack & Pay supermarket, before it closed down. He procrastinated for months. When Martin finally got around to asking, his boss agreed immediately. But the market closed soon after. That's when Martin started driving a taxi.

Of course, when Martin is completely honest with himself, he knows it is not just that he procrastinates. He is – or has been until recently – a slow mover. Physically. This is no doubt connected to his size. Martin weighs close to 320 pounds, which is fairly heavy for a man his height, five foot ten.

Martin spends a lot of time thinking about how he might have become the Flash. The Flash is a DC Comics character. The DC Comics universe for a long time had multiple earths. It started with Earth-One and Earth-Two. On Earth-One, Barry Allen was a police scientist; a lightning strike sent him into a rack of chemicals, which gave him his powers. He was inspired to make himself a costume by reading an old comic book about a superhero also called the Flash, who appeared in a comic published by DC in the 1940s. Barry Allen thought that Flash was just a character. But one day, while vibrating at supersonic speed, Barry Allen found himself on Earth-Two. There he met the original Flash, Jay Garrick, who got his powers while experimenting in a laboratory on something called heavy water. Since Martin has never worked in a laboratory, the origin of his powers remains something of a mystery to him.

Martin is spending more and more time in his cab reading comic books for clues. Sometimes he parks under a street light in a neighborhood by the river, shuts off his radio and reads. Sometimes he thinks of Deborah. Deborah lying in the bathtub, the curves of her body displacing water, the scent of the candles she'd placed by the tub. He imagines getting into the tub with her, all the water displacement, knows it will never happen. The cab smells of the car deodorant the company issues to him every month, but the weather is warming, and Martin opens the window, hears the rush of the river that flows at the foot of the hill. 'Martin, are you there? I've been trying to reach you for hours,' Joe's voice squawks from the box when Martin turns it back on.

His parents were a little too happy when Martin got married. 'We

thought you'd never find someone,' is how his mother put it. And he had believed that, too, partly because of his size, but also because of his personality. Martin's father wanted him to join a team when he was a boy. Baseball, basketball, it didn't matter which one. It's just that he had no interest in sports. He preferred books. He is an intelligent person, he thinks, just not highly motivated. He has always liked to draw, for example, though he does it less and less. Martin did finish college; he simply could not find a career. He felt as though his destiny would make itself clear.

He was thirty when he met his wife at a comic book store. She had a beautiful face, an aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and blond hair pulled into a long braid down her back. She was not interested in comics. She taught second grade and was looking for a comic to read to 'her boys'. Martin was haggling with the owner over an old issue of *Ghost Rider*. After that, he thought of *Ghost Rider* as their comic, even though she did not read it.

One Friday, a couple of months after discovering his powers, Martin does not go to work. He sits in the apartment, reading comic after comic. Should he wear a costume? Earth-One Flash wears a tight-fitted, one-piece red suit with a mask. Martin examines his stomach while standing sideways in front of the mirror on his bedroom door, the reflection of the comic books spread out on the carpet behind him. He is thinking more and more about the multiple earths. It got complicated for DC Comics writers, having earths multiplying in the stories. Some people had doubles who existed earlier in history because the timelines of the earths were different. There was an Earth-Prime, as well, where even comic book writers had parallel selves writing comic books and meeting their creations. Someone at DC Comics made the decision that the earths had to merge. In 1985 and 1986, it published *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, a twelve-issue series that combined all the earths. Martin spent a long time avoiding that series because the merger required some of his favorite superheroes to die. But now he reads the whole series in order, over and over.

The phone rings while he reads. Martin answers it, explains to Joe that he is not feeling well. 'I understand,' Joe says, twice. Joe tells him to make it a long weekend, that he will see him on Monday.

Martin does not go to work on Monday or on Tuesday. The phone rings and rings. When Martin moves fast around the house, the chirping of the phone sounds more and more like a series of slow gongs from a steeple bell and then, as his speed increases, each gong is further stretched out into a long moan. Martin does not answer the phone or check his messages. He peers out the window. His yellow cab sits by the curb. It is his only car. He thinks to himself that he doesn't need it. He can go so much faster now by foot. Even the stairs of his building are not a problem when he takes them at full speed. He lives on the third floor, a walk-up since the elevator broke nearly a year before.

Deborah discovered she was pregnant two months after he took the taxi job. She wanted him to quit, to spend more time with her. But they needed the salary, even with Deborah working, and she planned to keep working as long as she could. She was always sending Martin out to the stationery store for markers and crayons, poster board and construction paper, rolls and rolls of invisible tape, things the school couldn't pay for. She had him help her cut out large numerals or strings of letters. He would come with her to school some mornings when his overnight shift was ending to help her put up displays or to carry in boxes.

Sometimes Martin would stay, though he was exhausted from his shift, to watch Deborah teach. Sometimes he stayed nearly all day. It was a small private school. The children called her Deborah. She would gather them in a circle, just before lunch, and read to them from books of fantasy. Once she read them C.S. Lewis, from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Her voice soothed the room like warm air. Within a few minutes, a few paragraphs, the children had stopped fidgeting, stopped playing with each other's hair, stopped

punching each other on the arm. They stared from their chairs, some with elbows on their knees, some with arms at their sides, while she read. Each day, one student was permitted to sit in her lap and help her to read. A tiny girl with dark hair in braids sat in Deborah's lap, but would not read. 'Do you want to try, Allison?' Deborah asked, but the girl shook her head, put her arms around Deborah's neck and turned her face to Deborah's chest. Deborah laughed. 'You'll read silently with me, though, won't you?' Allison nodded.

Martin suggested once to Deborah that she create a comic to teach the children about pregnancy, to prepare them for her departure in case the baby came early, before the school year ended. She thought this was a good idea and asked him to draw it. That day, during the late afternoon before his shift, while Deborah graded assignments downstairs, he decided to start it. Deborah would be the main character. He pulled out a drawing pad, some colored pens. But he needed to think about it more, so he put it aside.

Martin did not get a chance to start it. The next morning, when he came home, as he opened the door to their building, he could hear her voice from three flights up. She was yelling his name. He felt sick when he heard it, the way it sounded. The stairs loomed above him. He took the steps as quickly as he could. He gripped the bannister with his left hand, his chest heaving, thighs burning. Her voice stopped long before he reached the third floor. The door was shut. He tried to open it, but it would only move an inch or two. He shoved as hard as he could, with all of his weight, his chest still heaving, perspiration rolling down his cheeks, his shirt sopping. Finally, the door opened. The police said the man had come in and out through the fire escape. The winter air had filled the room by the time they arrived to find Martin kneeling by his wife, holding her head. Martin was cold for a long time. Joe let him take two weeks away from his job, paid him for them.

It is spring now. The phone rings and rings, and Martin reads about

Crisis Earth and scans his *Flash* comic books. He goes through them again and again so fast he fears the friction will ignite the paper. He does not stop to eat, to drink, to answer the phone. Soon, the phone stops ringing. All at once the obvious occurs to him. There must still be at least two earths if he is on this one and the superheroes are on another, even if all the superhero earths merged into one. He picks up the pad he planned to use for his comic book on Deborah, still on the bedside table where he left it months before. He begins to draw. It comes quickly. It is not about her pregnancy. It is called *The Wandering*. The comic he writes is about a woman named Deborah who knows she should be somewhere but does not understand where, or why, or how she knows. He puts her on a train. He imagines how easy it would be for him to run alongside it, to leap aboard. She is there, in the frame. It is her cheek, her chin, her nose. Not his Deborah, but another, from a parallel earth. If he vibrates fast enough, maybe he can get to the other earth and find her, talk to her, explain. Soon he is vibrating and vibrating, his whole body reverberating at speeds unimaginable until now. He looks only at his comic book, folded back to the page where Deborah's face stares up from her seat on a moving train frozen in a drawing shaking in his hand at a rate that cannot be measured. Martin is the fastest man in the world. He gazes at the picture. He lingers.

More about Bryan Walpert

Improvement Projects

Maxine Alterio

(... she's telling me things that aren't required, like how she took her last lover at seventy-four)

It's Tuesday, an ordinary working day. I've been writing reports all morning and this afternoon I'm visiting clients. Flora Smithers is first on my list. 'A difficult one,' said the Case Manager when she handed me the file. 'Needs the physio pool but won't go. See what you can do, Helen.'

I like a challenge so while I have lunch – yoghurt and a banana – I read the Smithers file, gauging her situation according to our organisation's points system. She scores well. She's entitled to a weekly visit from the district nurse, home help, and meals on wheels until the occupational therapist thinks she's able to cook again. I allocate five minutes to establish rapport, twenty minutes for the actual assessment and five extra for farewell pleasantries.

I set off confident I can get her in the pool. She's been in one before according to her file, although it was probably years ago. I don't suppose elderly people like exposing their bodies, and who can blame them, but I'll work on her until she sees sense.

I pull up outside her house, right on time. First thing I notice is the steep path. This is not suitable for an elderly woman. Some clients don't take their circumstances into account. Live within your means and according to your abilities, that's what I say.

She's expecting me on account of the phone call I made before I left the office. As I imagined, she's frail and walks stiffly. Friendly enough, though, invites me in. I say nothing about the clutter or the dust. That can wait. We talk about the weather, then her pot-plants, safe things to make her feel comfortable. I call her Flora and tell her to call me Helen.

'I'm here to help,' I say.

'I don't need any, thanks.'

'We'll start with the day you fell. Tell me what happened?' I know she slipped on an icy footpath but because the elderly like to tell

stories, I've allowed time for a brief one.

'There's nothing much to say, I just fell.'

'Not enough calcium in your diet?' Despite all the publicity my profession puts out on osteoporosis, here she is with a cracked collarbone and a femur not long out of plaster.

'I eat well, always have.'

Age doesn't equate to professional knowledge. This is a fact. My grades in nutrition say it all. I look around the room to find something she's good at. On the back of a chair, I spot a crocheted cover. 'Nice head rest,' I say.

She shakes her head, somewhat curt, I think, and says, 'Why are you actually here?'

Embarrassed, I reflect she's probably tired, too. Energy levels fluctuate in the elderly. I decide to get straight to the point so I take out my form and prepare to talk her through it. We don't get far. Before I can establish her marital status, she's telling me things that aren't required, like how she took her last lover at seventy-four.

I want her back on the footpath, describing what happened. 'Tell me where you were when you fell?'

'I found him in the physiotherapy pool easing his knee joints,' she says. 'Water is so comforting, don't you think, Helen?'

She won't distract me. 'What did you notice just before you fell?'

'I met lots of men in the physio pool.'

'Did you feel faint or unwell?'

'We chatted while we rested between lengths. Ron, my last lover, damaged his knees stacking wood for a family who didn't appreciate him until they thought he would leave.'

I glance down at my notes to check how I usually keep people on

track. ‘Now back to when you had the accident, Flora. Where were you going? Somewhere nice?’ Maybe she does the flowers at church like Mary who is on my Wednesday list.

‘I retired after Ron,’ she says. ‘He was my best, a quick learner.’

What did she say? ‘Run that by me again, Flora?’

Flora shifts slightly in her chair. She crosses one foot over the other. Her shoe buckle sends a silver wink across the room.

‘I didn’t waste my time if they weren’t motivated.’

What is she talking about? If I’ve got it right, and I’m sure I have because I got a good pass in ‘Listening Skills’, Flora finds men in physio pools and gives them some kind of assessment. That’s not what physio pools are for.

‘I gave them plenty of feedback, and a few tips,’ she says, flicking her white flyaway curls with a wrinkled hand. ‘Know what I mean?’

‘Well ... aahh, sort of,’ I reply. Where do I go from here? I’ve never struck a case like her before. Is there some book I haven’t read? I know, I’ll stay with the pool. ‘So, Flora, if physio pools have played such a significant role in your life, why refuse to go in one now?’

She ignores my carefully constructed open question and gazes at my briefcase. She’s probably wondering what’s inside. There is a list of my clients in a folder, and their reports, in case I need to check anything.

‘Now,’ I tell her, ‘we have half an hour to decide what to do with you.’

‘I’m fine the way I am, thank you,’ she says.

I smile to show I’m on her side. ‘Not according to my notes, Flora.’ Then to refocus her I say, ‘Why won’t you go back to the pool?’

She looks straight at me then coughs slightly. Nervous, I think. To indicate my interest, I lean forward.

‘We’re alike, Helen, you and I.’

Hardly.

‘We both want to help people,’ she says.

There’s a world of difference in the way we go about it but I keep smiling so she’ll continue.

‘Let me tell you about Ron, my last improvement project,’ she says. ‘He was different from the rest. Sixty-eight years old and still shy around women. Curious, though. I could see it in his eyes.’

I resign myself to an extended visit. ‘Did you ever get tired of, you know …?’ I ask.

‘No. They were all different. How many have you been with, dear?’

‘Umm, not many,’ I reply, trying to recall her age.

‘They’re like stripes on zebras, no two are the same. Everything about Ron was underused. His wife used to say, “Pull my nightie down when you’re finished.” In the end, he didn’t bother. But I thought he had potential so I took him on as last winter’s project.’

‘But you knew he was married, Flora.’

‘Phhh, what’s married, when people are unhappy? I think of an unhappy union as just another condition like diarrhoea or eczema. If treated, the problem disappears.’

Normally I wouldn’t tolerate this much narrative therapy but I let Flora go on with her story because there’s a bit of me that wants to understand why she thinks the way she does. I use my newly acquired neuro-linguistic technique, matching her breath for breath. ‘But what stops you going to the pool for therapy now?’ I ask.

She makes me wait while she arranges herself in the armchair. I watch her tug her rose-gold bracelet into place. Satisfied with her appearance, she turns to face me. Her milky-blue eyes flicker into focus.

‘Ron was the one that mattered,’ she says. ‘Everyone has one, don’t they? Ron was mine. I worked on the others, improved them like, but Ron was different.

‘Sex doesn’t come naturally to everyone, Helen. Some men need lessons.’

‘What do you mean?’ I’m happy with my mix of open and closed questions.

‘Well, some people get anxious about sex. There’s no need. It’s only a skill that needs practising. Most unfulfilled men end up in physio pools. Their bodies mirror the ache in their hearts. Ron’s knees gave out on him. He was down on them too often.’

This is going to take forever. ‘So how did you start?’ I say.

‘We talked,’ Flora says. ‘I still remember our first conversation, word for word. I asked him if it was his first time at the pool.

‘“Yes,” he replied, “it is. I’m trying to get my knees back to full mobility. By the way, I’m Ron Harris. I live over in Belleknowes.”

‘“Flora Smithers, nice to meet you. I live quite close, near the park.”

‘“Really, I often walk my dog in that park.”’

Flora goes quiet at this point. She’s probably thinking about those early days with Ron walking his dog and, somewhere along the way, dropping in for a chat and a cup of tea. Perhaps he called her ‘love’ as he reached for her hand in the shadows of the front porch.

‘I gave him what he needed,’ she says after a while. ‘In amounts he could manage. He happily applied himself. In fact he expanded in all sorts of ways.’

I look at my watch discreetly.

‘And,’ Flora continues, ‘I felt the fingers of love stroke me for the first time.’

I'll go to the library later. See if I can find a book on the aberrations of the elderly.

