SEVENTY PERCENT WATER

Jeanette Sheppard

...dazzling in its clever use of language, beautiful imagery, wry humour, and deep understanding of humanity and feeling...

Sophie van Llewyn, author of Bottled Goods

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A flash fiction collection

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For Mum, who gave me words.

For Dad, who gave me a paintbrush.

For John, who gave me time.

Contents

11 The Villagers

12 Winter

13 Seventy Percent Water

14 Honey

16 Out of Sight

17 Rattle and Spin

19 Travel Flash

21 Mirror in the Bird Bath

22 How to Enter Another Galaxy

24 Kindling

25 Domestic Fairy Tale

26 Photo

27 Because of you

28 The Last Time I Visited My Mum

29 Sing

31 Electric Café

Contents cont...

33 Smoke

35 Drawn

36 The Artist

37 Trumpets

39 Spectacle

41 Watermelon

42 I remember the cockerel my father received as a housewarming present

43 Desert Notes

44 Chamfer

45 England, 1971

47 Kelly Loves Traffic Light Jelly

49 The Box

50 How to Draw

52 Delicate

53 Air

The Villagers

They sent him into the forest to gather wood for the fires. After a week, he had not returned.

It was Angharad, his wife, woken from a nightmare, who saw the wooden creature emerge higher than the trees, hands giant twigs spread against the dawn sky. She couldn't see his face beneath the white powdery flesh. She held a flaming torch to the hem of his robe. He couldn't bend to stop her.

The roar and snap of him alerted the villagers. They cheered as he burned. Later, they watched as Angharad lifted her gold band from the cold ash.

Winter

Her red cotton dress flaps in the icy wind as she reaches up to place another piece of dried dung on the sheep-pen stones, adding fuel for winter, while her elder sisters round up the sheep on the hillside. Whistles mix in the wind. Hugging herself warm inside the pen, she watches the red and white dots weaving through the rocks.

Her sisters approach, holding their arms wide to channel the animals through the pen gate. She is nudged and jostled. Living fleeces warm her legs. She touches their heads, pushes them around the circle. Her sisters close the gate, slip the rope over the post leaving her to check the numbers. She counts the flock — she knows them all by their markings. There is one missing — the sheep she reared. She calls to her sisters, but the wind flies in her face.

Seventy Percent Water

He'd told her at night in the sweep of a lighthouse beam, after Storm Angus. As they stood on the rocks looking down on a beach littered with dead starfish, he'd told her he was leaving. Moments before, he'd told her a fact he'd learned at medical school — our bodies are seventy percent water. Always remember that, he'd said.

Months later, she walked into the hospital where he worked. It was her plan to see him again. She didn't need to speak. She saw him at the far end of the sea-green corridor walking towards her. The clank of trolleys, the squeak of wheelchairs, and shoes on vinyl stopped as her head rattled with the clack of pebbles in the lap of the sea and the glitter of starfish. The lighthouse beam swooped across her face. Her lungs crashed against her chest.

Splits in her skin began at her feet. Pools of salted water seeped into the gaps — pushed through her veins to her calves, thighs, hips, waist. She began to swell. The lighthouse flashed again revealing her barnacle-white knuckles either side of her rounded body. She had passed the seventy percent. She was now a hundred percent. Her swollen skin sprouted holes until finally she drained away and merged with the ocean.

In the sea she reformed and swam away from the storm.

Honey

On the way to the museum, Suzi's twin brother tore her glasses from her face. She knew he hated her looking like him even more now that she wore glasses too. Smaller than she had ever been, she trailed behind him, dragging her feet on the dirt path. The teacher had told the two of them to go into the sandstone museum to look at the tapestry and write down in their exercise books the meaning of the imagery.

Under the *No Eating Allowed* sign, Suzi's brother sat on the bench, clicked open his rucksack, took out some bread from his lunchbox, and pushed it into the jar of honey he'd bought at the gift shop. Suzi sat at the other end of the bench. She pushed at her glasses on her nose; the broken arm rubbed the skin around her ear. Through the fractured lenses she looked up at the tapestry — a bear lunged its paw at a beehive nestled in a tree. The bear's black fur had faded, but the swirl of yellow thread in the beehive glowed in the slit of sunlight from the narrow window above her head.

Bees buzzed in Suzi's ear. She looked at her brother, still devouring honey from the jar. She slid along the bench towards him, his eyes now closed as he poured honey into his mouth. Close to her brother, she buzzed into his ear. He pulled back, alarmed at first by the noise, and almost dropped the jar, but formed a grin, then shoved the final chunk of bread and honey into his mouth, sealing his action with a smirk. She buzzed again as he swallowed. He coughed; his face turned red. She pushed her arms under his, lifted him from the bench, wrapped her arms around his middle, and thrust until the bread shot from his mouth. Her brother ran from the museum, calling for the teacher.

