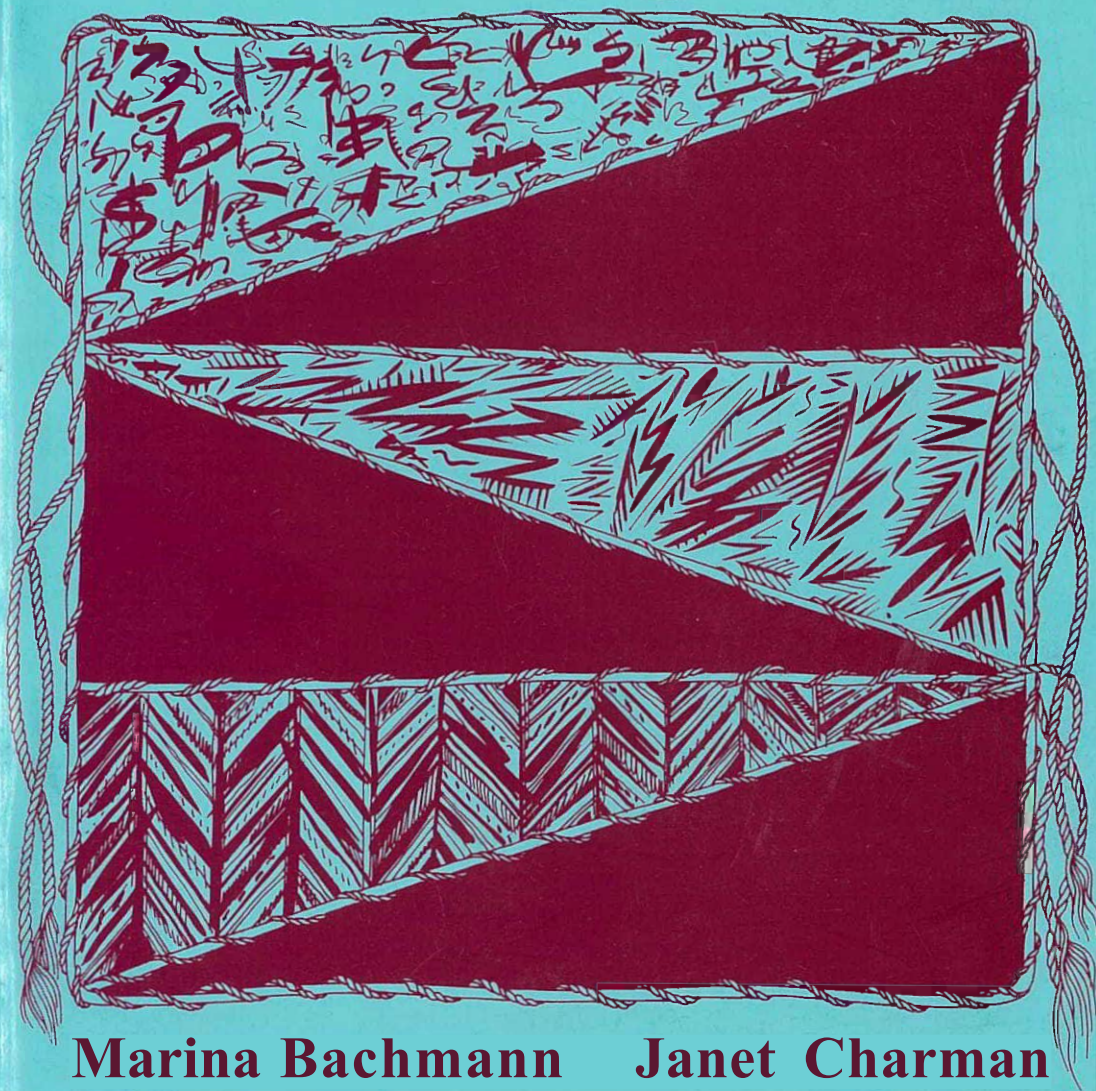


Drawing Together



Marina Bachmann Janet Charman
Sue Fitchett

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SPIRAL is a series of women's writing collectives which publishes *Spiral*, a feminist literary and arts journal (irregularly); and books of poetry, fiction and ideas, on a non-profitmaking basis.

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When I Am Least Afraid

Sue Fitchett

OUT AT PAREMOREMO ON TUESDAYS

I Sally-forth

Le Quattro Stagioni
Vivaldi
translated
through the car stereo
keeps time
with breasted hills
cow nipped
I taste this morning's cud
milk and porridge stirred.

Secure as any castle
 moled in the earth
not hill topped
one solitary battlement beacons
behind its blue glass
a lone figure watches me
limp gunned
the enemy
is within.

I antenna a grounding checklist
bladder / zip
paranoia / smile
approach Aladdin
guardian of 1001 nights.
"Open Sesame"
modern magic is electronic
mechanically my feet
graze the polish
each movement screwed
by eyes

in the walls

Behind
the closing bars
introduce
a fifth season.

II At the Sally-port

Only mothers, wives, daughters,
sisters besiege this

breach with me
mice-snapping metal

all become supplicants to
God's standins at central

about to enter the cage
a sleek ghost pads by

once at a zoo I watched her
turn and turn space-trapped

sometimes at night her captive cry
reaches I do not visit

sweat prickles behind
my knees

I step
in.

III "No Sallys here"

He smiles
"Catholic
I'm the catholic one
my dear."

offer my hand
palm soft
eye-exposed rare
hen's teeth
easy count for the census
no beards elders or
camembert cheese

I walk the
whistle clean
corridors
box slow limbs chests
flash official orange
easy to see
distress signals

"Mea culpa
Father
I confess
I dyed
my tee-shirt."

IV "SALLY TURN THE LIGHT ON"

Something about the quality
of the light
its brightness filtered out
only half there
zebraed on the wall
a secure sign
placing its mark
on faces

(colour sucked
not permanent damage
to the body
can see
strips of blue

('enough to make a sailor
a handkerchief')

flecked
bird splinters
needle-feed colours
into our eyes
still we lick on
hollow-grey hunger.

Exposing the Truth

Trying to talk about truth
over the telephone
was not a good idea
you need to see the eyes
to know.