I am about to give Flora another minimal encourager but she closes her eyes. She's probably drifting back to her time with Ron, fantasising about him bringing her a cup of tea, perhaps reading to him as he massaged her stiff joints with oil from the Body Shop. Maybe he led her on. Let her think they could go on forever.

'What happened, Flora?' I ask.

'Well,' she says looking surprised to see I'm still with her, 'our one and a half hours each night stretched to two, then three. Ron's dog waiting at my letterbox caused talk. The Nightie heard about us. She threatened to phone Ron's middle-aged children. He got into a real state. Concerned for his health, I suggested he stop seeing me until he sorted things out.'

'Did he?'

She presses her hands together. 'Three days later his heart rebelled. Apparently, he asked for me at the hospital. A nurse found my number in his glasses case and phoned but it was already too late.'

'Oh, Flora, that's sad.' I reach over to pat her arm.

She flicks my hand away as though it's a troublesome moth. 'That's why I won't go back to the pool.'

There seems to be more to Flora's case than I first thought. 'I see why you're against it,' I say. 'Too many painful memories.' I try for eye contact but Flora ignores me. After a while, I write on my form, 'Mild depression prevents client from engaging in physical activity.'

'Close enough,' she says, reading my diagnosis upside down. Then she raises her head and nods towards the door.

I want to tell her time will help, that she'll soon be her old self again, but I say nothing as I pick up my form and walk across the room, a

distance which, on one level, seems infinitesimal and, on another, immense.

More about Maxine Alterio

Four Stories

Tania Hershman

... her tone is usual, normal, the tone of someone who does not know that their lover can see straight into their colon, the twists and turns of their intestines.

Think of Icebergs

‘It’s hot,’ you said.

‘Think of icebergs,’ I said.

‘Melting,’ you said. ‘All melting. What happens?’

‘When?’

‘When we run out of ice?’

I put my arm around you, felt your bony shoulders.

‘Don't worry,’ I said. ‘People are clever. Very clever. There’ll always be freezers. And iced coffee.’

•

We spent the sweltering summer wearing very little and standing very still in the dark corners of your dust-filled flat. I traced the sweat sliding down your thin arms, you wiped my forehead with a towel as if I were your poor, dying Victorian husband.

When things got unbearable, our refuge was the lobby of the Grand. We sat, our long bare legs curled up beneath us, sipping iced coffees and bathing in the freezing air. We watched businessmen in heavy suits flock together and swoop into the dining room, and ladies with small dogs, high hairdos and large luggage being escorted to the lifts.

‘Heaven,’ you said, slurping your iced-coffee-flavoured foam. ‘Paradise.’

But when we revolved out of the doors, it was worse than ever. A sizzling frying pan to the face.

‘Hell,’ you said. ‘We’re taking the Fire Line straight to the inferno.’

You tipped your head back and looked up at the blue-perfect, dazzling sky.

‘I think … it might rain,’ you said.

‘That’s what I’ve heard,’ I said. Both of us, standing on the melting pavement, heads tipped back, pools of salty sweat running down into our aching, dry eyes.

Dangerous Shoes

‘If you were a shoe you'd be designer,’ he said, drawing out the last word as if it would never end. ‘You’d be Manolo, darling, on the catwalk, teeny skinny models teetering on your precious spiky heels.’ She liked this image, Amazonian skeletal girls slipping Amazonian skeletal feet into her luxurious leather. Herself squat and bush-like, round-hipped and under-attended, she desired someone to sauté and pour off her fat to reveal the real goddess underneath.

‘Manolo,’ she breathed and her eyes were more glassy and lush than he had seen them in that entire first hour of acquaintance.

She reached out a squat pink finger and he wondered for a moment whether she was going to touch him and in that instant he craved her touch and also it made him feel ridiculous. What was he doing here with this pygmy woman, whose grin was a rope he wanted to tie around his slanted neck and hang? Why did they think she would suit him in any way, she who barely reaches his kneecaps, for whom he is having to utter moronic statements regarding footwear?

‘My life is the sum total of the aim of my mistakes,’ he had told his friends, a couple fascinated by his inability to hook himself to any female for longer than it took them to decide what brand of organic coffee beans to order for the month.

‘He expects to hate them all,’ the couple had said to each other behind his back, ‘and so he prepares for it and torpedoes any potential.’ ‘Let’s give him something truly grotesque,’ they agreed, and dispatched a colleague from a neighbouring cubicle, four-foot nothing without her old-lady shoes.

‘See how he takes this one and destroys!’ they laughed.

He sat opposite her and her finger was moving towards him and he did feel hate and he did feel revulsion, and he felt utter puzzlement when he leaned towards the digit and took it in his mouth and as he began to suck on it she breathed harder and harder, all four-foot-nothing of her, ecstasy fizzing through her veins like Coca Cola.

Plaits

Someone behind started plaiting my hair.

Hey, I said.

Sorry, he said. Just given up smoking … hands fidgety… hang on.

I sat there waiting for the lecture to start, feeling the gentle tug as he pulled one section of hair over the other. My knees said, Marry him. Don't turn round, just decide.

•

We married six months later. His face was as delicate as his hands were dextrous, his temper cool and his love eccentric. He washed my hair, made me pies with pastry messages on top, grew prize-winning roses, and said that the washing up was his meditation.

When I cut my hair, he said that it was fine, that he could tickle my scalp now, but his hands were disappointed, and soon I smelled tobacco.

Stress at work, he said.

I talked to a wise friend, who said, Grow it back. My knees said, He should love you anyway. I saw him in a cafe with a woman I didn't know. His fingers were playing with her curls. I threw up in a rubbish bin and went home. I found a pack of his cigarettes and started one a day, even though my knees weren't pleased.

I love you, he said in bed, when my hair had reached my shoulders again.

I know, I said, and fought my knees' insistence that I go into the garden and dig up his rose bushes.

Transparent

I can see through her. She is sitting opposite me and I see her ribs, the blood beating in her heart, the tea as it makes its way down towards her stomach. Yesterday we were sitting here as couples do, cut off from one another by skin, by outward defenses. Today, she is as open to me as my own mind.

‘Can you … ?’ I say, my eyes fixed to her thin frame, watching the brown liquid slide down her throat, seeing her lungs fill with air.

‘Milk?’ she says, passing it over. She cannot see through me, clearly. This is one way only.

‘Are you … ?’ I say, and I hold my breath in case this should all disappear, in case her flesh should instantly return, clouding the vision. I want to say, Are you feeling alright? She looks at me.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ she says, and her tone is usual, normal, the tone of someone who does not know that their lover can see straight into their colon, the twists and turns of their intestines. I force my eyes up to her face, and I see her sinuses, the roots of her teeth, and I gasp. She puts down her mug and stands and comes over to me and puts a hand of bones on my forehead and bends down to me, pressing her veined cheek to my skin.

‘I think you’re feverish,’ she says, and she goes to find our thermometer, and I watch her spine shift and elongate and compress as she bends down to rummage through drawers and I wait for her cool hand on my hot face and wonder whether she can see through me anyway.

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More about Tania Hershmann

Mill

Janis Freegard

Mill wants to be the best she can be,
because now she's got someone to be it for.

I

There is a sunless underbelly to this country, something dangerous, something from the night. Beneath the pavlova and the Haere mai, men turn on themselves with ropes and guns and drink. Mothers murder. Bolts are fired into the brains of living sheep. In the bush, pigs' throats are slit.

There is a sinister undercurrent running through this country, something untoward, something not altogether nice.

II

She does not have the character of a Millicent, who sounds like someone's ancient aunt, nor does she have the personality to be Milly, who sounds pretty and sweet. They call her Mill. She is heavy and strong.

III

Mill stands at the gate of the Taranaki home she shares with Mum and Mum's boyfriend and Mill's brother Andy. There's nothing here for Mill except the same kind of living death that swallows up anyone who stays. Mill does not want a man of her own, chained to a pushchair. She does not want to be filled up with foetuses. She does not want the pointlessness of small town life, lawn mowing on Sunday mornings, Friday nights at one of the two pubs in town. There's not any kind of life here that Mill can see herself living.

IV

Mill's sturdy and stocky, like Dad was. She knows she's going to leave, like Dad did. He just up and walked out on them one day. Mill was eight. She kept hoping he'd come back for her, but he never did. For a long time she blamed Mum for driving him away. Now she tries not to care, but some days she just hates him.

V

Mill's got a cousin in Wellington. Sarah. Mill leaves school two weeks before the end of her final term and hitches down. She doesn't tell Mum she's going because she knows Mum'd go spare. She phones from her cousin's place after she gets to Wellington. She picks a time when she knows Mum will be at housie, because she doesn't want to talk to her. She gets Andy. He's fifteen and only talks in grunts. Mill hopes he will pass some sort of message on. She tells him he can have her room.

Andy's pretty happy about this. His room is just a sun porch, barely wide enough for his single bed. Mill's room's got a built-in wardrobe. He'll have room to put up his poster of Jennifer Lopez. 'Orrigh. Syoo,' and he hangs up.

Mill won't see Andy again.

VI

There's a subterranean menace through this country, something sunless. Children grow up in poverty seeing things that children never should. Beneath the veneer of pikelets and lolly scrambles, there is something in this country less than pleasant.

VII

Mill sleeps on her cousin Sarah's couch in a rotting flat in the darkest part of Aro Valley. Sarah works as a receptionist at an escort agency. Mill remembers when Sarah left town three years ago, pregnant. Her Mum and Dad kicked her out, said she was a little slut. She came to Wellington and had an abortion. Rumour had it the baby was her uncle's. Mill asked Mum at the time why Sarah couldn't stay with them, but Mum didn't think it was a good idea. Mum's boyfriend was out of work at that time. Mill thinks Mum didn't want him and Sarah at home together all day.

Over the next few months at Sarah's, Mill meets a lot of receptionists. She'd never realised how many receptionists an escort agency needs. They sit round at Sarah's flat in their afternoons off, smoking joints and laughing about the guys who come into the agency. Sometimes they come round crying and disappear into Sarah's bathroom, then re-emerge glassy-eyed and looking like nothing matters any more.

There's a scrawny young guy who comes round to the rotting Aro Valley flat, too. He leaves packages for Sarah and walks out with half her weekly earnings. Mill smokes a joint with him from time to time. He seems all right. She knows he's under strict instructions from Sarah not to give Mill anything stronger.

One of the receptionists is very pretty with black stuff round her eyes that makes them stand out. Mill feels shy every time she comes to visit. The pretty receptionist comes around more often. Sometimes she turns up when Sarah's out working and it's just her and Mill in the flat together. Mill likes that. She's two years older than Mill and seems very sophisticated. Mill starts smoking.

One day the pretty receptionist takes Mill to bed and for the first time ever, Mill feels fully alive.

VIII

Mill moves in with the pretty receptionist. She gets a job in a gay bar, lying about her age.

She learns that working behind a bar is not unlike being a priest. You see all sorts of things and hear all sorts of things and you say nothing. The blonde woman who's in here with her girlfriend every Saturday night – you know that the girlfriend doesn't know she went home with that bus driver woman last night and you know she definitely doesn't know she went staggering off down the steps with a very drunk man the week before.

Each to her own, thinks Mill, wiping out the ash trays. It's none of her business. Mill's got a pretty receptionist waiting for her at home with black stuff round her eyes and she is truly truly happy, happier than anyone else has ever been in the history of the world because no-one has ever loved anyone as completely and surely as Mill loves her receptionist.

IX

They still go round to Sarah's some days. On one visit, they find Sarah sitting on the floor, shaking. Mill makes her a cup of tea. One of Sarah's friends is in hospital after an overdose. It happened at Sarah's flat.

'It's this life,' says Sarah. 'It's just this bloody life.'

X

Mill gets thinking. For the first time in her life, she's got a goal. She can visualise her future and there's a pretty receptionist in it with black around her eyes. Mill wants to be the best she can be, because now she's got someone to be it for. She doesn't earn a lot at the bar, but she's saving. She's going to buy a car and then she's going to take that receptionist away for a holiday, just the two of them. Somewhere nice. It's going to be a surprise.

XI

There's something sinister lurking in the shadows of this country, a certain recklessness, a certain disregard. Something from the night.

Some days, the pretty receptionist comes home with a faraway glassy look in her eyes and it seems to Mill she's not really there at all. And some nights her eyes are all red round the edges, instead of black, and Mill knows it's been a bad shift, but she doesn't ask about it. She just wraps her up in a duvet and makes her a cup of Milo and holds her until she stops shaking.

XII

One night, while she's working in the bar, Mill gets a call, one she never thought she'd get. It's her cousin. 'I just had your Mum on the phone …'

'I hope you didn't tell her where I am.'

But her cousin's saying, 'It's bad news, Mill, I'm really sorry.'

It's Andy, Mill's brother.

'You've got to go home, Mill.'

XIII

Andy was in a car with his mates. They'd been drinking all night. The guy driving was way over the limit. They were on the wrong side of the road when the truck hit them.

XIV

The day of the funeral is a perfect, crisp, cool winter's day. Mill gets into a row with her Mum and they don't speak all morning. She gets a ride to the church with Aunty Flo.
But then at the church they're all crying and hugging.

XV

Mum and Mum's boyfriend want Mill to stay with them. 'At least for a few weeks, love. The house is so empty …'

Mum looks old, for the first time. Kind of lost. Mill knows the boyfriend's not much use to her at a time like this. He's dealing with the loss in his own silent way. Perhaps for the first time, Mill realises he really cared for Andy, and for her too, no doubt. He wasn't Dad; no-one was Dad but Dad, but at least Mum's boyfriend had never walked out on them. Mill knows he'll be out at the pub every night, trying to drink the pain away, leaving Mum at home on her own, sitting with a pile of Andy's school books and the cup he won for swimming.

Mill stays two more days. It's all she can stand: the hands of death clawing at her, trying to haul her down into that limbo world. Two more days in Andy's shrine. Two more days of wishing Mum would stop crying. Two more days of missing the pretty receptionist the way she'd miss a limb.

At the end of two days, Mill packs her bags and kisses Mum goodbye, trying not to notice how helpless Mum looks. Mr Holland down the road gives her a good deal on his old Falcon. She'll have just enough left for the holiday. It's her first car. She drives back to Wellington feeling like a king. And feeling guilty because Andy's never going to get to feel this way.

XVI

There is a shadow over this country, something unsavoury, something sinister, something not altogether nice. There is a scene waiting for Mill in Wellington that no-one in love should ever have to see.

XVII

Mill drives into the city late in the morning. She parks the Falcon outside the flat she shares with the prettiest receptionist in New Zealand.

She walks through their gate and up the stairs to their front door. She unlocks the door and walks through the hall into the bedroom they share. The pretty receptionist is not alone.

Mill recognises the scrawny guy who sells her cousin drugs, but right now she is not thinking. There is a low animal howl deep inside

her, a wordless keening. Right now, Mill won't give voice to it: this pain she did not know existed. She didn't know anyone could hurt this much and not die. She is standing at the foot of the bed swaying. Her world is going grey. She thinks she might be sick.

The pretty receptionist is going sorrysorryohmigod ohMill I'msosorry.

The scrawny guy pulls on his jeans and leaves. He knows they've just broken something precious.