Suzi sat on the bench, opened her exercise book, and smiled at the tapestry. In the warmth of the slit from the window something pushed underneath the skin on her back. On the wall opposite, shadows shifted into wings.

Out of Sight

Ailsa stoops under the oak branch, dislodging a clump of snow onto the abandoned truck. An orange shape blurs behind the iced window, dips out of sight. Ailsa steps nearer. The crunch of snow underfoot stops her — she could be in danger. She takes her phone from her coat pocket and taps the emergency button, but she could be wasting police time — this is probably somebody sleeping rough. Who should she phone? Behind the iced window the top half of a hooded face appears. Disappears. A child. Maybe around eleven or twelve. Ailsa steps nearer to the truck.

Thud. Another clump of snow falls from the branches. A door clicks open. The child ducks underneath the low branches and runs into the next field. Ailsa circles around the tree, along the side of the hawthorn hedge, and slips through the gap.

Small footprints lead to the brow of the hill where the orange dot disappears. A gunshot echoes around the fields.

Rattle and Spin

She is in this room. She has white hair. She is in a chair with wheels. Your eyes are meant to see, to hold the world. Go on, hold out your hands. Cut out your sharp tongue. She is not a fool. Don't dress her in clothes that she would never have worn. Dress her in colour and crimson painted nails. Hold her poems in your hand. Hear the chatter of office banter and taste the percolated coffee on the day she moved into her first flat. Lie on the cold pavement where she camped out to buy her first house. Let the wedding bells ring. Drift into blue skies: picnics plump with reds and greens eaten on mown grass; a soundtrack of laughter. Peel the apples caught from autumn trees. Squeeze out the pomegranate seeds — fruit she can't afford. Hear her tears as she snaps her Achilles tendon dancing at a party. Both legs. Rest your pen while she sneaks hidden kisses with her lover under orchard boughs. Touch the disappointment when she discovers her autumn kisses belonged to another woman. Hear the scratch of pen on paper and witness the circle of light as she hides under covers. Feel the prickle of handpicked holly in the wreaths for sale that filled her bedroom every year that she grew. Forget about the test. In fact, don't call it a test. Taste the days when she created soft meringue, scooped watermelon seeds in Australian skies. Even see the roast she can still cook. Go on, sit in her chair. She will pull up a seat, make you laugh until your mouth swells ready to burst. She will offer you flowers, the best she can afford even though you employ her — not the sugar-pink, plastic-wrapped ones she picked up today at the local store when she bought her bread and milk. Bird of Paradise. Anthuriums. Roses. She will hold her arms wide to protect you from the world

even though you have just met. Watch her mop blood from my knees; hold my hand from the aeroplane as we step down on sticky tarmac thousands of miles from frozen skies. Sit among the penguins as they emerge from the warm midnight sea; marvel at the flicks of moonlight on water. Snuggle into the sand. Feel the grains trickle between your toes. See her turn me away from the blooded whales beached at Gunnamatta, wipe the blood-stained air. Don't let her see your bag though. She will lift your bag even though you go to the gym every night; she will tell you it is too heavy for you to carry. If you leave the room her voice will reach across the air and call you back. Don't make her do it. Stay here awhile. I know the pee is strong and she can't remember the words that just came out of her mouth, but I also know you have two minutes to sense more than the rattle and spin.

Travel Flash

I twist around to see Mum slip away from the platform. Most times I catch her. Today I can't — I've just turned my ankle over on the escalator, thanks to my new trainers. I don't call out to her because people will try to stop her and she'll cry. I hobble back through the archway, try to keep up with her grey hair. She steps onto the escalator, chats to a man in a high-vis jacket. These days, she always goes for people who are brightly dressed. Before, she used to say, *people shouldn't make an exhibition of themselves, Stephanie*.

I squeeze through the people on the escalator, with plenty of *excuse mes*, but Mum's soon at the top. Someone says hi to the man in the high-vis, and Mum moves off to talk to one of the attendants. She stares at his bald head as he bends, leaning on his knees to hear what she's saying. He looks all around, unsure whether she's okay to be left alone. I wave my arm at him, point to my chest, and point at Mum, but the last guy on the escalator in front of me is swaying about to his music and wipes my vision. I lose sight of Mum and the attendant.

At the top of the escalator she's nowhere to be seen — she can't have gone through the barrier without a card. I hobble round in circles.

There she is. On the down-escalator. A woman with oversized rings offers me her arm. I take it. We weave down through the lines of people, both of us apologising. Mum's at least heading in the right direction. My ankle feels like it's swollen around my trainers. On the platform Mum's on a bench next to a young woman with a guitar smothered in sunflower stickers. She asks her to play "Take Me Home, Country Roads". The young woman nods. Mum closes

her eyes. The Tube train rumbles near. Mum opens her eyes and scans the platform. She scowls as she sees me limp towards her on the arm of the woman with the oversized rings. She says, *Come on, Stephanie, you're always stopping to chat to people. We could have missed our train.*

Mirror in the Bird Bath

The small, round magnifying mirror from the bedroom almost fell onto the path as she stood it in the bird bath, but she caught it in time. See, she could still do things with her hands despite them being knobbled and bent. She wasn't a fool; it was summer, the water had dried in the bird bath — she wouldn't have put the mirror in with the water. She had dementia, she knew that, but it didn't make her a fool. The bird bath was the obvious place — the new one at physio said you had to adapt to your circumstances. She was doing that. It was too dark to see properly in the bedroom now that the bulb had gone — the bird bath was the same height as her head when she sat on the bench.