Across the lines
static mocks

our conversation
counterpoints
thunder shadows
from last night's storm.

Past midnight
she arrived

(alcohol soaked

I
shaken from dreams
resented
this time of pumpkin mice
the rest of the night
morsed
with lightning and her snores.
Amidst this morning's ruin
a dog chews our Kleensak
domestic rubbish scattered
on a wet road.

Truth starved
I search
for scraps
amongst
the debris.

BALLAD OF THE BRICKS (SECOND-HAND)

I

At their site clutter
a task seen
seems easy
to trailer-load two hundred.

Hard-eased
in borrowed gloves I would
as soon give up a smile
as admit defeat
to mortar-chipping men
I dig deep
for the best bricks
graceful on the rubble.

II

Bricks are heavy
heavy
this truism bears
a more casual choice.

GIVE ME A GIRL UNTIL SHE IS SEVEN

Meriel I

She sits drawing houses
straight lines
two windows and
a door
she hesitates
before she curls smoke
from a chimney.

Meriel II

Anarchy
there are marigolds among the vegetables
trees stud the lawn

she raises the spade high
a private crusade
her blows shatter the earth

roots raw in the sun
join renegade marigolds
a pyre of vengeance
gold and green char to black

she stands back
smiles
the right angles return.

III

Day Pickers
becomes
a silent movie
and I
the trapped actor
stumbling
in a haze of grey
to an incomplete finale.

IV

Drizzle down licks
brick dust
from my yellow parka
I
lean
mouth down stretched
against the trailer
meeting muscle softness
of a body moment still
homed.

Meriel III

Hands on head
sit up straight
good
who is the neatest
who is the neatest
rule straight lines
slant your writing
left to right
left to right.

Meriel is an example
aren't you Meriel
she smiles
her desk uncarved
laid with virgin paper,
finely sharpened pencils
prick the air
draw clear right angles
leave no smudge.

Meriel IV

Anarchy
there are marigolds among the vegetables
trees stud the lawn

she raises the spade high
a private crusade
her blows shatter the earth

roots raw in the sun
join renegade marigolds
a pyre of vengeance
gold and green char to black

she stands back
smiles
the right angles return.

Meriel V

wall lines
roof lines
window lines
connect to each other
right angle to right angle
clean / near / straight
the eyes move up down across
there is no other focus
spaces in between arc empty
perpetually
a wind snatches at silence
smoke curls from her unseen fire
burns for no one.

HABITAT

I

Wipers
erase the
wet
slick on
my screen
clock
a passage through
winter's
edge

II

in the hand
of the boy
on the pavement
mild milk
cased in glass
heading home
for a cup of tea
or warmed
 on the stove
sweetener stirred
 (honey
 milo
 whiskey
to coat the throat
punctuate daily
small-talk routines
which skirt spaces
cracks rank weeds
coring the city

III

even under Fowlds Park
a list throw from
my window
sewers run
a woman strolled there
last week
stepped through a hidden
manhole
raped

IV

water washes the leaves
clean
at the periphery
of my vision
unheeded cries for help
run into the gutter
tyres slide
on the greasy surface
squeal.

Western Re-runs

In Henderson

(our western frontier
saddlery and stetsons
break cover on Saturdays

they call them hoons
found together in packs

(not the playing card kind
entertainment is not their line

haunting the highways in the weekends
horns and blurred speed
outlaws
outlined
in a rear vision mirror

(too close

don't shoot
until you see the whites
of their eyes
fortunately they left
their lassos and six guns
at home

today

pass by

vanish into the sunset
leave no trace
of their passage
no dust clouds
no hoof prints
but in the west
men will always be men

(and cowboys don't cry

was it only

the funny clothes
the soft drawls
'git along little doggies'

will

jessie james
billie the kid
and hopyalong
always look better
on celluloid.

seasons greetings from the southern hemisphere

bleached in the sun
bones in the sun
bleached bones in the sun
the blood can be found
high in the branches
dropping down on families
picnicking
white teeth gnash
bird flesh
purple mouths
birth
cherry stones

(beach balls and blue sky

belie

snowlaked cards

on the mantelpiece

at home

uncle's drinking steinlager
brother's drinking d.b. export
father's drinking the rum
aunty mabel bought
the women are sipping just juice
and planning the next meal
children are anywhere
and everywhere
like the sand
hidden in dunes

bodies of the unwanted

(hudson and hall

the cats' kittens

never heard of them

decomposing into
non-nuclear waste

(but there are only

330 shopping days

until next

BEING A MATTER OF DEFINITION

(Waitangi 1984)

The white rabbit may have felt at home
except his fur would have dripped with the heat
waiting.

Inspector Silk says
the march was
not stopped
by the police.

White knight to red queen
or is it white Queen to black Queen
checkmate.

Inspector Silk says
the march was only
technically stopped
to ascertain its intention.

Over the bridge, under the bridge
through the bridge, off
the bridge, past the bridge
the possibilities remain (un)limited.

Inspector Silk says
the march organisers
claimed
the march was peaceful.

The white Queen's man
sat in a house of cards
hatless hoping
his tory would think well of him
no one came.

Inspector Silk says
that he could not
recommend
the whole march be allowed on.

In the nearly deserted gollcourse
a fading smile hung in a tree
neatly stacked rubbish cairns
offered little resistance
to wind-scuffed white knights.

Inspector Silk goes home
to play croquet
with hedgehogs.

The Family Therapist and The Three Bears

Mirror, mirror on the wall

shows
3 bears
seated

(with Joe
arguing about who
broke the chair.
They can't see me
they don't know

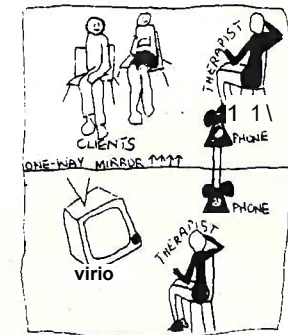
(yet
that we don't believe
in Goldilocks.
My pardner

(smile Joe
that's right
you're on candid video

fields the bears' hugs
deftly side-steps
a hairy one,
"Good one

Joe
we've got a card trick
or two
up our sleeves
ain't we pal."