XVIII

Mill walks round the bedroom and she starts throwing the receptionist's clothes into carry bags. In go her book about crystals, her earrings, the stuff that makes her eyes black, her collection of ceramic cats. She's going MillMillMill pleaseMillplease. Don't throw me out Mill please.

Mill's not listening, but she's not throwing her out either. The pretty receptionist is the best, the very best thing that has ever happened to her in her life and she's not letting go of her that easily.

She picks up all the bags she's packed and she says to the pretty receptionist, who now has black streaked all over her cheeks, 'Get in the car, just get in the bloody car.'

And the receptionist senses that there is still a chance, because she knows that Mill is the best thing that's ever happened to her too, and she pulls on her clothes quickly and wipes her face and says oh Mill I'll be so good to you, I love you Mill, I'll never do it again Mill I swear.

And Mill says, 'Just shut up and get in the bloody car.'

XIX

The pretty receptionist doesn't know where they're going, but she knows she'll go anywhere as long as it's with Mill. Mill's got a plan. She's always wanted to see the South Island. They'll get the ferry, go on holiday for a week or two, find a town that looks friendly. Mill will get bar work and the pretty receptionist will get a proper job as a real receptionist somewhere and not have to do what she's been doing any more.

XX

She does not have the character of a Millicent, who sounds like someone's ancient aunt, nor does she have the personality to be Milly, who sounds pretty and sweet. They call her Mill. She is sturdy and strong, like Dad was strong. She can take what life throws at her and not walk out, like Dad never could.

XXI

There is a sunless underbelly to this country, an underlying menace, something not altogether nice.

But now and then somehow: some chink of light, some tiny sliver of hope. Sometimes that's all you've got, and it doesn't look like much. It's not much. But it's enough to be going on with.

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More about Janis Freegard

Space Oddity

Angelo R. Lacuesta

Adam sticks a finger in my ear. 'Beth?'

Adam comes up to me during my afternoon nap. My eyes are closed but I can smell him, the mucus on his sleeve, the sun in his hair, the earthy odor of his three-day-old shirt. I pretend to be asleep by giving off a low snore and making a sleepy twitch. Adam sticks a finger in my ear. 'Beth?'

'What up, Adam?'

'You're not really sleeping.'

Grandma is at mass and Auntie Sering is still in the kitchen, so there's nothing to do but listen to him as he recites the names of dinosaurs, in order of decreasing size, uncurling the fingers of one hand, repeating as necessary.

Then through dinner it's prime numbers, as far as he knows them.

It's my grandma's house, but she only comes out for meals now, and for morning and evening mass. When she talks to us it's mostly about God's grace and *Coffee Prince*. Auntie Sering, my father's sister who never married, goes to the market, plans our meals, locks up at night by swinging the wooden jalousies shut and carefully stacking the empty tin cans of fruit cocktail and pineapple juice against them on the sill. It makes it look like we're preparing for a nuclear war.

'The burglar alarm,' she explains whenever I watch her. 'It's my invention!'

Adam makes the same claim each and every time I'm here.

'It's Jurassic but it works,' Auntie Sering admits, tiptoe on a chair to put up the top layer. Afterwards we step back and look at it as though we've just put up a Christmas tree. Adam has his hands on his hips. He smiles up at me and whispers, 'Grandma.'

'Prayers!' Grandma calls right on cue from upstairs, where we go and huddle on our knees before the Sta Maria de la Paz y Buenviaje.

We include the house in our prayers, and for all in it to sleep soundly and remain safe from all harm – after praying for family and the sick and the dead, after the rosary and before we get up to say 'good evening' to each other.

But the reason I feel safe at night and the reason the burglar alarm works is that there has not been a single break-in since the day my grandparents moved in. As far as I remember, too, nothing has ever moved or changed – not a single piece of furniture, not a single throw or cushion cover.

Before he died, my father returned from time to time – to bring money, to show himself to his family, dragging his own family along: my mother and me, to escape idle summers or droll city lives. At five I was the dark-skinned girl who spoke smooth Visayan, but at twelve I was the spoiled city girl in plastic maryjanes and imported barrettes, and summers at grandma's were worse than idle.

As far as I could tell, my mother, a probinsyana herself, loved the house, from the moment she shouted 'Maayo!' at the gate when we arrived. That was the signal for me that for the next few days, or more likely several weeks, I would be in a distant world, cut off from everything. It filled me with dread, to disappear into the province without a mall or a decent movie theater, and I would be counting the days until we went home.

But almost as soon as I had forgotten the last visit, we would be at it again, packing light and leaving everything behind for another holy week, or another entire summer with nothing but the sounds of chickens and tricycles, the aimless conversations with distant relatives, and the rattle of the electric fan.

Years and years later, these are the things that fill me with delight. It's fashionable to be old-fashioned now. I see how different the light is in Lambunao. The afternoons are bright and cool and the breezes more generous. There always seems to be the smell of coming rain,

or of rain that has just ended only to return the next day before you can start missing it.

Today there are traffic lights and shopping arcades, the noise of tricycles is louder, and there are even a couple of tourist inns. But most of the town is held in its old and slow habits. The food served at the restaurants – they still call them 'eateries' here – remains inexpensive and earnest, and the people, as far as I know, have willingly chosen to stay behind.

Not my father, of course. Nor me, by natural extension. Before Adam, he was the last man in the house, my father, who moved out just two weeks after graduating from high school for an engineering degree in the city. Auntie Sering never went to college, but she never needed to. She was happy enough not to be working and to become, for the first time, the only child.

Well, I thought I was a city girl, but now I find I've acquired this automatic reaction against city things. I get queasy whenever I hear Adam at his X-Box or video games, or when I see him surfing the internet.

Or maybe it's just Adam. Today he abandons his games and shoots me with a gun he's made from an action figure by pulling its head out of its socket and bending it at the waist to make a pistol grip out of its legs. He aims the neck hole at me and I make the mistake of pretending to be hit and clutching my chest. He points at me all day, shooting me down again and again with the headless little man, and I've learned to make a point of complaining loud enough for Auntie Sering to hear.

'Adam!' I say in my most level tone, and he looks at me, knowing I'm trying to sound reasonable for her sake.

'Adam!' Auntie Sering picks up on it but stops short of a full reprimand, as always.

Adam's real mother is some poor, desperate distant relation who

thought they could take care of him better because his father had abandoned them. His father works in Dubai or Bahrain. I don't remember him, and I don't know if Adam does, but I've heard the women mention him. They said Adam looked like the guy and you couldn't deny he was his son, and that he certainly was like his father in many ways.

He was five years old when I met him. Auntie Sering was carrying him like he was her baby. He cried all the time, waiting for his mother or father to show up at the door. 'Soon, Adam, soon,' Auntie Sering would say, and we all counted on him forgetting.

Grandma didn't quite approve because he was a sickly and irritable kid, and besides, and more importantly, it was crazy to take care of someone not your own. But Auntie Sering prevailed, and when they asked her, 'Whose is that?' at gatherings, she learned soon enough to say, and not without some pleasure, 'He takes after me, doesn't he?'

But it's years since anybody's asked anything and nobody really visits anymore. The wall clock is stuck at a little past four and the good plates and glasses haven't been taken out of the glass cabinet in the living room.

Every morning Adam comes to my room and counts my dimples, the moles on my face and neck and the one on my shoulder. He counts all seven of my stray white hairs, singling out the strands before smoothing them back onto my head.

'One day I'll have white hair too.' He combs with his fingertips as he searches for more. I ignore him this time and continue reading my textbook, a clip-on light making the diagrams glow on the page.

The summer is supposed to be for pathology, psychology and neurology and maybe just enough genetics to get me through my finals. I came with books, lecture transcriptions, my iPod and my favorite DVDs, only to find out the DVD player I sent them two or three years ago conked out months back. 'You really can't trust new

technology,' Auntie Sering told me. 'And besides, aren't you here to study?'

It's Adam you can't trust, of course. There are two or three scratch-ridden holes where there used to be screws, and the unit rattles with loose parts when I shake it.

Today he calls himself Адамски, the name written in careful strokes on his shirt with a marker. He's commanding the International Space Station from the pit under his desk, old PlayStation controllers repurposed into steering controls and a ball-peen hammer turned into a throttle. To steer the rig he taps on the controller buttons. 'Blasts of compressed air from mini-thrusters,' he tells me, in case I was wondering. 'You don't need rockets in space. They're just for escape and reentry.'

'Adamski's been watching too much Discovery Channel,' I tell him.

He gives me a blank look and offers a walkie-talkie he made out of Lego.

'Speak into the comset so I can hear you. No, there's no cable TV in space.'

'So how'd you hear me without the comset, then?'

'Read your lips on the cabin monitor.' He points to a small mirror taped to the wall in front of him. I recognize it as my missing compact. I've been looking for it for days.

'Ah. *Space Odyssey*. I'm on to you, Adam. Adamski.'

'*Kommander* Adamski. And I don't get you. Over,' he says, into his own comset, identical to the one in my hand.

'No? HAL 9000? Evil one-eyed spaceship computer who's too smart for his own good?'

'What is that, a book? A movie?'

'An old movie.'

‘Shit!’ The word rings in an upper register and I know he’s trying to impress me with it. ‘Old movies.’

‘Well, the old ones are still the good ones. They don’t make them like they used to.’

‘That’s a cliché,’ he says into the comset.

‘Hmph. Well, I’ve got to go.’

‘Go? Where?’ He knows there’s nowhere I can go in this town.

‘Go study. Otherwise I fail my exams and it’s the call center for me. There’s no escape velocity for that.’

‘Copy that,’ he patches in.

‘Copy dat!’ I repeat, in a cartoon voice, though my child psychology book tells me you should never talk down to kids. Contrary to instinct, you should talk to them like they’re adults.

‘Shiiit! Thruster three overload!’

By late afternoon, Adam has downloaded the movie, watched as much of it as he can, and has fallen asleep. Auntie Sering has been ordering him to take an afternoon nap every single day since I’ve been here, but this is the first time I’ve seen him do it. Seeing his small form curled up around his favorite pillow, I want to sniff his cheek and nibble at his eyebrow. But they’ve warned me that he’s an incredibly light sleeper and I’m always afraid he’ll hear me. I switch off the TV instead.

‘Put it back on,’ he says. Suddenly his eyes are open.

‘How’d you know I turned it off?’

‘You can still tell when lights change even if your eyes are closed. How can you not know that?’

The next day he tells me he’s doing secret work for NASA as a designer, making virtual prototypes of planetary transport. On his PC

he shows me downloads of the first moon rovers, large as owner-type jeeps, that seated a driver and a navigator. He shows me the smaller Viking lander, which didn't need a crew to achieve all the mission objectives. He closes the jpegs and shows me six-wheeled Mars rovers, the size of radio-controlled cars, then graphic mockups of the newer ones, the size of cockroaches.

'They're making them smaller and smaller.'

He tells me he is doing research that will make them even smaller.

'Even smaller?'

'Practically invisible.'

'Nanomachines,' I say, shrugging.

'Exactly. They'll get so small they can go anywhere. The tallest rock, the smallest hole. They'll pass through your skin.'

'Wow, Adam.'

He's caught my voice edging toward baby-talk and flashes me a warning look.

'How do you do your research, anyway?'

He rolls his eyes. 'The internet, what else?'

'That's an awfully big project, Adam,' I tell him, returning to my textbook.

'It's simple to do once you've got the theory part.' His pokes his head under the book and worms his way onto my lap, trying to get a look at what I'm reading. Today he smells good, skin like milk, hair silky as a baby's.

Adam tells me he knows more stars than anybody else, and there's nothing to do again but listen as he recites their names, in order of size, from white dwarfs to hyper-giants, using the stubby fingers of one hand, repeating as necessary.

‘To reach those stars you’ve got to hibernate. You know what hibernation is, Adam?’

‘Of course. You fall asleep and when you wake you’ve been asleep for years. It’s in the movie. I downloaded it yesterday.’

I pick a book at random. ‘Here, you can have neurology. I’m done with it.’ I ease out from under him and rummage through my pile of books at the foot of the bed. They’re not in their usual order.

‘Adam, have you been going through my textbooks?’

I’ve thought about asking for the key to the room so I can lock the door, but it isn’t really my house.

‘No.’ Of course.

‘Okay, Adam, study time first, okay?’

‘You suck,’ he says.

‘I’ll suck at my exams if you don’t let me study. If you leave me alone for a couple of hours I’ll give you something special on your birthday.’

Adam gives out a shrill whoop and leaves the room.

On Adam’s birthday, Grandma wakes him early for church. When they return, Adam is trailing a bunch of balloons from his fist and is surly from the heat.

‘There were ten of them, you know,’ Grandma says. ‘We lost four on the way. And you should have seen him in church!’

‘Looking up the women’s skirts and making the loudest racket during the blessing,’ Auntie Sering whispers to me. ‘You’ll get a taste of—’ She raises a foot behind her, grabs a slipper and holds it in mid-swing over Adam’s rump. He mewls and throws a glance my way.

‘Easy lang!’ I tell them. ‘After all, it’s his birthday.’

This embarrasses him more, and I wonder if I'll ever do anything that's just right. He turns to me and opens his arms for a hug. I break his momentum by cupping his cheeks and shaking his face a little bit. 'How old are you today, Adam?'

He frowns between my hands.

'Ten,' he says, oddly shy.

'Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.' He quickly adds, sticking out a finger for each number.

'Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one.'

Adam pauses.

'Twenty-one,' he says again.

'Twenty-one what?'

I don't realize that he's counted up to my age until later in the afternoon, as I'm packing my clothes for the trip back home tomorrow. I guess I've been too busy counting down to this day, too. What's left of it before I leave: a long afternoon nap, a quick dinner because everybody's tired from Adam's birthday, and the nightly rosary.

'Good evening!' we say to each other right after the 'Hail Holy Queen'.

I mess up Adam's hair and pretend to sniff it. 'Well, time for a bath, Adam.'

Auntie Sering reaches for his hand but he refuses it.

'Come na. Take a bath,' she says.

'I want you to bring me,' he tells me.

I take his hand and drag him downstairs to the bathroom door and he gives me a little-boy look that tempts me to remind him he just turned ten today. I open the door and push him into the tiny

bathroom. He grasps my hand and pulls me in.

'Why don't you call Auntie? My exams are in two weeks and I really need to do some studying, Adam.'

'Soap and towel,' he announces.

The towel is hanging from a hook. I step into the shower to see if there's soap in the dish. Adam reaches behind me and closes the door. There's a bunch of sounds and I turn around and see it's one of those funky old doorknobs that don't work anymore and I'm relieved for that. Then I see Grandma's remedy – a shiny new hasp and a padlock, clicked shut and, well, here's another prank to add to the collection. I think we've covered everything now. If I wasn't in medical school, I'd be quite the psychologist already, or quite the patient.

'Adam, don't do that. Open the door.'

Silence, of course.

'Open the door, Adam.

'Adam, open the door.

'What is your problem, Adam?'

'You're leaving tomorrow but you can't,' he says.

'Shut up, Adam.'

'I'm calling your Mama.'

Adam does his best sneer. It makes him look like a grown man. I have the sudden urge to slap him, or grasp his neck and lift him off the floor.

'Auntie Sering!' I shout. 'Adam, open the door.'

I hear Auntie Sering's slow feet flapping down the staircase above us. Adam's eyes are on me as he starts mouthing words.

‘Your Mama’s coming. So stop doing that!’ I instantly, regrettably, know it will only encourage him. And I don’t know exactly what he’s doing; he’s just standing there, mouthing words, baring his small teeth as he exaggerates the syllables. I try to calm myself so I can understand what he’s saying, in time to the sound of Auntie Sering’s slippers coming down the stairs.

I’m trying to read his lips. His mouth is like a baby’s and sometimes it makes him look abnormal and abominable when he talks to us about stars or planets or all that stuff. In my books there are pages and pages of color plates of mouths and lips afflicted with various diseases. There’s everything there: cleft lips and cleft palates, skin rashes and sores, odd mutations of the limbs, breasts, spread female genitalia, all their parts labeled and described. I told him not to look at my books.

I lift the back of my hand until it’s inches from his face. His lower lip is pressed against his upper front teeth to split a word into two syllables. V. Seven.

‘Six. Five. Four.’ He’s counting down her footsteps.

On ‘three’ he whips his hand out, slipping the key dead into the padlock. He pulls the door open in one motion. Auntie Sering is two steps up the stairs, wearing a confused look as Adam takes off and I scramble after him. Upstairs, Grandma is still praying in front of the Virgin Mary. She holds her arms open to Adam, who slips through and runs into his room.

‘My God! What’s happening?’ Grandma shrieks.

‘You shut up, Grandma,’ Adam says. I reach his door just as he slams it shut. I give the door a hard kick and the solid wood barely flinches.

I head to my room, count my books, and stuff everything into my bag. I blast ’70s rock into my ears and make a decision to leave at dawn instead of mid morning. I fold up the blankets, pull off the

bedcovers and straighten the furniture so it looks exactly the way it's been all these years. I lie flat on my back on the made bed, turn up the volume and close my eyes tightly.

At dawn I sneak into his room and carefully dislodge my compact from the wall under his desk. I steal a look at him and he looks like a child again, perfectly asleep, with his oversized head and half-open mouth and tiny feet sticking out of his Star Wars blanket, a gift from his father many birthdays ago.

I plant a soft kiss on his mouth and head downstairs. I carefully unbolt the door. It’s already light outside but inside the house is still dark and sleeping. The jalousies are closed and the tin can walls are waiting for their first intruder.

More about Angelo R Lacuesta

Mock Wedding

Susannah Poole

'Oh, poor Eva feels stink!,' Clare said.
'Propose to me instead, David.'

On the night Eva agreed to be a revolutionary, the fireplace in the living room was filled with crackling flames devouring macrocarpa. The sap-scented smoke wafted into her bedroom where she sat at her desk in her sleeping bag, fully clothed and wearing a woolly hat. In front of her were highlighters and the draft of her essay 'Indigenous Responses to Colonialism in 19th Century Art'. The happy chatter of guests arriving for the flat's weekly video night was filling the house. Eva shuffled in tiny geisha steps to her door and listened. David was telling the tale of the firewood.

'Mum and Dad turned up with it today as a peace offering. They'd never given me any of their shitload of wood from the farm because they don't like my lifestyle. When I went home at Easter I told them they were small-minded and now they give me this. Me and Dad stacked it together.'

David went about with the idea he was maligned by his family because of his disinterest in rugby and livestock. He often said this had bred in him a keen sense of the need for equality and justice. Eva was never sure whether this was heartfelt or merely impressive-sounding rhetoric.

Eva's own fireplace was bare. She let her sleeping bag fall and straightened her hat.

As she squeezed through the living room door, her heart sank at of the sight of so many people entwined on the foam squabs. Even those she knew not to be lovers rested in each other's arm. Blankets and casks of wine were strewn across the sofa. She was about to quietly retrace her steps when David caught her eye.

'The video's just about to start.' He patted the carpet beside him.

She picked her way through and sat with her back against the wall.

'Share my blanket,' David whispered, draping it over Eva's lap.

‘Thanks.’ She tucked it in snugly. ‘It was nice of your parents to drop off the firewood.’

‘I’ll tell you the story behind it later. The video’s “True Romance”.’ He squeezed her knee.

The film was at a climax of shooting and swearing when the picture warped and slowed, then disappeared with a grinding sound.

‘Oh piss!’ Clare glared at the video player.

Clare had lived in the flat for five years. Her favourite food was toast and every day she wore vintage clothes: jumpsuits, shawls, marching girl’s boots. Dresses were nailed to her wall with their chiffon skirts gracefully cascading down. When Eva first moved in Clare had visited her in her bedroom and asked questions about the Frida Kahlo posters on her wall. Even though Eva was deeply passionate about Kahlo’s art, she was struck dumb and gave mumbled replies while Clare looked concerned.

‘I’ll get it going.’ David jabbed at the eject button. Using a fish slice he dragged out the tape with its shiny innards trailing. Everyone groaned.

‘We need one of those head cleaners.’ Clare took the tape from David and hit it against the floor. ‘They’re real expensive.’

From here it followed that student life was expensive, food and cigarettes were expensive, and only ten years ago university had essentially been free. Now students were being coerced into debt. Lockwood Smith, stifled in his suit, was going to create a generation who owed thousands before they were twenty-five.

‘This requires action!’ David shouted. ‘Look at Eva. She has to work in a shitty weekend job and probably has a loan, too.’

Eva blushed as every eye fixed on her. She pulled at a loose piece of blanket wool. Other people wanted to work at the *in* cafes with concrete walls covered in posters advertising gigs from years ago.

But Eva enjoyed working at the Cosy Teapot Tearooms: humming along to Classic Hits, '*We built this city on rock 'n' roll',* while arranging the Belgian biscuits pink icing and jelly crystal side up.

Clare took Eva's hand. 'Wouldn't you love an allowance?' Her short hair shone like feathers.

Eva sighed despondently and nodded.

The required sense of defeat permeated the air and then Clare leapt to her feet. 'There's a varsity group organising a protest where heaps of students get married. Not to a boyfriend or girlfriend but just whoever, so they're eligible for the married people's allowance. Mock weddings will really fuck with the system, eh?' From her pocket she took a pouch of tobacco.

While the others babbled excitedly Eva imagined how furious her parents would be if she took part and they found out. She shivered. And already David was on one knee in front of her. His eyes were bloodshot. 'Will you marry me for money?'

Before tonight she barely existed to these people, and now she was jolted into the thick of the action. If she declined David's offer, she'd fade away on the very night she had tiptoed out. She'd merge back in with the blanket, the smudged wallpaper and carpet stains.

'Oh, poor Eva feels stink!,' Clare said. 'Propose to me instead, David.' She pulled the sash window open.

The rush of fresh air cleared Eva's head and gave her daring. 'Okay,' she said quietly.

'I do,' she said, louder.

Clare grinned, exhaling smoke through her nose. 'Yay! We'll go op-shopping for dresses tomorrow. I'll be your bridesmaid, okay?'

'You'll be perfect.'

The next afternoon, Eva and Clare were in an op-shop on the south

side of town, with a section dedicated to wedding finery. The unwanted dresses hung in shiny rows. Their fake satin trains slumped on the floor amongst plastic toys from fast-food chains, thrown by bored children. Clare was flicking through the dresses, exclaiming loudly on their ugliness.

'Gross, gross … and *really* gross! Look at this label: SOILED.'

A pink splash ran from neckline to waist.

'Red wine,' Eva said.

'Eh?'

'The stain.'

Clare swayed, holding out the skirt. 'There's a story behind this. Bride goes into a fury because her brand new husband dances with the matron of honour to a bogan song. She pushes this tart of honour to the floor.' Clare threw the dress down and stamped on it. 'Then the mother of the bride chucks a glass of wine over them and screams, "*Cut it out, you two*."'

The shop ladies glared.

Clare scooped up the dress. 'Hang on,' she laughed. 'Even better: the bride already has four kids from four fathers and she's giving her youngest sips of wine …'

Eva felt the shop assistants' anger. She grabbed the closest wedding dress from the rack and jiggled it at Clare. 'What about this one?'

There was a moment's silence as they looked.

The dress was china-white with a sash of pink peonies. Hanging with it was a headpiece of beaded flowers and ribbons, which Clare put on. It slid down to rest just above her eyebrows. The ribbons and pale pink flowers shone against her dark hair.

Eva sighed. 'It's so lovely.' The dress weighed nothing in her hands.

‘It shouldn't be jumbled in with all this other shit. Those shop ladies don’t even know what a treasure it is.’ Clare looked intently at Eva. ‘It’s organza and I love even the word *organza*.’

Eva opened her mouth to say she wanted it.

Clare dipped her head so the wreath fell into her hands. She placed it on Eva’s head and looked at her beseechingly. ‘Will you think I’m a complete bitch if I buy it? I won’t wear it as your bridesmaid.’

Eva touched the pink peonies. ‘You should have it for your collection.’ She handed it over. ‘It wouldn't fit me anyway.’

Clare kissed her on the cheek. ‘You’re so sweet! Now let’s find you something hilarious and cheap.’

A week later, the raggle-taggle wedding procession marched from the registry office to Magnetic Street for the ‘reception party’. Grooms wore suits so tight that fabric tore with every arm swing. Bridesmaids skipped in mauve frocks, throwing petals from stolen flowers at bystanders and buses. Eva’s dress smelt like cigarettes and fell from her shoulders revealing her thermals. Mothers with babies in prams and senior citizens stared momentarily.

As soon as the procession reached its destination, Eva started slinking towards her bed. Her pyjamas were waiting, folded under her pillow, whereas the backyard was damp and crowded with people devouring a feast of past-their-due-date-pop-tarts and over-flavoured chippies. She only made it to the laundry before she felt a tug on her net veil.

‘Are you running away?’ David’s breath smelt freshly of toothpaste.

‘I'm getting something warm to wear,’ she lied.

David put his arm around her waist. ‘Don’t hide.’

Two guys carried the living room stereo past them and sat it on top of the washing machine, kicking aside bags of dirty washing to make

room for the speakers. Music blared out.

‘People say the world is fucked,’ David was shouting. ‘The oceans. The government. The trees. All fucked. But small actions can instigate change. If you look at all the amazing things in history you’ll find individuals are remembered more than events – people like Rosa Parks.’

‘You can't really compare us to her.’

‘Why not?’

Eva shrugged.

David patted her head. ‘And I thought you were crawling out of your shell.’

‘Rosa Parks will be remembered forever but people won’t remember our mock wedding. That’s why no one stopped us – not because they were too ignorant to know what we were up to.’

David lightly stroked the dip of her waist. ‘Why did you do it then?’

‘Because I’m not in a shell,’ she said but her words were drowned by the opening notes of a favourite song.

As if choreographed, people tipped back their heads to sing. They sang they would always love you, always run to you, throwing their hearts into it. The stereo was turned to full volume. Bouquets of dandelions flew, landing in the holly hedge and derelict vegetable garden.

Eva noticed David’s gaze rested on Clare leaning against the washing line with a cigarette in one hand and a jar of red wine in the other. Her bridesmaid’s frock was thigh-high and her legs gracefully long even in woolly tights. Her fake tiger fur coat was unbuttoned.

Eva joined in the singing as David sauntered over and rested his forehead on Clare’s. They entwined their arms and leant in close. Eva believed that David and Clare were falling in love – tumbling

together in the way that inspired artists to paint and poets to write sentimental words. Collapsing together like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Up in the branches, fairy lights swayed, making her dizzy so she closed her eyes. When the song finished, she opened them to see Clare leading David by the hand inside and down the hallway that was lit by tea-lights in saucers of sand.

Eva hoisted up her dress and pushed past the supermarket trollies along the side of the house. From the front gate she ran like an actress in a film. Cars tooted at the runaway bride tearing along a street sparkling with broken glass. Her veil floated away to land on the pedestrian crossing.

She wished her own romantic story would start. She wished she'd hear the clatter of skateboard wheels, and the guy on it saying, as he came alongside, 'Where are you running to, pretty one?'

'I'm not running to; I'm running from.'

They'd come to a stop and he'd place a hand on her cheek.

Her feet began aching and when she reached the church she turned to trudge back home. This was real life, not a poignant scene.

Flicking on her bedroom light, Eva saw the organza dress on her bed, its skirt spread as if held out. Her fireplace had been laid with scrunched newspaper and kindling, and a neat stack of wood was on the hearth.

Oh.

The scene was so exquisite, the pointless party noises faded. Eva undressed and slipped the dress over her head. Flicking a match, she lit the kindling and from under her bed she pulled out a box of colourful craft materials. In front of the flames she shaped crepe paper into full-petaled flowers with pipe cleaners for stems. When there was an equal number of each colour – white, pink and yellow – she fastened the blooms with a piece of string.

Nervously she clasped the bouquet to her chest in front of the mirror. She'd never seen herself looking this way. Shadows cast by the fire flickered on the walls.

'With my body I thee worship,' she whispered to a person she didn't know yet, who must be waiting not so far away.

Her reflection looked angelic.

And happy.

More about Susannah Poole

skin and bones

Tina Makereti

... at night the urge all but overcame him.

He was lonely. It's what you'd expect really. A man in his situation. He was surrounded by the good earth, his plantation, his stock, a nice river in the valley for fishing. He thought he should be happy. Fulfilled. But something was missing.

It was spring. He went about the place tilling and planting and from time to time felt an urge. He'd look down and see his own weighty erection and think*, what am I supposed to do with this?*

He worked hard. There's a massive amount of work to do when you first start out on a place. He needed to get everything working in rhythm with everything else. He wanted to be self-sufficient. So he added in fruit trees and feed crops, and found he enjoyed the bird life that came to fossick in his orchards.

Despite this, at night the urge all but overcame him. He would thrash about in his bed, the mass of the pulsing thing between his legs making it impossible to lie comfortably. Nothing would relieve it. His own desperate fumblings had little effect. He tried dousing it in cold water, strapping it down with bandages. He prayed for relief.

Even though there was no one else around, he felt betrayed by his own neediness. When he stopped for a breather and a drink he no longer surveyed his land proudly as he wiped the sweat from his brow. He frowned. The birdsong no longer reached his ears. He saw that the shed needed painting, the weeds needed pulling, and the trees needed fertilising. He saw that it was not good.

There came a day so hot the earth beneath his fingers was warm to touch. He had watered it in preparation for seedlings, and now he sat and ate his lunch beside it, running his left hand through the dirt as if it were sand on a beach. He was hard again, as he was almost constantly these days. It occurred to him that it would be pleasant to unsheathe his penis in the warm sunlit air. He looked all around. Of course, there was no one there. He hadn't seen any of his brothers

since they had had that fight last winter, during which Tawhiri destroyed several of his crops and crashed into his house, causing the roof to collapse. *Tane, you gotta get him back for that*, Tu had goaded*, I'll back you up!* But he'd rejected Tu's advice, so Tu turned on him as well. The only one he was on speaking terms with at the moment was Rongo, but he lived miles away.