I see their hand
4 of hearts
can ring Joe
short-distance.
Skinned
they won't have a paw
to stand on,
next week we'll give it to them
straight
NO Goldilocks
and I'll get another chance
to play
fairest of them all.



FAWL7 THFR.APY MAP

If You Didn't Laugh

Marina Bachmann

Dear moon

you look like a pouting lower lip tonight abandoned by the top or even an almost lost in the dark half smile so far so good

I was seven and a great believer the year they landed on you for the first time.

The uncertain blacks and greys of (he T.V. joined the pastel dawn. I snatched quick glances at the screen as i threw on my clothes, nibbled toast passed to me in silence, brushed my teeth and put my school bag on my back. I had to speak to ask mum to zip up my parka — it was always getting stuck. Teachers thought i was a big baby when i asked them to do it up. They were apologetic, sometimes angry 'Why don't your parents get you a new one?', after the struggle. And all morning i'd been hoping for something unexpected to happen; death, disaster, life or even just the swiss cheese they once promised us but everything went disappointingly smoothly. Except for maybe the american drawl that i couldn't quite understand. It had a sort of triumphant, undignified, 'Oh boy, oh boy we did it!' sound to it. I put on my orange regulation scarf so i'd be seen on the road. I didn't get run over until later in the year and dad bought me a pink marzipan pig afterwards because i'd been lucky and hadn't been killed. I walked into the fresh bread as usual morning and rehearsed my 'Did you see it?'s and 'Wasn't it neat?'s but forgot them on the way to school because the world felt just the same.

For weeks i spent hours on the living-room couch suspended in lunar dreams while looking at glossy blue, black, white, gold magazine covers. The astronaut doing his weightless, White, Man on the Moon, Triumph for Mankind walk. And the earth was a hazy, blue floating sphere, lost and small as a beachball. (A man went on television and insisted, in spite of all the evidence, that the earth was Hat but i didn't believe him because dad said he was an idiot.) There were lots of photos of the star-spangled banner planted in the space soil like a lot marker. Did it hurt? An infinite number of stars surrounded it, putting it to shame or giving it something to aim for. Maybe it felt the way american kids did when (hey saluted the Hag in their classrooms. It was such pretty, clean colours against a drab background. I'd stand at the window on clear nights and try to spot the flag amongst the pockmark craters. I got tired of that after a while.

That same year a boy from my class stopped me and my friend outside the school gates. He held out his fist and asked us if we could keep a secret. We nodded. He opened his hand and we stared at the stone treasure shimmering on his palm. He said, 'Me and my dad found it — it comes from a star or maybe even the moon.' We said, 'Really?' half believed him and didn't mention it to anyone. Who knows, it might have been true.

the reassuring thing about planets is that they have a strong determined core that keeps them in orbit

and then of course there's the moon

outside you lay your sad smile on the water say 'look i'm the one who keeps pulling this body through its tides'

Country Relations

Humid late morning

Through the car window nothing much seems to have changed with them. Their farm is still the messiest in the settlement; no trees, few fences. The family stands in a line to meet us looking like a photo from the fifties, not chocolate box material though. We get out of the car, shake hands, kiss cheeks. Uncle gives us his raw, red shake and wide grin, 'Well, you've put on quite a bit of weight since we last saw you, Frank, and you still look like an ironing board, Margaret.'

My parents stiffen, tighten up their smiles. Fortunately he doesn't address me. Beside him my aunt is thin, almost transparent. Her hand is like a clammy fish. I feel tempted to squeeze hard. The oldest boy is leaning against the wall. He's just like his father. None of my friends like him. The two other kids are silent and heavy with big round cheeks and eyes. The only girl, Martha, is about fourteen, the same age as me. We were friends when we were younger and I used to visit more often. Now we look each other up and down. She's awkward, wears flared jeans and a checked shirt. I feel good in my tight, new, city cords.

We arc shown into the house. No advances have been made there either. Still no flush toilet or shower — they are the last ones now and everyone knows it. We walk through the dark hall and into the lounge which is also the youngest boy's bedroom. I sit down on his bed and inspect the bookshelf full of colourful hardbacks. My parents have arranged themselves on the sofa and seem like cardboard cutouts in their European clothes. My mother has crossed her long, smooth legs and is playing with her string of pearls. Uncle conducts the conversation from the most comfortable armchair, the one we'd all looked at but avoided. Aunt sits perched on a chair. She's got a bit of a bird or maybe a hare in her the way she giggles at her husband's harsh, whistling words and then looks round nervously. I have to stop myself from staring at her white, old-fashioned, Sunday shoes. Martha is standing in the doorway. Uncle pipes up again, 'Hadn't you and Martha better go to the kitchen to check on the rabbit?'

My aunt nods, smiles quickly. She gets up and Martha follows her, looking straight ahead.

Her father spreads his legs and lights a cigarette. He raises his voice and tells us what a pest rabbits have been on the land. 'Once they get established there's no stopping them, they destroy all your crops. You have to be hard on them, you have to have a firm hand, the same as with women, eh Frank?'

Dad smiles a non-committal smile. Mum stares out of the window at the broken down windmill.

'We go shooting once or twice a week, me and the boys. We usually get more than we can eat. The one we're having for lunch was a really stubborn little bastard. Walter only managed to wound him but I finally got him.'

Dad went out shooting too when we lived in the country. We have photos of the trophies, thin rabbits in a line. I used to watch while he skinned them, running a knife through the soft fur, exposing the red underneath. It peeled oil as the blade cut the white from the flesh. Then there was only a tiny body and a separate stretch of fur. He often gave me the tail. I'd run it over my cheek with a mixture of horror and delight, my sweet, dead rabbit. We would hang the carcass up outside the front door for a few days then it went to mum.

'There's not many things Gertrude is good at cooking but she's not bad with rabbits. My mother gave her a recipe and as long as she follows that it always seems to turn out okay.'

Mum has tied her necklace into a knot. She smiles vaguely, gets up and goes into the kitchen. I follow her, glad to be moving. All of us females set the table silently while the men talk about hunting.