His meal finished, he thought, *why the heck not?* and pulled off his pants. His left hand was still dirty, but he let it be, finding himself even more aroused by the odour of the earth. He stroked himself, but this still felt like his own hand, so he fell to his knees and began moulding the soil into a pleasing shape to lie against. At the last moment, he made a hollow deep into the mound he had formed, and, no longer thinking rationally at all, he inserted himself there.

Well. For a man as inexperienced as Tane, this was a revelation. It was warm and soft but unyielding enough to cause a pleasing friction as he rubbed himself in and out, astonished by the pleasure of it. He released his seed quickly and lay spent against the earth like a babe on the breast of his mother. Oh, the relief! For the first time in weeks he felt calm deep down to his belly, and his loins did not scream fiery need at him.

For many days after that he experimented with his mound, forming it in different ways each time to see how it best fitted him. He gained much pleasure from coupling with his little plot of sacred soil, but he found it best to do so in the afternoon, once the sun had warmed the earth.

Days turned to weeks and weeks to months, and Tane became frustrated again. The autumn chill brought with it frost and rains that should have pleased him. But his mound turned to watery mud, and he rarely got a chance to lie there. His desire would come to him at night, and he wished for something that could relieve the ache that had moved from between his legs up into his chest.

This ache had all of him now. On the rare occasions he could enjoy the physical delight of his earthy adventures, he would return to his bed spent but still yearning. For all the cold winter he carried a pressure within, a need for more than simple bodily indulgence.

He couldn't figure out what he was missing.

•

By the following spring, as the sun's warmth released sweet blossom buds from hibernation and the insects and birds began emerging from their winter nests, Tane was desolate. He came to the soil desperately, but without passion. His orchards suffered. He neglected his stock. His house was left unswept. He no longer gained any joy from hunting, gathering and cooking his meals. Instead he ate whatever food he found while he worked – fruit, seeds, the occasional huhu grub.

One day after a sun-shower, Tane dozed under a tree in his orchard, where it was relatively dry. His eyes were half-closed, his mind drifting. He thought about all the adventure he'd had in his life, all that he had created on his land. But he did so without the pride he was accustomed to experiencing over such thoughts. *What is happening to me?* he thought.

Slowly he became aware of the fantails in the foliage above chattering excitedly, the cicada buzzing steadily faster, the tui's call becoming more melodic and enchanting than he remembered. With his eyes fully closed now, the world around him was a riot of fervent sound, each creature vying for the attention of its peers. *I am alone*, Tane thought, *that is the problem*. But who did he yearn for? He opened his eyes to the flutter of numerous wings, feathered or dry-leaf crisped, clasping talons and searching feelers, buzzing and twittering declarations of love – the ardent couplings of all creatures in the canopy. *Oh*, he thought, *oh.* And he laughed, for how could it

have taken him so long to realise this?

He called his mother, asking her what he should do about finding a partner. She did not know of any available young women. Indeed, no women were known in the area at all. She felt for her son. Even though she and her husband were separated now, she remembered their time together as the happiest time of her life. 'You may have to be creative,' she told him, 'let your imagination guide you. Do you know of the place called Kurawaka?'

Tane felt the world tilt for a moment, a path clearing before him. The place his mother named was the same place he had been visiting all this time.

He made his way to the spot he held in such affection, all the way beseeching the heavens and the earth to help him in his quest. There, he fell to his knees and scooped the soil into his arms, bringing it to his face and inhaling deeply. *Yes,* he thought*, oh god yes please let this be it.* Then slowly, affectionately, he began to work. At first, it was easy – he wanted the creation to be like him, his mirror, his equal. He formed the arms and the legs, the neck, the head, the shape of the torso. Here, he took liberty, remembering the various forms he had tried the summer before, adding shape in ways that he had found most pleasing. There were things he did not know or understand, so he let instinct guide him – adding folds, a dimple or two. He was enchanted by the figure that emerged under his fingertips.

All that was left was the face of his beloved. This was difficult. He formed something resembling what he knew of his own features – a nose, two eyes, lips. Touching his face, he realised the features he had moulded were softer than his own. He hoped this new person would accept the roughness of his face and body. Laid out before him now, the figure was smooth and rounded, like the hills in the far distance. He was at once excited and anxious. He knew of the old magic, how the life force could be shared, how creatures could be brought into being, but he had never tried to make someone like

himself before. Who would she be? Would she even want him? Would the magic work?

His mother had told him to be creative. A leap of faith was required. He opened his mouth, not yet sure of the words, closed his eyes, and attempted to find the sound. If he could just find the right note, the words would come, he was sure of it. His voice sounded awkward at first, so unsure. But he was right. After a moment of hesitation his throat began to hum with vibration, and the chant coursed through him like a powerful shifting tide.

This was it. If it didn't work he would be crushed. He wanted to prolong the moment of anticipation, the moment of not knowing. And then it was time. He leaned over and looked at her dear face, gathered up all the power of the desire inside him, and blew a warm constant stream of air into her nostrils. He took all of the air in his lungs and blew it into her, sending with it all his intentions.

There was a pause.

And then she sneezed.

'Tihei mauri ora,' he whispered. He helped her sit up, break away from the earth beneath her. A layer of soil fell away from her skin, and he could see her true form, glistening and alive and the deep red-brown colour of the earth that had formed her. Silent laughter filled him even as tears formed in his eyes. He clasped her to him, pressing his nose against hers so that they could breathe together for a while.

She was smiling as she lifted her face to look into his eyes. He felt heat rise to his face. He didn't know where to look. She was here. Alive.

'I'm Hine,' she said, 'I'm so glad you figured it out. I've been waiting for ages.'

He was stunned.

'Aw, look at you,' she said, 'you're all skin and bones. Let's make a

feast. Time for a celebration, don't you think?'

More about Tina Makereti

All Clear

Salman Masalha

As he entered the gate into the café garden, he noticed that a new girl had joined the table.

When Nurit Tzur phoned Amir to ask how he was doing ‘in these crazy times’, there was a jocular tone to her voice that didn’t quite conceal her anxiety. ‘Don’t forget to bring your mask,’ she reminded him again before she hung up

In her bedroom a little later, Amir realised he hadn’t laughed so hard for some time, and certainly never upon hearing an announcement from the Home Front Commander. With his forces alert on all fronts, he had learnt on his own flesh, the country’s flesh, the meaning of the Jewish experience. Now the more he tortured her, the more pleasure she felt, and her yelps of joy cut through the silence.

He had met Nurit – Nushnush to her friends – several years earlier. At that time of the popular Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories, she was living not far from his rented apartment in downtown Jerusalem. One day Amir had gone to the neighborhood café where he was a regular, meeting friends or simply observing the clientele. As he entered the gate into the café garden, he noticed that a new girl had joined the table. Her laugh could be heard from quite a way off and she looked as though she were sitting with old friends. Amir pulled a chair away from another table and sat down next to her.

One of the guys – Shimon or Dan, he couldn’t remember now – hastily introduced them: ‘Amir, Nurit.’ The friend returned heatedly to the conversation, but it wasn’t long before the argument died down, and talk continued along calmer lines.

Unaware of the hazard, Nurit turned to him. ‘I understand you’re Amir. Amir who?’

Shimon, his ear always finely attuned to goings-on, was quick to tell her, ‘Amir Cousin,’ and everyone laughed. Shimon always made wisecracks of the sort about ‘the northerner’, as he called Amir, who had come from far away and settled in the holy city.

‘Cousin?’ Nurit pursed her lips slightly

‘Not “Cousin”. *A* cousin, one of our Semite cousins,’ Itzik corrected her.

‘Ah, now I get it.’ Nurit laughed out loud.

Later, as everyone lingered on the sidewalk before dispersing, Nurit explained that apparently she too was going against the flow; she had left the trendy Tel Aviv area to live in Jerusalem. ‘Jerusalem’s provinciality – I think it suits me better.’

‘Provinciality is a relative thing,’ Amir said.

‘There. On the other side of the neighborhood, that’s where I live now.’ Nurit pointed, and her hand seemed to caress the treetops that moved in the gentle Jerusalem breeze.

In those days the word *intifada* was already being naturalized into the Hebrew language. Initially, the media had talked about ‘disturbances’, and when it looked as though quiet would not soon return to the occupied territories, the news people started using the term *uprising*. However, the sentries of the Hebrew language hastened to decry its use since it is from the same root as the fancy, right-wing term used for their 1948 war of independence. They wished not to corrupt youth by suggesting to them any resemblance between what Jews do and what Arabs do. Thus, gradually the Arabic word *intifada* insinuated itself and dwelt secure in the tent of the Hebrew language.

A certain commentator on Arab affairs, versed in the Arabist tradition that is remote from actual Arab experience, went one step further. He took the trouble to rummage in dictionaries and with his sarcastic grin smeared across the television screen, brought his ridiculous merchandise to the viewers. Looking straight into the camera, he burst into an Arabist exegesis as though he were revealing a great treasure: ‘The original meaning of the word intifada in Arabic is … a camel’s orgasm.’

A few days later at the café, Dan turned to Amir and asked his opinion of that linguistic 'scoop'. Amir waved his hand, dismissing both commentator and comment. 'I doubt there's an Arab alive who knows this information, or takes it seriously. Arabs these days barely know how to read those old dictionaries, which are simply fallow land where rookie Arabists graze.'

Inevitably, the discussion descended from the meaning of life and other weighty matters to animal orgasms. Amidst gusts of laughter, Amir learned something about the orgasms of sea turtles in the Galapagos. Indeed, Dan had recently returned full of enthusiasm for what he had seen on the distant islands.

'That's where they should have established the Jewish state.' Dan was keen to reignite the argument.

'And who would do the construction work; who'd till the land?' Itzik demanded.

'We'll bring over Arabs like Amir and his friends,' Dan said. 'We really can't live without Arabs.' After a brief pause, he continued: 'And then, presumably, everything will start all over again.'

But more than anything, Dan had been impressed in the Galapagos by the cries of the coupling turtles that filled the primeval landscape. He liked talking about sex and orgasms. He always said, half-seriously: 'Politics is what people engage in and sex is what they talk about.'

'And how do you tell the difference between a he-turtle and a she-turtle?' Amir asked him.

'Search me.' Dan added in a challenging tone, 'But what does our peasant nature-boy have to say on the matter?'

Amir couldn't bear the condescension in Dan's voice. He riposted, 'Go to the turtle, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.' The laughter around the table was gratifying.

Nurit was sitting with them regularly now. She asked with a smile, ‘Do she-turtles fake orgasms?’

The years went by quickly, apparently from force of habit, Amir reflected as he sipped his coffee, and exhaled cigarette smoke. Quiet had not prevailed in the land because, truth to tell, it had never existed. And to this was added another threat, signs of which could be seen everywhere: the packs and purses hanging over the backs of chairs had been joined by another accessory, cardboard boxes dangling from black plastic straps.

New fears had arisen. Saddam Hussein’s threat hovered in the air: the threat to destroy half of Israel if his country were attacked. No one knew what surprises were up the sleeve of the man from Baghdad who had killed thousands of his countrymen with poison gases. In Israel they had already taken the precaution of distributing ABC – atomic, biological, chemical – masks to all inhabitants, and had advised them to purchase masking tape to seal off the windows in advance of the trouble Hussein might be sending their way.

Amir was uncomfortable with the hysteria but he was compelled, under pressure from his friends, to report to the mask distribution center. With a fair amount of misgiving, he received a short explanation about its use from a young girl soldier, and accepted a cardboard carton with a black plastic strap. When he got home he put the carton in the closet without even opening it.

As tension grew and the Iraqi attack seemed closer than ever, people were asked to take the cardboard boxes with them wherever they went. They walked about town with the boxes dangling from their shoulders. You saw crowds at bus stops carrying the masks to work and home again. Some tried to hide the masks in plastic grocery bags and some, mostly young girls, went so far as to paint their boxes bright colors or draw flowers on them.

As in a night borrowed from the stories, darkness fell on Jerusalem.

With the war raging in Iraq and missiles striking at Israel, Amir found that disturbing thoughts often came to him, erasing the present. For example, why was he thinking about Shimon, here in Nurit's room? He had no satisfactory answer. As the years passed, he seemed to sink more deeply into his isolation. He often felt as though the wave of a magic wand had detached him from here and now and sent him floating in other worlds.

'What are you thinking about?' Nurit wanted to bring him back to the present and elicit some charm.

'Nothing,' he whispered in her ear, reluctant to show emotions that could cast a pall on the moment. 'I'm thinking about you, about us.'

And maybe he wanted to avenge that liberated Palestinian girl who couldn't bring Shimon to his knees. Shimon couldn't get past his Zionist guilt feelings, and had once confessed to Amir, during the first war in Lebanon, that he hadn't been able to respond to the flirtatious overtures of Souad, daughter of a Palestinian public figure. 'When the IDF is fucking Palestinians in Lebanon, I can't fuck a Palestinian woman,' he had confided, to Amir's astonishment.

And maybe I have Shimon on my mind now because I find myself in the bed of Nurit Tzur, daughter of Michael Tzur, a top Israeli officer. The idea continued to distract him as his hand glided over her shoulder and slowly down to her moving hip, like someone outlining dunes that stretched to the horizon. And what about my guilt feelings? Amir continued to torture himself.

He surveyed her soft body as his fingers drifted over her breasts and a warm nipple tickled his palm. The whites of her eyes recalled for him patches of remnant snow on the mountains of the north. He greedily suckled the water of life from her mouth as though it were the Sea of Galilee, lowering the tension that hovered over the land. His hand coasted across the slopes of her back as though it were a bird circling and soaring on updrafts of warm air from green fields.

He landed on the country's slim hips in the approach to a narrow plain that gathered at the navel. Far, far away at the edge of the bed, Nurit's heel stretched taut, like a spring coiling the moment his body reported the penetration of a force at the sink-holes of the Dead Sea.

Now the whole land was spread before him. He had simply to stretch out his hand to touch it, to fondle it as much as he wanted, to occupy it, and free it inch by inch from its resistance. Here she was, so close he could see the blue of her eyes, the gold falling over her shoulders, and now all her gates were open to him. Here she was, so close and yet so far.

Wondrous are the ways of this land, Amir mused. Such thoughts could surface for no apparent reason. It was another long night with Nurit Tzur, in whose bed he was stretched out, exposed to her, as she was to him. Rather than slaking his thirst quickly at her springs, satisfying his hunger on the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that grew in her breasts, he was tormenting her slowly, redeeming the land inch by inch, and it seemed as though he could go on knowing her forever.

Silence reigned outside. Quiet sheltered the house in this pastoral neighborhood and only breathing and assorted groans rose within the bedroom she had turned into a sealed room, following the precise instructions of the Home Front Command. And as Amir was immersed in his war of liberation, there came the sudden rise and fall of the siren's wail, rising and falling, rising and falling.

Nurit's fears were so compelling that she abruptly pushed him away – before he could perform the final liberating act and bring about an all-clear. She leapt from the bed and rushed to put on her ABC mask, urging him to put on his. As an act of sharing his fate with hers, he did so.

The mask changes the man, Amir thought, eyes following Nurit as she walked over to turn on the television. They were suddenly

creatures from outer space who had landed on a strange, stricken planet.

After a few minutes the all-clear sounded and they tore off the masks and breathed easy. However, Nurit's face was still tense.