Hot midday meal

We sit down. I look at my hands while uncle says grace. He finishes and we start to make our way through huge mounds of potatoes and meat. I can't take my eyes off my youngest cousin — he eats so much, so noisily. His father teases him about his manners. 'Now come on son, if we wanted a pig at the table we'd get one in from the yard.'

The boy blushes but keeps eating. My aunt has given herself the smallest serving and looks up from her plate between little nibbles. Uncle says, 'One of the many things my wife just isn't good at is eating.' The corners of her mouth twitch up. She refills his plate. Conversation, knives and forks clunk against the plates. They're not all from the same set. Mine has a gold ring and mum's next to me is covered in blue birds. I finish, put my cutlery down and look out the window. The sky is clouding over. Dad says that it looks like rain. Aunt whispers that they can always do with that. She starts to clear the table. All that's left of the rabbit is a disrupted skeleton. The bones have been picked clean and lie in broken heaps on their own plate.

Dessert is my aunt's speciality. We all know what to expect when she carries out the big, chipped bowl. Yes, it's lemon cream made of sugar, cream, lemon juice and beaten egg whites mixed to a smooth, pale yellow. Mum and dad compliment her. 'Ah, we were hoping we'd get Gertrude's special, we always look forward to it.'

It's the one thing apart from her handshake that she's famous for in the community. She smiles and fills everyone's bowls.

Beaten egg whites make me feel like throwing up. I look down, take a deep breath and start to eat in steady little mouthfuls, feeling the fluffy mixture over my tongue. I try to miss my tastebuds and swallow quickly. Mum is watching me. Slowly I make my way through the lemon cream, relieved to see the bottom of the bowl. Little pink flowers nod their welcome. We've made it. Mum smiles. I sigh.

After lunch

I have to go the toilet. Aunt looks at me apologetically and sends Martha with me. She takes me out the back door along some planks to a wooden shed. The door creaks a little as I swing it open and shut it behind me. It's dark in here. When I can see again I decide not to stay too long. I keep my eye fixed on a spider and try not to breathe too often. When I get out Martha is still waiting for me. She's staring at the fields. We go back into the hall and she shows me a bowl where I can wash my hands. The water has a greyish oil slick on it. I swish my hands round quickly and dry them on a matching grey towel. Now they smell sickly sweetish.

We go to the kitchen to help with the dishes. Uncle is sleeping, dad's reading in the lounge, the two boys have gone out. Mum is sitting at the kitchen table talking. Martha and I dry and stack the dishes on the table ready to be put away. My aunt's pale arms are buried deep in soapy water. She hardly ever looks up and answers questions quietly in her Prussian birthplace accents. Gertrude is mum's cousin. They

came to Uruguay on the same ship after the war and settled here in Mennonite communities to farm. It's been thirty years but most of them still don't speak Spanish. We went to live in Germany a while ago. My parents say it was the best thing they ever did though mum sometimes cries about it when dad's at work. They say that going to Uruguay is like travelling back in time, but we keep coming back for visits.

It's hot in here. Flies buzz in through the torn screens. Aunt apologises. Mum brushes them away, turns to me and says, 'Why don't you get Martha to show you around the farm?'

I look at my cousin. She's like a fish in a bowl, swallowing and blowing out silence. She walks out the door. I follow her.

We used to spend all our time together outside. We laughed and giggled high in the hay carts and looked for eggs in the barn. That was years and years ago. Now we lean over and stare at the pigs. The animals get noisy when they see us and push their way towards the trough. We got told off once for feeding them feathers. We were trying to find out if pigs really did eat everything, didn't realise that they could have choked. They look as if they've forgiven us but this isn't the same lot. Martha swings open the door of a shed. A fluffy, yellow, chirping cloud moves towards the light. We've woken up the chicks. They're getting over-excited. We shut the door again quickly. The hens are hiding in the shade. The oldest boy has taken out the horse, so that's it. We go back inside.

Everyone is worn out by the time we sit down for coffee and plum cake, a rich yellow and purple, 'Country fruit and eggs are so much better than city rubbish'.

My parents look bored and glazed from the heat. Their conversation and smiles are drooping. I can hardly keep my yawns down. They are preparing to go, shuffling about. I feel impatient, almost ready to kill anyone who holds us up any longer. My aunt looks at me, then at Martha and asks in a whisper if maybe I'd like to stay since us girls haven't seen each other for such a long time. I panic and half stammer a polite refusal but my mother jumps in and says, of course I'd be delighted. Could they drop me off in the morning? Fine, Martha can drop me off on her way to school.

The clouds are thick and grey when we wave my parents off. Martha and I go for a walk through the fields. We follow the shallow, brown river. Something has poisoned the fish. They are floating with their silver stomachs up. Shiny nutrias slip into the water when they see us. I try to think of something to say and ask her what she's going to do when she leaves school. She answers with a version of her mother's voice that she might do a secretarial or business course in Montevideo. She's not really sure, something will turn up. I tell her a bit about Germany, ask if she wants to go there. She says no, why should she? This is her home.

We sit down under some eucalyptus trees. Here the air is scented and heavy. It reminds me of being forced under blankets with a steamy bowl as a child. I crush the leaves and sniff them. It's like breathing in love. Insects are humming through the hot afternoon. A rabbit starts up before us and disappears with a bobbing white tail. Martha is dreamily chewing grass. Her eyes are wide and blue in her flat, round face. Her hair is straight blond cut to a bob just below her chin. She looks cow eyed, country naive. I ask some more questions, get short replies. So I give up and start to dream myself. My eyes fall shut. It's so humid.

The evening meal

We get back just in time for dinner. Martha didn't have to help because of me.

Everyone is silent during the meal apart from my uncle who occasionally gives us one of his pearls of wisdom, 'I bet you don't often get to eat good food like this, eh girl? You look a bit like a city weed, not big and strong like old work horse Martha. If only she wasn't so damn lazy.'

I look at my plate and don't say that I hate country food. The cheeses and milk taste boiled, the sausages make me feel sick after seeing their relatives in flesh and blood. My uncle slices off big chunks of black pudding, coagulated blood with fatty white lumps. 'Here you are son, that'll get some muscle on you.' He hands it over to the oldest boy who smiles his great, dumb smile. I carefully butter my bread.

Bedtime

We do the dishes again. Then Martha does some homework. After an hour or so we start to get ready for bed. I make another trip out to the toilet, alone this time. I stumble in the dusk but survive. We wash in the bowl. The water has been changed since the last time. Martha lends me a nightie. We hop into bed and leave the light on. It's still quite early. I ask her a few more questions, practising polite conversation. She asks me who we've visited in the settlement. I reel off my list of relatives and think about all the afternoons and evenings I've wasted when people won't switch on the light until you can't see at all. The frogs have started up outside. Aunt comes in to say goodnight. On her way out she flicks the swatch off. We lie quietly in darkness. I feel sweaty and uncomfortable from not having had a shower. Also I'm not used to sharing a bed. Martha is breathing unevenly. She's not asleep yet. I cough. She turns towards me and asks me in a whisper if I like Michael, a boy from one of the families in my list. He's another one of my country cousins — better than most of the boys, at least he can talk about some normal things. I say yes, he's all right but I don't really know him very well. She says she really likes him and he likes her too, he said so. That makes him her boyfriend. He's going to give her a medallion to hang on a chain. Her face is close to mine. Her breath is hot on my cheek and I can feel her blush. She's dreaming of marriage.

I know what she means about Michael because I felt the same way for a minute when he was showing me across the courtyard to my bedroom. There were stars in the sky, his tall body next to mine. Touch crossed my mind like a scene from a movie. I put that out of my thoughts and tell her about a boy I like, sort of making it up. After all it's only fair to exchange one dream for another. She is satisfied and we are friends now that we have swapped secrets in the dark.

There is thunder, lightning, wind. I fall asleep with the rain. Wake up all night. Sticky. Funny dreams.

Morning

The rooster wakes us up. I feel clumsy and tired. It takes me ages to get dressed. We eat breakfast alone. Then Martha gets the bike out. She's a real country girl, can already drive a motor scooter. As she starts up my aunt reassures me that her daughter is a steady driver so I musn't be scared. She kisses me. I hop on and hold on tightly, nervous about the gravel roads that are wet from the rain. Martha shouts back, asking me if I'm ready. I nod and turn towards her mother to waive good-bye. The sun has just hit the front of the house. Aunt is standing in the doorway. She's squinting. Her hand is raised. A shai stab of light comes from one of her fingers. It's her wedding ring. We set off into the morning. The air is still cool. It makes my eyes water.

The Chase

She bursts into my room leaving the door wide open. White light shoots between my eyelids. I try to prise them apart, rubbing away stubborn bits of sleep.

'Wake up Erika, it's ten o'clock. We're late.'

'Uh.'

'I raced over here the minute I woke up!'

She pulls the sheets off me and heaves me up by the arm.

'Come on, we've got to get going.'

She drags me to the bathroom and puts a wet doth in my hand. I run the cold flannel over my face knowing that if I didn't she'd do it for me.

'Hurry up!'

We're on our way back to my bedroom. She throws clothes at me. Yesterday's jeans and sweaty tee-shirt. All in all it's not a good start to the day. I try hard to dress quickly and look at her for the first time. She's got that 'I haven't slept for nights', manic Marion glint in her eyes. Shit, my shirt's got stuck in my zip. She's already at the door. I use brute force and don't mention breakfast.

'You can use uncle's bicycle. I've asked. I managed to borrow one too.'

She rushes outside. I follow. There it is leaning against the wall — my uncle's pride and joy. I call it his world war two bike; huge and brackelcss. I prepare, myself for death and mount the great contraption. In a state of shock I rattle through hens onto the main gravel road after Marion.

I'm jolted into a sort of awake. She's right, it's late. The sun is already lull on die road. From now on it will get hotter by the minute. The roadside trees are dusty — it hasn't rained in months. After a few minutes I'm coated in fine silk. A sudden swarm of parakeets breaks my stupor with sharp green shrieks.

'Hey Marion, slow down! I can't go as fast as you on this thing.'

She yells back without turning round, 'You can catch up on the downhill.' Fine in theory but in practice there aren't very many. She is about live metres ahead of me now. I start pedalling faster.

We left the dance before all the other young people last night. At two o'clock in the morning we were on our way home on foot. Marion muttered under her breath, 'The creep, the bastard, the silly shit . . .' I kept what I hoped would seem like a sympathetic silence while secretly loving the thick sadness of (lie night, the tall, cool trees. Frogs serenaded us. In the end I felt guilty for not suffering too so I agreed to join her this morning. 'I'll come and get you at eight' were her parting words to me.

Ah, the luxury of downslopes. I relax my legs but don't catch up because she's still pedalling furiously. She's scanning the melting road ahead, the brown, cut Helds beside us.

We are chasing her prince, a handsome blue-eyed demi-god (toasted she called him once when she was practising her english on me. I collapsed in a lit of giggles and explained that she meant tanned). He, like most gods, has abandoned her. Last night he succumbed to the temptation of a german hussy who cat tied her great bra-less cleavage into this settlement. 'She's so cheap. How could he fall for anyone like that?' But he did and she saw him (she watched him constantly) rest his head by her (the hussy's) nipple when he was reaching for a drink. 'That's disgusting.' Marion is sure that it's only a temporary infatuation. Last night she said, 'He'll never marry her,'

and then. 'Did you see him pass the ball to me at soccer? He came really close and smiled. \ es I saw. She played so hard in the hour-long game that she became a pulling red hero. He kicked (he ball over to her and gave her one of his charming little smiles. Within a few hours he had been seduced away from the wholesome, the good, and the harmony oi the afternoon had been destroyed. We arc on this mission to rescue him.

She slows down as we go past his place, a red brick farmhouse.

'Shit, I can't see him anywhere!'

All I feel is relief because we're not racing ahead at full speed at the moment. The air is heavy and hot. It dries the sweat on my face the minute it makes its way from the pores. My jeans arc sticking to my legs. My bum and thighs arc itchy and burning; working their way to a bruise. I wonder what this does to a woman's anatomy. Oh no, she's speeding up again.

'Hey Marion, lets swap bikes for a while.'

She's not slowing down, doesn't even look round.

'We haven't got time.'

'I'm really sore, I'm going to have to stop soon even if you don't.'