'If, heaven forbid, something terrible happens in this country, will you keep me safe?' Her joking tone couldn't hide her fear.

'Keep you safe from what? From whom?'

'Nuuuu – you know. You're just pretending not to understand,' she pleaded – as though he had the answer.

Keen not to create conflict at this moment of togetherness, he blurted, as though casually, 'The Sabbath will keep you safe, Nushnush.'

She didn't laugh but said, affronted, 'Excuse me? What's that?'

'I was just joking,' Amir told her as they sat, embracing and staring at the television screen, watching the live broadcast.

'There has been a hit in the Central Area. There are no injuries,' the Central Command Spokesman reported.

At these reassuring words, they looked at each other and burst out laughing, their eyes filling with tears, and their nostrils with strange and varied smells of rubber.

Translated from Hebrew by Vivian Eden

More about Salman Masalha

Trapeze Artist

Claire Beynon

She drops her pen and watches him move,
his arms a levelling span, spread wide
as wings on either side ...

She takes off her shoes and watches him from her eleventh-floor office window. He has sole ownership of the sky, striding out above the city on a high wire of his own making. Away up there, noise and traffic are of no concern to him. He walks the air on bare feet. Small glands produce the steady length of thread on which he treads. He wears an apron over jeans and a T-shirt. In his pockets, he carries a notebook, an eraser, a cache of soft pencils.

His apron is securely tied, a carefully packed parachute ready to unfurl should he fall. Falling's an inevitable part of treading the high wire. He's careful to erase any evidence of a tumble, transforming the occasional accident into easy, elegant moves. He dances with paper and pencils, after all; he knows about balancing.

When he runs, she can hardly bear to watch. Her heart pounds. Beads of sweat gather on her top lip. But he's magnificent outlined against the blue. She drops her pen and watches him move, his arms a levelling span, spread wide as wings on either side of him. His hands splice the air, keep him steady, part the way. The tightrope he's walking is a clear line, energy pulsing along its length. Taut, yet flexible beneath him, it leads him straight into the wind and safely across to the other side. Sometimes he steps off the wire to perch on the sills and alcoves of old buildings, bending low to peer into rooms through half-closed windows.

People on sidewalks shake their heads, say he ought really to bring himself down, stand squarely on solid ground. He'll come to no good, living like that with his head in the clouds. There are, however, some who envy him. Like her, they watch and are tempted. Like her, they wish they had his ability to tiptoe above the cloud cover. They, too, wish they could glide and somersault, find a shortcut through the fog that swathes the city in the early hours of morning.

The floor is cool beneath her feet. She steps out onto the balcony, climbs the metal stairs to the top floor. She notices him lean to the

right, turn his head and look down to her. Mesmerized, she allows herself to be courted by him. This will not be the first time. She stands in silence. He draws her up with slow gestures and his quiver of graphite pencils. When she reaches out to him, he tosses his head – without warning, knocks her to the ground. He is ruthless, has banished her in the past to vast, featureless spaces where there are no markers by which she can define herself.

On occasions, she tries to outsmart him. She lays herself out before him, intent on tripping him up, but he knows what she's up to.

Most days she watches him from behind the curtains of her eleventh-floor window, observes him inventing and re-inventing himself high above her head in that blank, ordinarily unnoticed space that hovers above the street lamps.

She stands and watches. The undersides of her feet itch.

More about Claire Beynon

It's a Chemistry Thing

Latika Vasil

How does someone so young, who doesn't need to clock in anywhere, live in a penthouse apartment with a sweeping harbour view?

As I walk into the party with my friend Anya, I notice him, an indistinct figure at the back of the room. He's by the bookcase, bending close to the spines, trying to read the titles in the dim light. I'm not sure why but he's caught my eye in the crowded room. Anya joins a small cluster of people near the sofa. I can't hear their conversation but they all seem to be talking and laughing a bit too animatedly, in that party sort of way. I can almost see the conversation suspended over them in cartoon speech bubbles full of exclamation points. Anya gestures at me to come and join her group. I smile and wave back but don't move. I like my vantage point. I pull out a cigarette from my bag and realise I don't have a light, and then, just like in the movies, he's in front of me with a lighter. It's no plastic *Bic* but a flashy designer number. This is too unreal. Perhaps he's under the misapprehension that I'm alone and a wallflower. He's here to rescue me.

It's time to rescue myself. I grab a nearby bottle of wine. 'It's a nice night. Shall we go out into the garden and look at the stars?' I ask him.

'Sure.'

'Sure' is the first thing he has said to me. I run it through my head. *Sure* is an under-appreciated word. I like it. It suggests certainty, decisiveness, confidence and affirmation – all attributes I have aspired to, with little success to date. I decide I like him. I take a sideways look and realise he is younger than I first thought – possibly in his twenties. It's a warm summer night. I've had a bit too much wine – Anya suggested a few pre-party drinks to get us in the mood – and am a little wobbly on my feet. The patio, bathed in the soft reddish glow of Oriental paper lanterns, reminds me of the exterior of a Japanese tea house. It's very still and Zen-like and I feel ever so slightly like a geisha.

'Let's go down there.' I point to a wilder, unlit part of the garden.

'The sky will be darker and we'll see more stars.'

We sit on the grass, which is a little damp, next to an unkempt camellia bush. We've forgotten to bring any wine glasses and have to take turns drinking from the bottle. We look up at the sky and I point out the stars and constellations. I reel off Greek and Latin names – Castor, Pollux, Canopus – like a Classics scholar. I'm not sure he's even listening. He is exceedingly quiet. Usually silence between strangers is even more awkward than first conversation but for some reason we both lie there on our backs, perfectly at peace, staring at the inky sky and neither of us feels compelled to speak.

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Two days later and I'm in Guy's flat. Just before leaving the party I slipped him my phone number.

'Give me a call if you want to do some more star watching,' I said.

Brazen (and horribly corny) I know, but the wine robbed me of any last bit of sense that night. It's late afternoon and we're lying in bed. I stare out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the cerulean harbour and the sharp-edged city skyline and wait for the usual conversation – the exchange of curriculum vitae and back stories – but he doesn't ask me what I do, or what I studied at university, my relationship history, or what music I like. I pretend to reciprocate the lack of interest, although I am more than a little curious to know how someone so young, who doesn't seem to need to clock in anywhere, lives in a penthouse apartment with a sweeping harbour view. He also appears to own a lot of original artworks signed with names that even a determined non-gallery-going person like me recognises. He has everything except an ashtray.

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He brings out a small Japanese rice bowl for me to use. It's bright white with one small blue calligraphic character on the inside, which I study.

'It says 'rice' if you're wondering,' he says.

I'm disappointed. I had expected something less prosaic. At least it doesn't say 'cigarette butt'. I squash out my cigarette in the bowl and light up another immediately.

'I don't usually smoke so much but I'm nervous,' I explain for no particular reason.

'Why are you nervous? You don't strike me as a nervous person,' he says.

'I don't know. It's all just awkward, I guess, not really knowing you or anything about you.'

'Okay. What do you need to know? What can I tell you about myself that would make you feel less awkward? Ask me anything,' he says, as if he's offering me the world.

This feels a bit like a silly game but I go along. I resist the urge to ask him about his finances. That would be way too shallow. I try to think of something throwaway, something that would tell me very little.

'Okay. Do you like your name? It's kind of generic. Like if I was called Girl or Chick or Doll or something.'

He pauses, reflecting for a moment, as if I have asked him something deep and thought-provoking.

'Actually I hate it. I was named after my father, Guy Hamilton.'

The Guy Hamilton, I immediately think to myself. Second on the New Zealand rich list Guy Hamilton. Guy junior is a spoilt rich kid. Suddenly I feel like I know too much, as if I've just joined all the dots and the picture formed is a disappointingly familiar image of a

rabbit rather than the exotic creature I'd been imagining. Guy says nothing more. He just smiles in that impassive way of his.

He phones me a few days later.

'Can you come over to my place? I've got something to ask you,' he says.

It's eight in the morning.

'I've got work,' I say. I'm late and multi-tasking already, talking on the speaker-phone, slipping on my boots, and eating a piece of toast.

'Work.' He stretches out the word as if it is an alien sound on his tongue.

'Is your work important?'

It's a disconcerting question. I could simply answer it directly: important versus unimportant – yes or no? Alternatively I could have a ten-minute rant on the sociology of work. I settle for the simple approach.

'Well, no, my work isn't particularly important in the big scheme of things. It might inconvenience a couple of people if I'm not there today, but the world won't collapse.'

'Great. Take a day off. See you at my place in an hour.'

Two hours later I'm in the lobby of his building, pressing on his intercom buzzer and wondering what I'm doing. Upstairs I look around the apartment, more carefully this time, looking for clues into the mind of Guy Hamilton junior but there is nothing; none of the revealing personal detritus that most of us surround ourselves with – photographs, books, DVDs. There are many beautiful objects – the bright Rothko-like abstract paintings, the Buddhist sculptures – but everything is too artfully placed, too clinical, like in a photo shoot

for a glossy magazine. As we drink coffee – naturally he has an Italian espresso machine – he asks me his question.

'Do you have a current passport?'

'I think so.' I'm trying to remember when I last had it updated and feeling a little apprehensive about what he might say next.

'Why?' I ask.

'I'm going to Japan on Wednesday for a while. Come with me.'

I don't have an answer but I do have lots of questions, and sentences that begin with 'but' running through my head. I focus on one word.

'Wednesday – you mean like forty-eight hours from now?'

He nods.

I reel off some logistical questions of the 'where, when, why, and how' variety but he simply shrugs them off.

'Details, details, we can sort those out. Just decide whether you're in or out,' he says casually as if asking me to decide whether I'm up for a game of tennis on Saturday afternoon.

I reframe the conversation. 'You hardly know me. You don't even know what type of music I listen to.' Saying it, I'm not sure this isn't the least important thing to know about a travelling companion.

'You keep on saying stuff like that! What does it matter?' He sounds exasperated. 'If I had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things 'you', how would that change anything or make things better? Isn't it a chemistry thing?'

Later I'm home sitting in front of my laptop. *A chemistry thing*, Guy said. I google 'chemistry'.

Chemistry is the study of the interactions of chemical substances that are made of atoms or of subatomic particles: protons, electrons and neutrons.

A chemical reaction is the transformation of some substances into one or more other substances. These reactions can be shown as chemical equations.

I read these definitions several times, thinking that somewhere in and in between these words lies my answer. I think of what happens when people meet – of our emotional atoms or whatever, our protons, electrons, and neutrons adding and subtracting, reacting and transforming, as our energies swirl and collide. I like the clunky oddness of the words – interaction, transformation, reaction – but I'm none the wiser. Chemistry was always my worst subject at school. I could never quite understand what changes I was trying to see when chemical *x* was added to chemical *y* and heated over the blue butane flame of the Bunsen burner. I could never quite see the point.

My head is spinning with possibilities, endless permutations of scenarios straight out of the movies, involving me going off into the Japanese sunset. I picture us sitting in a shinkansen train staring out at a perfectly shaped, snow-capped Mount Fuji. I imagine us both kneeling at a low table in a Kyoto teahouse eating braised tofu and drinking green tea. Later we stroll along the river, stopping to take a photograph of a rare geisha in full make-up and traditional kimono. We are arm in arm at night in the crowded streets of Ginza, our faces lit by excitement and by the multi-coloured neon screens on the buildings. We duck into a karaoke bar where we drink electric blue cocktails and sing songs from the seventies and eighties. The Japanese kids in their dyed hair and beyond trendy clothes clap and cheer. It's an impressive scene – the lighting, the set design, the

cinematography all perfection. Only, me and Guy seem to have morphed into Scarlett Johansson and Bill Murray.

I also visualise myself sitting at my work station in the office, doing my going-nowhere office job, headphones on to drown out the nasal droning of Leanne, who seems to be permanently attached to a phone receiver. Both sets of imagery are disquieting – one too unreal and the other all too real – and I suddenly feel the urge to choose anything but either of the options facing me.

I google Guy Hamilton. Mr New Zealand Rich List Guy Hamilton pops up. I learn that with the recession Guy Hamilton's fortunes have taken a turn south. He is now fifth on the list. I also learn that Guy senior has been married twice. There are pictures. The first wife – a brittle-looking blonde – now lives in Perth with her latest husband. The second wife looks like the brittle blonde probably did twenty years ago and runs a boutique PR company. Why do rich people never fail to live up to the clichés? The most interesting fact of all is that Guy has two daughters from his first marriage, no son. No Guy Hamilton junior. I suddenly laugh aloud – something I rarely do when alone. I'm finding this side-splittingly funny and I feel the urge to tell someone. I pick up the phone to call Anya and then realise that Anya knows nothing about me and Guy. Nobody I know does. It's a private joke.

A few hours later I'm sitting at the breakfast bar, smoking a cigarette and sipping a cup of green tea. I watch the rain cascade down the kitchen windows. Everything outside looks blurred and distorted; the outlines of trees, fences and lampposts are zigzagged and fuzzy. My mind feels cluttered and empty at the same time, like a neat house with hidden depths of mess: old magazines and newspapers stockpiled under the chairs and sofas, cupboards bursting with clothes and boxes of unsorted this and that. I run my finger along the windowsill. It comes away a little damp but clean. I look around the kitchen, at the shiny stainless steel appliances. Everything is

impeccably clean – a testament to someone who has too much time on her hands.

I hear the ping of my mobile. It's a text from Guy. *BuyiN tkts 2day. RU n?* I love the brevity of texts – the way they force you to the heart of the matter. If only all communication was like that. I think back to the first conversation I had with Guy at the party. Am I in? I hit reply and type in my response. I keep it brief – a single word seems to say it all.

Ladies of the Lake

Brenda Sue Cowley

'You're older than the water you're about to shake hands with, girl.'

Mildred and Harriet rocked back and forth, back and forth, on the cracked and peeling porch of the little house on the corner by the lake. Squeak-squeak went the chairs, but the ladies no longer heard the sound. After so many years, it was no more distracting than a breeze. This cold Fall morning, they had been going on about something of great importance to do with an egg yolk, when Mildred turned in her chair, a new idea wiggling through her mind like a mouse looking for cheese in a maze.

'Ought to go swimmin', Har.' Mildred was looking at the water with a gleam in her eyes of pure excitement. 'Ought to give ourselves a chill.'

Harriet followed Mildred's gaze.

'Don't swim, Mil. Never did. Ma thought it'd give us the crabs.'

Mildred cackled. 'The crabs! Funny ol' woman, your ma.'

Mildred and Harriet sat silent a moment, then Harriet spat her tobacco into a can. 'Might as well teach me, Mil. Not likely I'll get any younger.'

'You're older than the water you're about to shake hands with, girl. Come on, let's freeze these old bones. See if we can't put a skip in our steps.'

They threw off their rugs and hauled one another up. The chairs kept on rocking as, hand in hand, Mildred and Harriet went down the porch steps until their arthritic feet met the frozen dirt below.

'Might be slippery,' Harriet said.

'Sure to be,' Mildred replied.