'We won't go much further. Come on Erika, you know I have to find him.'

'Okay, but not much longer.'

I m angry at her because she won't give me her more modern bike, selfish cow, after all the whole thing was her idea. I know she's angry with me for not having more stamina.

Over the time I have known her she hits dragged me along miles and miles of uneven terrain for her men. We have been in hot pursuit of them at till limes of the day and night. We have wandered through streets in the midday heal, 'No one goes out at this time of the day!' 'Yes, but he might', paraded through squares and cafes at night. She won't let me eat or rest. We have endured sunstroke and starvation on these missions and have always survived. So far we've only had one success and then I had to go back home, sat outside in (he dark while she talked to him.

We are pedalling up to the church now. My stomach has started rumbling quite loudly and I feel queasy. The rest of me is uncomfortable, numb, shaken to pain with the slightest Jolt. We slow down to check out the congregation — these are the first people we have seen. There is a group by the door waiting to go in, a few other people arc standing by the graves. One quick glance tells her that he's not there.

'Where the hell is he? Probably still with that tart.'

She speeds up again. If she had thought dial he might be at morning service we would probably have sat across the aisle from him, pretending to listen to uncle's sermon like little marriageable angels.

Now she is really determined. I can tell from the way she's leaning over the handlebars. She's refusing to let me catch up. I don't have the energy to shout at her anymore. The landscape is dissolving. 'There arc dancing spots before my eyes. My head is thumping. I know about this — these are die first symptoms of sunstroke. I hings are not looking good. I grit my teeth and keep m\ legs moving. We have to turn back soon — I promised I'd be back for lunch.

We have got onto a bumpy, less list'd stretch ol road and have trouble avoiding the pot-holes. Every jolt reminds me that delicate plates bruise easily. Sharp stabs ol pain break the monotony ol dull ache. Ending this mission is going to require some drastic action on my part. I relax my body. Soon, soon I will fall into the gravel, just a matter

of finding the right spot. Done properly it will only mean a lew more bruises. I he grass on my right looks soil gold and inviting. Past that stone. \ up, this is it ... I lean to slide. Relief and panic. I push the bike to the left so it won't land on lop of me. Impact, I enjoy lying down for a few seconds. My body starts coming back. Marion is standing beside me.

'Are you okay?'

I move to test my limbs. Everything leels all right apart from my arm, it s throbbing with a long graze. I stand up, still in one stiff, sore piece.

'Yeah, I'm fine.'

I look at Marion, she's frowning. I realise that it would have been better lor me to have sprained an ankle or wrist, at least that would have given me some dignity. She turns away and sighs with exasperation. I've let her down again.

'Okay, we can go back now.'

I pick up the bike and climb on carefully. In spite of my arm I feel elated and quite enjoy the ride. Marion is still miles ahead of me but at least she's picking the quickest way.

She has stopped at a turn-off. She's wailing for me to catch up. I pedal faster, hall expect her to take off just before I get there but she stays put until I'm beside her.

'You can have my bike now since you ve got a sore arm.'

I've been forgiven. We swap over and ride side by side. I look around and notice the brown summer fields, birds, life. The sky is a humming, hot blue.

'It's exactly the colour of his eyes, isn't it Marion?'

'Yup, and the fields arc toasted like his skin and hair.'

We laugh. My ribs hurt a bit.

A few people pass us on their way back from church. We wave and smile. As we come round a bend I can see my aunt and uncle's house. We were much closer than I thought. I speed up for the sprint home, turn down the drive first. I have trouble walking when I get off the bike — it feels like floating. I concentrate. My aunt welcomes us at the door. She's smiling and still wearing her apron. I'm in time fm lunch.

'Hello girls. Has Marion been showing you around our little settlement, Erika?'

Marion looks at me then starts stroking the dog. I hold my arms behind my back.

'Yes, it was very interesting.'

The dog sneezes — Marion wasn't watching what she was doing and stuck a bit of grass up his nose. Our mouths start twitching then we're giggling so much that my aunt shakes her head and walks back inside. We fall onto the ground, lean against each other shaking with laughter, exhausted and in agony.

Dying

Outside there's (he drip, drip of rain through broken guttering. The wind is sweeping up the trees. Hectic hair. Fingers pointing everywhere. No moon. No stars. I'm alone.

Shift from the window to the saucepan cooling in the kitchen sink. Inside is henna. Women all around the world have used the crushed root to dye their hair and skin for centuries. To be beautiful. Cleopatra rising from a milky bath. A procession of brides walking palms up into marriage. It's lukewarm now, won't burn my scalp anymore. I find a towel, comb. Transport everything away from the crackling fire comfort of the living-room to the one-bar heater in my room. It suits my mood and purpose better. Before the mirror. Now smile, little darling. Curl up your mouth and spread the muddy paste all over your head. That's it.

Yuk, I should have worn gloves like ii says on the packet but it's too late now. They'll probably arrest me for murder tomorrow, carry me away at dawn before the neighbours arc up. Bright light in my eyes, 'What did you do with the brown-haired woman who lived here before you?'

Would I own up?

Half of it has gone down my neck and onto the carpet. On my hands henna smells earthy, half-buried.

The first time I did this was years and years ago. Emily's parents had gone away for once. We'd been planning it for weeks. Giggled furiously throughout the whole procedure. Then settled down in front of the T.V. to watch Miss World with plastic-bags over our heads and a million chocolate bars. Laughed so hard we woke the budgie up. Her father would have had a lit and he did when he got back. But she was used to it. He yelled at wife and daughter ail the time after he'd been drinking, even when I was there. Once, after a party, he grabbed hold of Emily and said, 'You've let your boyfriend screw you again. I can smell it on you, you little slut.' She gave a lot back but not enough and he never remembered the next day.

I had just finished rinsing her long, long hair out, was combing it, wrapping it over my hands when there was a knock at (lie door. Her boyfriend. She rushed back to tell me the good news. I had to stay in the bathroom, couldn't even wash the dye out of mv hair because of their musical pipes. Finished. Grab the towel.