It was about thirty yards to the water, and the women took their time along the tiny path. They commented on a little rock that was new to the area, they were sure, and they poked among a bush or two,

looking for missing children. They chatted about porridge oats and who might come for dinner, though the dinner guests had stopped coming close to a decade ago. Pausing to breathe at a tree, Harriet prodded at the bark with a crooked, spotted finger.

'See it?' she said.

'You ol' bat,' Mildred said. 'You've been pointin' at it for years. It's gone, as sure as he is.'

Harriet squinted and pressed at the shape she knew to be carved here: a heart with an arrow ripping through it, and the initials J.D. The old tree was barely holding onto its bark, let alone the scrawlings of a man in love. Harriet was silent a moment, remembering how he kissed her right on this spot. She could no longer see his handsome face in her mind's eye. She was like the tree; it was hard enough work just to get clothed in the morning – there was little energy left for summoning the details of the past.

'Come on, Cookie,' Mildred said. 'Sun'll be up before we unlace our shoes.'

Harriet left the tree but went on pointing out things that caught her eye.

Mildred took an interest, and sometimes bent for a closer look. She bent as far as she could to show off her limber body. She could turn her neck a good way to left and right, and when she bent right over, every once in a while, on a very warm day, she could touch her shins.

'You old show-off,' Harriet said.

The women took hands as they approached the water. The chill coming off of it made it seem as if the lake was blowing on them.

The lake blew its chill on them and the women allowed the cold as they might allow a stranger to talk on a bit long. Very close to the water, the ground was soggy and green, and they crept even slower,

for the purposes of safety.

Mildred spotted a fine, large rock, and they began to remove their sweaters and stockings and scarves and whatnots, folding and placing them neatly on the cold, dry surface. It took a while.

Naked as the day they were born, bodies bent and flapping, the two women edged their feet into the icy water.

‘Time I learned what it’s all about, right?’ Harriet said.

‘Time we both learned.’

Mildred and Harriet joined hands again and walked into the lake.

More about Brenda Sue Cowley

Carol, Unplugged

Linda Niccol

Like a kitten, Carol bats the air with her hands, as if the word she is trying to find is dangling there, just out of her reach ...

Frank gets into the car, turns the key in the ignition and backs down the drive. A warning prickles the back of his neck. *Don't take the train.* But it's only one stop, a pleasant little outing for Carol – a change of scene. Going in the car wouldn't be the same.

Carol is waiting at reception. Her straw hat is held on with white elastic under her chin. It contrasts sharply with her black leather jacket. He also notices her thick white ankle socks are at odds with her sling-back shoes. When she sees him, she beams, and takes an unsteady step forward, eager to be out of there. The caregiver, Denise, reaches for her arm.

'Ow!' Carol, grimaces and shakes her off. Denise smiles benignly over her head.

'What have you been up to?' Carol asks Frank.

'Oh just the usual, work and stuff.'

'He was in the paper this week,' says Denise.

'Wow.' Carol's eyes are wide behind the lenses of her glasses.

'The hero of the Housing Corp …'

'*Housing New Zealand*,' Frank corrects automatically.

Denise rolls her eyes. 'Same thing. Anyway, Carol, your man here came up with a way to join two houses together for a big Island family.'

Carol looks at him with wonder, as though he's a magician.

'Wow,' she says again.

He wonders what she is visualizing. 'Wow' is one of her standard responses to almost anything now – it's easy to say and it does cover all sorts of situations.

Denise leads Carol towards the car.

‘You have to wonder why they have so many children, don’t you?’

He knows better than to be drawn in. ‘It’s not just one family, it’s the extended one. That’s how they live. It’s part of their culture. We have to acknowledge that.’

‘Really?’ Carol’s expression is of absolute amazement.

Denise smiles grimly.

Carol insists on opening the door herself and Frank waits, holding his breath, as she manoeuvres into the car by gripping the door-frame and lowering her body onto the seat. Frank almost applauds.

Carol hums tunelessly as she pulls on the seat belt, making several attempts to insert the clip into the buckle. Beside her now, he waits until it clicks into place. As he starts the car, his scalp tightens again. The car fills with Carol’s sour odour – tobacco and clothes that haven’t been properly aired. Wondering why she isn’t wearing the perfume he bought her, he makes a mental note to check the drawers in her night table when he takes her back. He turns the car stereo on. Iggy Pop’s ‘Lust for Life’ throbs out of the speakers. Carol looks at him, thrilled; she never fails to recognize music, especially the stuff they played when they were first together. Was it the number of times she heard those songs that made them stick in her mind? Or perhaps the brain is more receptive when a person is in love.

At the station he parks as near to the platform as possible.

They board the train. It’s crowded; there are no spare seats next to each other, and so they sit opposite in aisle seats. Carol gives the ticket collector a big flirtatious grin as he clips her ticket and hands it back. For a few seconds, the old, gorgeous Carol is superimposed on her features. Then she is gone again, a light switched off.

Frank looks out the window, glad he is facing the right direction. The train pulls out of the station. The sudden motion makes Carol tilt forward, slipping on the upholstery. She looks nervous.

‘It’s okay,’ Frank says. ‘You’ll be fine once we get going.’

The train picks up speed and moves along to an even rhythm.

‘So what have you been up to?’ Carol asks him again.

He gives her the same answer as before, but elaborates on the work part of it. She responds with an upward tilt of her chin and a sad smile.

‘That’s great. I wish I was doing … you know …’

Like a kitten, Carol bats the air with her hands, as if the word she is trying to find is dangling there, just out of reach, on a twisted piece of paper tied to a string.

Frank feels his expression turn to one of mock inquiry, eyes wide, eyebrows raised – waiting for her to finish her sentence. It’s a cruel game. He doesn’t know why he does it. He hopes that, just once, she’ll catch the word. He spells it out under his breath.

‘W-o-r-k.’

It came before everything else – marriage, children, family and, often, him. For four years, she was a one-woman dynamo, running the largest telecommunications company in the country. She was the powerful strategist, the implementer of technology, meeting and greeting all over the globe. Among the first signs that something was wrong were the calls from cab drivers and waiters to say they’d found her cell phone, before she even realized it was missing. Then it wasn’t just forgetting things, it was the way her brain rerouted day-to-day activities – like one of her own call centres running amok.

He came home one evening, a short time after she’d been asked to resign, to find her plunging the vacuum cleaner brush into a bucket of soapy water as she attempted to wash the floor. Luckily she’d forgotten to plug it in.

Frank can’t help narrowing his eyes as he contemplates the husk of

Carol, the battered straw hat covering her head, the inside of which is full of holes. Her once lithe, responsive body is stiff and bloated from steroids.

He looks away.

Out the window, flax and marsh blur to a green and brown smudge edged with the iridescent light of the sea on the horizon. Frank closes his eyes and goes with the rhythmic clack of the wheels on the tracks. He is on the Northern Line coming in to Euston Station. He is meeting Carol. They have been separated for the first time since they met, only for a week, but it seems an eternity. He sees her first. She shines out of the crowd, the light reflecting off her short, bleached hair. Then she lifts her head and the light beams from her face. She is running down the platform towards him. Her body collides with his and she jumps into his open arms, wraps her legs around his hips and kisses him. They fit together perfectly.

'What have you been doing for the last six days, nineteen hours and twenty-four minutes?' she asks.

'Waiting to get back to you.'

The train slows at the station. For a moment he has the sensation they haven't quite stopped, that the building is moving. There's a name for this feeling, but he can't recall it. Does that mean he's losing his memory, too – an early warning of something more sinister? He only has to spend a short time in Carol's company to suspect he's taken on some of the physical characteristics of her illness and it unnerves him, even though he knows it can't possibly be contagious.

'This is our stop.' Frank stands and holds out his hand to her. She doesn't react. 'We're getting off here, Carol.'

'Don't rush me,' she says testily, shoving his hand away.

So she's going to be difficult. He doesn't need this.

‘We have to get off, the train won’t wait.’ The muscles of his face form a rictus of a smile for the benefit of the other passengers.

Carol sighs and gets up.

They walk down the platform. The station is quite a way from the crossing to the village. Carol drops his arm and fumbles in her bag.

‘What is it?’ he asks.

‘I want … you know a …’ Her hands tremble in the air, trying to draw a shape, trace the action of the word, which he knows full well is *cigarette*. He waits as she fumbles again, this time locating the packet of Holidays, the cheapest and possibly the most lethal cigarettes on the market. The rest home purchases them for her; he can’t bring himself to, even though smoking is the least of her health issues.

‘Can’t you wait till we get to the cafe?’ He tries and fails to keep his voice even.

‘No. Sorry,’ she says with sarcasm, her face twisting into a sneer.

Frank tries to take her arm again and she pushes him away. He turns and looks down the track. The exit to the street is a distance from the platform; the most direct way is across the tracks.

He steps over the first and the second, then on over the chunks of gravel. The crossing bells begin to ring. He turns, expecting Carol to be just behind him. She is still on the tracks. With a cigarette in her mouth, she sways, rummaging in her bag again, no doubt for her lighter.

The train is not in sight but the ground grumbles underfoot.

Carol tilts and falls. Her bag hits the ground and explodes like a small bomb.

Frank runs back and tries to pull her up, but her body is a dead weight and her feet are hooked over the far edge of the tracks.

Although slowing, the train bears down on them like a merciless beast.

‘Ow,’ says Carol.

Frank grabs her under the arms and flings her, tossing her free of the tracks just as the train hurtles past. It squeals to a halt on sharp, shiny wheels.

A guard jumps down and runs towards them.

‘Didn’t you hear the fuckin’ bells?’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘My wife’s … disabled. She fell.’

Carol stands, her legs grazed, hat askew. The contents of her bag shrapnel on the gravel.

‘Ow,’ she says. ‘Ow, ow, ow.’ Her hand is shaking.

The guard regards them with disdain. The story obviously doesn’t add up.

‘I could report you,’ he says. ‘But I won’t.’

‘Thanks very much. I’m really sorry. It won’t happen again,’ Frank hears himself whine.

‘Yeah, yeah. Cross at the crossing next time, if you don’t mind.’ The guard’s voice is scornful. ‘It’s a twenty thousand buck fine, you know.’ He is grabbing the guard rail and swinging back on the train.

Frank puts an arm around Carol. He pushes his sunglasses up onto his head. He hugs her. She whimpers. A tall Maori woman appears and supports Carol, while Frank drops to his knees and gathers up her stuff – foil-wrapped sweets, cigarettes, a broken comb, an incontinence pad.

Carol’s legs are at eye level. Sturdy, hairy and pale. He imagines them severed – the possibility of a quick, merciful, euthanasia. He gets to his feet with her handbag. The other woman looks at him.

They hold each other's gaze a moment. Does he imagine the flash of contempt, followed by pity? She tightens her arm around Carol, who looks up at her and smiles sweetly.

'You look after her, eh?' says the woman, releasing her grip.

Frank nods and takes Carol's hand; in sickness and in health.

They pass the pub, the windows of which look onto the station. A couple of punters come out onto the footpath and watch them as they shuffle past. Frank pulls his sunglasses back over his eyes; perspiration trickles down under his arms.

The cafe is in the shell of an old house. They enter and sit at a table, which jiggles as Frank rests his elbows on it. Carol looks around expectantly. He gets up and fetches menus. The table wobbles again. Tearing a page out of the newspaper left on one of the chairs, Frank folds it and wedges it under one of the legs. Testing its balance with the flat of his hands, he is inordinately pleased when it does not give. When Frank opens the menu he feels a little rush of saliva. The food is surprisingly sophisticated for this small town: prawns in tempura batter; salmon carpaccio and coconut bread. Carol squints as she makes a pretence of reading. She clings to these small rituals as she would a life raft, which in a way they are. Frank leans over and takes her glasses off. The lenses are coated with oily finger marks.

'It's a wonder you can see anything, Carol.'

Carol smiles sadly and shrugs.

'Shall I go and wash them?'

In the bathroom Frank runs warm water over the glasses, and soaps the lenses. He dries them carefully on a paper towel and lays them on the side of the basin. He sees himself in the mirror and realizes he's still got his own sunglasses on. He takes them off and rubs at the sweaty indentations on either side of his nose.

Back in the cafe, the harassed owner is rushing around taking the orders, serving and diving into the kitchen every so often to cook; the food will obviously take some time. A couple sitting opposite give up and leave just as their order arrives. The cafe owner stands with the plates in his hands as they file past him.

‘Couldn’t wait any longer, sorry,’ the woman mutters, and the man stares straight ahead.

Unfortunately, neither dish is one he and Carol have ordered, so the owner takes them back to the kitchen. There is a loud crash and a curse, which startles Carol.

‘What?’ she says, her eyes frightened.

An explanation of what has just happened seems too hard. Frank helps her outside for a cigarette.

‘So what have you been up to?’ she asks, smiling at him with genuine interest as Frank guides the lighter to the tip of the cigarette in her shaking hand.

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It seems like days, not hours, later when Franks turns the car key in the ignition. The stereo blasts on. Iggy Pop’s energy grates on his nerves, so he switches to the radio. Neil Young sings about a junkie and a setting sun in his tremulous tenor – a voice that’s always sounded old. Carol smiles and sways in time.

The song ends as they approach the railway crossing near the rest home. Warning lights burst into jangling red on the striped poles. Frank glances over at Carol; she’s gazing out the side window, oblivious. His armpits sting with sweat and he begins to shake. His first impulse is to shut his eyes, put his foot down and keep on going – anything to get away from the pulsing red and the strident chime of the bells. But when he closes his eyes, he sees Carol lying on the

tracks. He slams on the brakes, his blood ringing in his ears in time with the bells as the barrier drops in front of them.

In the seconds of quiet before the train arrives, the announcer says Young is playing unplugged. No electricity, no back-up musicians, just a voice and an acoustic guitar. Young does superbly with these basics. His raw voice fills the car again. The song is poetry: burned out basements, Mother Nature, dreams and chosen ones. Carol sings a line. Frank joins in. When the train thunders across in front of them, they stop singing.

‘Wow,’ Carol says.

More about Linda Niccol

Author bios

Alex Epstein was born in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) in 1971 and moved to Israel when he was eight years old. He is the author of four collections of short stories and three novels; his work has been translated into English, French, Spanish, Russian, Greek, Dutch, Croatian, and Italian. In 2003 he was awarded Israel's Prime Minister's Prize for Literature. In 2007 he participated in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. In 2010 he was writer in residence at the University of Denver. He lives in Tel Aviv.

Alex's four love stories are excerpted from *Blue Has No South*, 2010. That and *Lunar Savings Time*, 2011 — both collections of his short-short stories — are available in English from publisher Clockroot Books.

Angelo R. Lacuesta has received numerous national awards for his fiction. He has also received two National Book Awards from the Manila Critics Circle and has been finalist for a third. He is among the most widely anthologized Filipino writers of his generation. Among numerous literary grants and fellowships he has received, his most recent has been a fellowship at the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. He was literary editor at the Philippines Free Press for four years and has been a guest editor, editor-at-large and contributing writer for several magazines and online publications.

Brenda Sue Cowley has lived and worked in Salt Lake City, Utah, since 1991. Originally from Portland, Oregon, she has spent her Utah years working professionally as an actor, a freelance writer, and is currently operating a small business in the Upper Avenues of the Salt Lake Valley. Her musical, *Shear Luck* (book and lyrics by Brenda, score by Kevin Mathie), received its World Premier at the Grand Theatre in Salt Lake City in the spring of 2006. Brenda holds a bachelor's degree in English literature from Northwest Nazarene University.