It was funny al first. I could hardly stop myself from screaming with laughter. Then they started giggling and thumping about. I tried not to imagine what they were doing. I sat on the toilet watching the mould grow in the grotty blue bathroom. My head started to feel uncomfortably wet and cold. I looked through the cupboards — all the usual rubbish, old jars, bottles. Altera while all I could hear, even with mv ear pressed against the door, was whispering. She'd been away such a longtime. I began to think that maybe she needed my help but I was too scared of making a fool of myself. Started to cry alter an hour or so. So much that I threw up all the chocolate I'd eaten. Couldn't wash mv lace. Finally the door slammed and she came to rescue me.

Later we joked about ij. Laughed until we cried.

Emily. She was so worried about how she looked. Eight stone of doubts. I found out that she shoved her lingers down her throat religiously. Married now. I never see her.

Well come on, time to get up. Can't sit here all night. Back to the lounge to wait patiently for transformation. It's four hours to midnight. Pumpkin soup's bubbling on the stove. The fire is only just going. I breathe life into it. Sit down with a record playing, book to stare at. Damn, forgot the coffee, the soup.

It's Friday night. Great way to spend it — alone waiting for the henna to take. Turn over pages, look at lines and my mind is still stuck in the same crackly, unclear groove relationship over

and it's not even that exactly. It's never anything exactly, entirely. Somewhere above the clouds the moon is full. Hiding to keep my howling at bay. The paper lampshade's small imitation is enough to get me started. Slow trickle. I have time.

When I woke up this morning jasmine from the bedside table hit me in the left nostril. It was lovely for a second then came the thump of a headache, pounding reminder. Made me want to sink back into amnesia and sleep. But I got up as always. Showered, looked in the mirror, my face the battlefield, ate toast, drank tea. Took a vague ache to work. There under fluorescent lighting I forgot the day, weather — became unreal with itchy eyes and nausea, easy routine and chatter.

I read the paper at morning tea. People dying in unclear black on white. Wars. Picture of a woman crying over her dead child's body. Capturing that misery could win photographic awards. Women raped, beaten. Small. Three lines for a lifetime of pain. A test at Mururoa, another one if the All Blacks tour South Africa.

I felt like an open wound. Forgot proportion. Pooled blood and tears.

And all day there was a lump in my throat. I wanted to tell them, 'Look, I feel terrible. Anne and I have just split up.' But they never wanted to know it existed. They made me honorary normal.

Every time the phone rang it went straight to my stomach. I hall expected it to be her. I knew it wouldn't be of course, didn't even particularly want to speak to her.

I only just made it through the day. Tied my nerves into a messy knot. When J got home I was so relieved and disappointed that there was no one there that I burst into tears. I filled up the bath and surrendered my body to steamy stupor, kept turning on the hot tap and finally got out when the water reached the rim.

I went out for a walk. Warm yellow windows made my heart break. I felt like an orphan staring in at the nuclear family. Dinner-time fission, fusion. It always looks nice when it's cold outside. I cuddled a cat on a wall, 'You're sad too, aren't you pet? Out on a cold night like this.' It purred, then turned its back and went inside.

Well, I've just finished another chapter without reading more than a sentence on each page. Time to put the book down.

Cold water is trickling down my neck.

Things come back sharp and quick.

Just friends out shopping. Suddenly she stopped in the middle of the aisle. Blushed a little. I looked at her side on.

'Listen Charlotte, there's something you should know about me.'

I said, 'Oh yes?' innocently. The delight of the knowledge in me already, reached for the soup packet and read it.

Night. I decided 'this is it'. 'Throw out subtlety — takes too long that way. Pull Paradise on the stereo. Sat down right next to her. We moved towards each other millimetre by millimetre. Touched accidentally, not wanting to risk too much. Then suddenly loll onto the carpet and laughed so much too much.

You don't get ulcers if you swallow your (ears — literally. Read it in the paper. But you do if you repress them.

So there's something good about everything.

Absurd optimism. I don't like you when you sound like mother.

In my room again. A branch scraping at the window. Nail, scratch, scratch.

The window is behind my face in the mirror.

There is a plastic bag over my hair to keep the heat in. Red splotches on my skin.

Who says I'm not beautiful?

'The moon is a white spread of light through a cloud. My halo —

'The glass is cool against my forehead. Sink into the too long night.

Stop here at the glass. It cuts. Broken mirror means bad luck. Twenty years like this, imagine that. My throat is sore, a scream hanging on and wanting out.

Look up. 'That face, that body beside me, there in the photos on the wall. Do I take them down or leave them up?

And it's the gaps that hurt most.

We are still friends.

We said, 'Let's not dramatise this.' Like a Greek chorus. On a beach at night the water washing out. Rangitoto called out solidity, definition

I wanted to touch.

We walked up the concrete steps from our moment of truth, so close but not looking at each other. We kissed out of habit when I hopped out of the car.

'Sec you.'

Haven't seen each other since then.

Pull the corners of your mouth up. This won't go on for ever. Two more days then stop.

My face is cracking. I look demented as a beauty queen about to raise her crown. Miss Universe. Thank you, but it's not mine. They are poisoning the earth under my feet, space beyond my reach.

Back to the fire. More coffee, brandy to soothe the throat. Pretty good. And jasmine, here too, drink it all.

The dock doesn't chime twelve times, just tells you in black digits. Never mind. Float to the bathroom for the final rinse.

Awkward all by yourself but not impossible. Lean over and reach for the cup. Cleopatra, give me your dying hand. There is nothing I can do except hope I won't have to repeat. Not because of Anne, That's something completely different —

relationships never make me feel suicidal too long. And tell me, would Antone have been enough to push you over the edge? You were conquered, your body, your country. It was more the world you were thinking of. Like me.

I'm leaning over the stained white basin. Gritty orange water washes down the drain, more down my neck. Lucky my hair's so short. It's almost clear now. Enough. I reach blindly for a towel, rub my head. There is a brownish stain on the yellow⁷ now. will probably never wash out.

Back to my bedroom. Comb my hair before the mirror. There are still little bits of grit. I glow faintly orange but it's hard to tell what it'll be like when it's dry. And I'm so tired. Exhausted. Eyes swollen. I have to take my body to bed so I can wake up a new woman tomorrow or just the same one with orange highlights

a past

a present

and at least the longing for a future'

Heavy Lifting

Janet Charman

do you know what's best for me

i remember
on afternoon
shift
how i stroked
my own passion
into some old lady's
unsunned
flabby back
concentrating
in the afterdinner
hotwash
on stupefying
the sick old body
into fragile
comfort
with these gentle
insistent
attentions

Dettol

Dettoller

je Dettol
tu Dettol
elle Dettol

nous Dettolons
vous Dettolez
elles Dettolent

Comprenez?

oui

Oui quoi?

oui ma soeur je comprend

je comprend tout a fait

Clayton's Sleep

i remember the year
Clayton Delaney died

on the Firestone Allnighter

this lil song
of Texas mourning
and how we sweeten
sour flesh
with the Country Air

our illegal tranny
drilling
the corridor canyon
as we hump
the easy now cows
across the arroyo

'IT'S RAINING'

Dont. Fight. Us. Mister. Heremaia.
We. Arc. Changing. You.

the first round's finished
i'm overdosing
on the disgraceful (no bell
silence
of the linen chapel
where i restock
my head
on the pure white
altarcloths
how many more
draw sheets
tonight
oh lord
now and al the hour of my death

'If the levee breaks Miss Kitty
ah caint ansuh fo ma men.'

'Do what yuh have to Rafe.'

meanwhile

inside the night worn red tepee
one of my hands
is at liberty
to slip past the white
starch
and cradle my own breast

obeying breakfast

we put the sixth slice
in marmalade rind
thick as lips
doltish
banging the china pot
bittersweet hot tea
up the table
stronger than we're used to
ducking the giggle to the plate
outrage
heard fell out of bed
sluice in flood
that bitch Sonia
I blame the daystaff
i thought
that someone
had told her

daring oblivion
doing and undoing
the eight hour shift
before the sisters' table
where Matron sits
in holy isolation
cutting her crust
sly fatigue
keep it down girls

the wringer burns

in the echoing
eighteen foot stud
porcelain walls
tiny black diamonds
border big bulbous taps
the child eyes that
too hot cold just right water
threading through steam
to the shining trolley
for an elixir i pour in
arm deep stirring speak
take off
winceyette
nightgown
mimi
telfa
hibitane
ticking white ghost
naked shaky wine biscuit
leaning onto me
just longer than necessary
to kick off the fluffy slippers
auntie gave
in
sinking her dogged beauty
in
soak away the will it
hurt
and can both see
the stark secret
dry it
cream
and cover it
willing to believe
that arms grow back

two deaths in one night

in each side room
a body
dropped in the sheets
after long pain
and a look of tense
hectic
between breath
fright

we were going to a rugby party
after work
that night

how we washed their bodies

i took down the cotside
and cut away
the drip
old dressings
and the oxygen mask

Jean said
i'll wash
you hold

i held
the dull blank weight
against warm me

his unknown soldier chin
propped up finally
and we found a bit of carnation
to stick between
his tied together hands

this was just
the first one
across the hall
we started on the other

how we washed his body
had to laugh
in the low light of
sisters
office

sipping tea
waiting for the orderlies
to load their long white parcels away
on cold trolleys

All that shit
I dont know how you girls can
Do it
says the lock forward
brushing his finger into what he hopes is my breast

Come down the beach with us —
we went
two deaths in one night

paranoia

med students
(girl doctors
dont seem so remote
across the candlelight
then in the smoke
he hands me
i see the cunning
little roach clip
is
an artery forcep
no
nurse
goes off
duty
till
the instrument count
is right

sealed section

the room
shocboxed
between
concrete struts i hear the homesister passing
one mirror each
and the prisoner obsessively rearranges
her furniture
so she can't
be seen
in it
the small bed
tried in so many
positions
best barring the door
but
eventually
forced
into the aperture
below the window
between the built in
study desk
and the wall
be still
i say
and read
Thursday says
some
women
use
a hairpin
a handheld
shower
faucett
but i want
to own
this dim finger
taking my time
persuading my body
back into
my mind

social committee

walk back
through the long grass
to the hall

leave the ponga fronds for tomorrow

but take the
hydrangeas
off the stage

carried
on a washing machine
lid

gotta dish them
in the surf
you said

frock got wet

didn't know
let's
lock
up
together

could mean this

taking tea with the midwife

she holds
the big dumb placental meat
cupping the liver grain tissues
to see if they're complete

running her thumb
across the moist cake
speculate

this would make good pâté

if i dont make love with this woman
my heart will break

i lay down
a thread
of red silk
aching
sharp
stroking
over your left leg
folded securely
into the crook
of the indigo

that rock back
receiving the cup
of broken orange pekoe

Chinese lit. 'white down'
a fine black tea
grown in India
Java
and Ceylon

encyclical

he's one of those tight white
sexy priests
with infinitesimally longer sideboards
each time we see him
how he struggles
standing by us touchingly
as we swell into our weddings
telling us
on Christmas day
that baby jesus
would have been aborted
if some monstrous women
had had their way. Hey
father la porte
who do you sec
mother theresa said on TV
girls can be priests
we have innate
spirituality
her card for automatic canonization
just went in the shredder
eh father
i remember you

what we do that matters is this simple

i hate her
for wearing the gauze blouse
in a Moslem country
does she think
her breasts
are so beautiful
we should all worship
then
frantic
heat bleating
i find
there's nowhere lying down enough for me
unasked
she brings
a sopping flannel
silently douses my face in it
and
with her own money
buys
an ice
block
peels
the paper
gives me the raspberry

there's a lot of heavy lifting looking after wimmin

she sent me
with the bowl
of chopped up bread
in milk
to Nana

here Mum made this
will she really
eat
the disgusting
slops

yes

the old lady
takes the gift
in her fierce
resentful
mouth

tell your mother

oh never mind

see the garnet ring i wear?
my mother said

i suppose
you can have
this

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Marina Bachmann is currently travelling in Germany and Uruguay — where she spent her childhood.

"My mother and sister and many of my friends are nurses. These poems are a personal view of the experience we've shared."

Janet Charman

"The professional is personal is political in my life and this is reflected in my writing. Auckland is my home because it's warm and I like to sail."

Sue Fitchett