Bryan Walpert is the author of the short story collection *Ephraim's Eyes* (Pewter Rose Press), which was named a Best Book of 2010 and from which 'Earth One, Earth Two' is taken. He is also the author of the poetry collections *Etymology* (Cinnamon Press) and *A History of Glass* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, forthcoming 2011) as well as the monograph *Resistance to Science in Contemporary American Poetry* (Routledge, forthcoming 2011). A winner of the James Wright Poetry Award from the *Mid-American Review*, the NZ Poetry Society International Poetry Competition, and the Royal Society of New Zealand Manhire Award for Creative Science Writing (Fiction), Bryan moved from the U.S. in 2004 to teach in the School of English & Media Studies at Massey University in Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Coral Atkinson was born in Dublin, Ireland. She has worked as a secondary school teacher, an educational journalist and in book publishing. She is a part-time tutor on the Whitireia Polytechnic Diploma in Publishing course and a mentor for the Hagley Writers' Institute.

Coral has had fiction published in New Zealand, Ireland and England and won and been short-listed for a number of short story competitions. In 2005 her first historical novel, *The Love Apple*, appeared and was followed in 2006 by *The Paua Tower* (both Random House NZ). Her picture book, *Magic Eyes: I Spy New Zealand History*, was published by Reed in 2006, and her junior historical novel, *Copper Top*, by Dancing Tuatara in 2009.

Coral co-authored (with Paula Wagemaker) *Recycled People: Forming New Relationships in Mid-Life* (Shoal Bay Press, 2000) and has published various non-fiction articles, essays, and educational texts. Her anthology, *Land Very Fertile: Banks Peninsula in Poetry and Prose*, co-edited with David Gregory, appeared in 2008 with Canterbury University Press.

See also Coral's NZ Book Council profile.

Christos Chrissopoulos (Athens, 1968) is a novelist, essayist and translator. He has authored five novels, most recently *The London Day Of Laura Jackson* (Athens Academy Prize 2008), two volumes of essays and one collection of short stories. Since 1999, he has collaborated with the visual artist Diane Neumaier on several art projects. Christos has been featured in many anthologies of contemporary Greek fiction and writes regularly on literary theory. His work appears in five languages. He has won a number of grants and has been invited to writers' centres in Europe and America. He was an Iowa Fellow in 2007. He is the founder and director of the Dasein International Literary Festival in Athens.

'Less than half a day' was completed in the city of Brussels thanks to a generous Passa Porta residency from the Het Beschrijf organization.

Chris adds: 'To Pen for the ride.'

Pen replies: 'Thanks Chris. It's been fun.'

Claire Beynon is a fulltime artist, writer and independent researcher based in Dunedin, New Zealand. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally and won awards for both her visual art and her poetry and short stories. She recently discovered filmmaking; her first short film *Hidden Depths – Poetry for Science* was selected for screening at the *PolarCINEMA* event in Oslo last year. Since then she has made a handful of short experimental arts films.

Increasingly drawn to global networking and interdisciplinary exchange, Claire has established valued partnerships with scientists, peace activists, filmmakers, musicians and fellow artists and writers around the globe. Her intention is to develop a home-based meeting space for meditation, collaboration and creative exchange.

Antarctica has had her under its spell since her first encounter with the continent in 2005. A second visit in 2008 reinforced an abiding connection to that place.

Simple pleasures include daily walks along the harbour front and feeding the native birds that come to her garden.

Claire also blogs at Icelines.

Craig Cliff's first collection of short stories, *A Man Melting*, won the 2011 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. The *NZ Herald* has described Craig as 'an electrifying new voice on the New Zealand writing scene', and he was named the 'hot writer' for 2011 by the *Sunday Star Times* – something his friends still tease him about. He lives in Wellington and writes a column for *The Dominion Post*.

See also Cliff's blog, This Fluid Thrill, his Facebook or his Twitter page.

Elena Bossi of Buenos Aires is a playwright, fiction writer, essayist, editor and lecturer who has authored several volumes of literary criticism, including *Leer Poesía, Leer la Muerte* (Reading Poetry, Reading Death), and a collection of essays, *Los Otros* (The Others) published by Universidad Nacional del Litoral in 2010. Her book, *Seres Mágicos que habitan en la Argentina* (Magical Beings of Argentina) was published in 2007, and a collection of poetry, *Jirones* (Rags) in 1990. A PhD, she researches and teaches the theory of literary criticism and a course in contemporary Argentinean narrative. She was chosen to attend the Iowa International Writing Programme in 2007.

Her novella *Otro Lugar* (Somewhere Else) was published in 2008, and her play *En los brazos de Alfredo ALcón* (In the Arms of Robert Redford) was selected to represent her province in the National Theatre Festival in Buenos Aires in 2009.

Janis Freegard was born in South Shields in the UK and grew up in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. She writes fiction and poetry and won the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Award in 2001, with her short story, 'Mill', which was published in the *Listener* and first broadcast on Radio NZ National in October that year. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Landfall* (NZ), the *New Zealand Listener*, *Home: New Short Short Stories by New Zealand Writers* (Random House New Zealand), *Takahe* (NZ), *Brittle Star* (UK), *Cadenza* (UK), the *Momaya Press Annual Review* 2009 (UK), and *Harlem River Blues* (Fish Publishing, Ireland). Several of her stories have been broadcast on radio. Her poetry collection, *Kingdom Animalia: the Escapades of Linnaeus*, was published by Auckland University Press in May 2011.

Janis lives in Wellington.

Lawrence K. L. Pun is a fiction writer and cultural critic based in Hong Kong. He has authored four fiction works, namely, *Fort, Da* (2010), *The Lost Land* (2005), *The Book of Sickness and Forgetting* (2001), *The Wounded City* (1998), and a number of non-fiction works on urban cultures and films, such as *New York, On the Road* (2009), *Citiology2* (2007), *Citiology* (2005), *The Panorama of Wong Kar-wai* (2004) and others.

Among his awards are the Hong Kong Youth Literary Award, a Chinese Literature Creative Award, and the 7th Hong Kong Chinese Literary Biennial Award. In 2007, he was awarded 'Distinguished Youth Artist Award (Literary Arts)' by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. He attended the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 2007, and spent a year in New York during 2007-8, supported by the Asian Cultural Council.

In recent years, his works have gained a wider audience in Mainland China, and some have been translated into English, such as *The Lost Land* (US: Heroes & Criminals Press, 2009). For those who know Chinese, you may also visit Lawrence's website.

'What Exactly Did I Lose?' was first published in *Hong Kong Literary Monthly* in 1997 March No. 143 and later collected in *Teaching Kit for Hong Kong Literature* CDRom (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005), *Tale of Three Cities Series - Hong Kong Volume* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi, 2001) and *Anthology of Hong Kong Fictions* 1996-1997 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2000).

Latika Vasil is a Wellington writer. Her short stories have been published in anthologies and journals, including *Bravado*, *Landfall* and *Takahe*, and broadcast on Radio New Zealand National. Her fiction recently appeared in the *International Literary Quarterly: A New Zealand Literary Showcase* (Issue 14), which features the work of 100 New Zealand writers. She is also the co-author of *Asperger Syndrome, Adolescence, and Identity: Looking Beyond the Label*, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers in 2004.

Linda Niccol: Short stories from Linda's collections *The Geometry of Desire*,2005, and *The Temperature of Water*, 2008 (in which 'Carol, Unplugged' appeared), have been well reviewed and anthologized. She won the 2006 Kaos Films British Short Screenplay Competition with *The Handkerchief*. She co-wrote New Zealand's 2007 box office smash *Second-Hand Wedding*. She has directed three short films — *The Poets*, 2008, *The Making of Dead Girl*, 2009 (MovieFest category winner), and *Collision*, 2010. Her script *Looking for Lila Ray* reached the top 25 of the 2010 Kaos Films British Feature Film Screenplay Competition. Linda lives in Raumati with her husband, daughter, and dog. She is currently employed as Marketing and Communications Manager for City Gallery Wellington.

Lyndal Adleigh is the bogus name of another writer represented in this collection. The editor could not choose between that writer's stories so decided to publish both, summoning Lyndal to take authorship, so that the finger of favouritism could not readily be pointed. Lyndal does not yet blog, FB or Twitter.

Maxine Alterio is a short story writer and novelist. She lives in Dunedin. Her first fiction collection, *Live News and Other Stories*, was published in 2005 by Steele Roberts (NZ). A number of her stories have won, or been placed in, national and international competitions. Several have been broadcast on radio. Others have appeared in anthologies such as *Penguin 25 New Fiction* (Penguin Books, NZ, 1998); *Home: New Short Stories by New Zealand Writers* (Random House, NZ, 2005); *Best New Zealand Fiction Volume 3* (Random House, NZ, 2006); and *Myth of the 21st Century* (Reed, NZ, 2006). Maxine's best-selling first novel, *Ribbons of Grace*, was published by Penguin Books (NZ) in 2007. She is also co-author of *Learning through Storytelling in Higher Education* (RoutledgeFalmer, UK and USA). Maxine is currently enrolled in a PhD in Creative Writing at the International Institute of Modern Letters, Victoria University of Wellington, where she is working on her second novel, *Lives We Leave Behind*, and a thesis based on the memoirs of First World War nurses. See also: RoutledgeFalmer (UK & USA) and New Zealand Book Council.

Salman Masalha was born in 1953 in al-Maghar, an Arab town in the Galilee, and has lived in Jerusalem since 1972. He studied at the Hebrew University and holds a Ph.D. in classical Arabic literature, for which he wrote a thesis on mythological aspects of classical Arabic poetry. He taught Arabic language and literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and served as co-editor of the *Concordance of Early Arabic Poetry*.

He writes in both Arabic and Hebrew and publishes translations in both languages. He has published seven volumes of poetry; his articles, columns, poems and translations have appeared in newspapers, journals and anthologies in both Arabic and Hebrew as well as in various other languages. Some of his Arabic and Hebrew poems have been performed to music and recorded by leading Israeli and Palestinian musicians. For his book *Ehad Mikan* (In Place), he was awarded the President's Prize for Hebrew poetry. 'All Clear' was published in Hebrew in *Maariv*, May 7, 2008.

Sue Wootton's awards for fiction include the 2006 Aoraki Literary Festival prize, and selection for the competitive publication *Six Pack 3* (NZ Book Month 2008). She has twice been a runner-up in the BNZ Katherine Mansfield short story competition. Her stories have been broadcast on Radio New Zealand National and published (or forthcoming) in a range of literary journals, including *International Literary Quarterly*. Her children's book, *Cloudcatcher* (Steele Roberts), was published in 2010. She is also the author of two collections of poetry (Steele Roberts), *Hourglass* and *Magnetic South*, with a third collection, *By Birdlight*, to be published in 2011.

'Beyond Pluto' was shortlisted for the 2008 Takahe International Short Story Competition (as 'El Dorado'), and was a finalist in the 2008 Sunday Star Times Short Story Competition.

Sue's work is also profiled at the New Zealand Book Council.

In her early twenties Susannah Poole went to a number of mock weddings to protest the student loan system. She was never a bride, matron of honour or a bridesmaid. Fifteen years later her loan is still large although dwindling. She was a runner-up in the Novice section of the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Awards in 2010 and has had stories published in *Takahe*, *Turbine* and the upcoming edition of *Sport*.

Tania Hershman's first book, *The White Road and Other Stories* (Salt Modern Fiction, 2008), was commended in the 2009 Orange Award for New Writers. Tania is Grand Prize Winner of the 2009 Binnacle Ultra-Short Contest, and European winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Broadcasting Association's Short Story competition. Her stories are published or forthcoming in – among others – *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Elimae*, the *London Magazine*, *Riptide*, *BRAND*, *Dogzplot*, *Eyeshot*, *Electric Velocipede* and *Nature*, and a week of her flash fiction was recently broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Tania is currently writer-in-residence in Bristol University's Science Faculty and has just been awarded an Arts Council England grant to work on a collection of biology-inspired short fiction. She blogs about writing at TaniaWrites.

'Transparent' was first published in the *London Magazine* in 2009. 'Think of Icebergs' was first published in *Litro* in 2009. 'Plaits' was first published in *Creating Reality*, and included in Tania's collection *The White Road and Other Stories* (Salt Modern Fiction, 2008). 'Dangerous Shoes' was published in the *LA Review* in 2009.

Tim Jones is a poet and author of both science fiction and literary fiction who was awarded the NZSA Janet Frame Memorial Award for Literature in 2010. He lives in Wellington. Among his recent books are fantasy novel *Anarya's Secret* (RedBrick, 2007), short story collection *Transported* (Vintage, 2008), and poetry anthology *Voyagers: Science Fiction Poetry from New Zealand* (Interactive Press, 2009), co-edited with Mark Pirie. *Voyagers* won the 'Best Collected Work' category in the 2010 Sir Julius Vogel Awards. Tim's third poetry collection, *Men Briefly Explained*, will be published by Interactive Press in late 2011. For more, see Tim's Amazon author page.

'Said Sheree' was published in Tim's short story collection *Transported*, Vintage, 2008.

Tina Makereti writes fiction and creative non-fiction. Her first collection of short stories, *Once Upon a Time in Aotearoa*, was published in 2010 by Huia Publishers. 'skin and bones' appeared in that collection and in *Huia Short Stories 8*. In 2009 she was the winner of the non-fiction category of the Royal Society Manhire Prize for Creative Science Writing and the Best Short Story in English at the Pikihuia Awards for Maori Writers. She is currently writing a novel inspired by her mixed heritage and Moriori culture as part of a PhD in Creative Writing at Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters. She also teaches Life Writing at Massey University.

Thanks

I'm hugely grateful for the energy and enthusiasm others have brought to *Slightly Peculiar Love Stories*. The twenty writers represented here have been indecently cooperative and responsive to requests and editorial suggestion. There was never any kind of fuss. Splendid. Thank you to each and all. Ongoing thanks to Christine Buess for her immaculate page design, and to Jason Darwin of meBooks who sorts our files into eformats. Three cheers for Sophie Bond who sewed and snipped, painted and fiddled small objects into a groovy cover design, and to Caroline Jackson who worked her magic in the photoshop and elsewhere. Helen Heath has cheerfully wielding the social media equivalent of a megaphone in the fairground, helping writers, Rosa Mira Books, and *Slightly Peculiar Love Stories* alike to raise their online profiles and become visible to the web-browsing, reading world. Web-design maestro Hugh Todd is keeping Rosa Mira Books, the website, elegant, informative, and ticking like a clock.

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Friends and family, for your unstinting support, I embrace you all.

Penelope Todd

Dear Reader,
We hope you've enjoyed this ebook and will recommend it to others, referring them to the Rosa Mira Books website where they can buy their own copy. Please consider the authors, for each of whom Slightly Peculiar Love Stories *represents hours of passionate toil. Each copy sold puts a few coins in their pockets. Each copy passed along to someone else leaves them a touch poorer, besides which it breaks copyright law, and our hearts, just a little.*

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