She drew the orange lipstick across her narrow lips, enjoying the press of the brand-new lopsided point. She pushed at one side of her bob, pinned it into an asymmetric shape. She wasn't going to put her black-and-white dress on in the garden — she wasn't a fool. She unzipped her washbag, poured her six other lipsticks onto the bench, removed each gold top, unscrewed each one, and placed them in a line beside her, alternating orange and cerise pink. She leant back against the arm of the bench and smiled at her neat row of brand-new lopsided sticks.

How to Enter Another Galaxy

Dial the number you found on the website — the one that took forty-five minutes to find. Wait for someone to pick up. Open your mouth to speak but listen instead to an automated voice tell you how important your call is. Listen to a voice tell you all lines are extremely busy at present, suggest perhaps you'd like to call back later. Listen to electronic music transmitted from another galaxy. Wait for inhabitant to answer phone. Listen as inhabitant with I-wish-I-had-another-job voice introduces himself, asks how you are today, asks what he can do for you. Tell him you are trying to change the date you have booked for someone to visit your ageing mother who keeps falling down. Wait while he informs you he doesn't deal with schedules, asks if you will hold while he speaks to the intergalactic being who does. Drum fingers on your cat's head while you wait. Leap from sofa as cat digs in claws. Pull cat down from Venetian blind one handed and shoulder-juggle phone under your ear. Drop phone on wooden floor. Drop to your knees, scrabble on floor, stretch for phone, shout, *Hello? Hello? Hello?* Listen to electronic music as cat climbs onto your shoulder. Purrs. Wriggle cat from shoulders. Cat-free, lean against kitchen unit; congratulate self on grabbing phone in time. Drop head back. Put phone on speaker. Place phone on kitchen unit. Snatch phone to ear as an alien who sounds like she's eating space-dust crisps makes her verbal entrance. Listen as space-dust-crisp alien tells you she has tried to connect with the intergalactic being who deals with bookings but could only speak to alien colleague number nine who picked up phone. Listen as she says alien colleague number nine thinks you need to speak to the super royal alien

in the purple coat from the remotest galaxy in the universe. Tell her you would be delighted to speak with the super royal alien in the purple coat from the remotest galaxy in the universe. Freeze as space-dust-crisp alien's voice speeds past you, tells you that the super royal alien in the purple coat from the remotest galaxy in the universe is on annual leave for two weeks. Implode.

Kindling

In our mother's bedroom your eyes flare at my menopausal glow. I can hear the matches rattle in the dark sky of your pocket. You strike a match between us as you take out *goodies* from your bag. I watch you, her son, my brother, place *goodies* on her bed — inappropriate goodies because you haven't phoned in months. If you'd called, you'd know nuts make her choke, chocolate makes her vomit. I scan your face for a twitch of eyelid, jerk of lip, a sign of surprise at how thin she is. Nothing. The airflow mattress creaks as she nudges her jagged hips to the edge of the bed. I place her walking frame in front of her, thinking you might help, but you turn and stride towards the lounge. Leave her on the edge. Flames lick at my skin as I help raise her from bed to frame. But I don't want her to witness the crack and spit of her children, so I kindle safer thoughts — I wonder if you remember Bonfire Night when you and I were kids, when we stood hand in hand on the green, the fire warming our faces, toffee apples in our hands, wood smoke in the air, a sky showered with colours. How we fizzed with the thrill of it.

Domestic Fairy Tale

I'm in my parents' kitchen full of my handwritten notes taped to every cupboard door. I perch on my father's perching stool that he can't use because the bathroom is too small. The social worker stands in front of the boiled kettle, the care manager leans against the cooker — her backside alters the time on the digital clock. Numbers flash. There isn't room for three chairs. There isn't room for three chairs in any part of my parents' sheltered bungalow. If we all reached out our arms, our fingertips would knock the tip of each other's nose. The sink gurgles, releasing the smell of the vast quantities of cooking oil my mother has poured down the drain. Fingers move under noses. Next door, a low-volume documentary about nineteenth-century miners keeps my father company as he struggle-rattles the biscuit-tin lid. Outside, the pigeon my mother used to feed coos on the roof. Across from her kitchen my mother lays in her hospital bed, reading over and over the two sheets of A4 I attached to the cupboard doors explaining where she is. I hold a ten-sheet, stapled-together copy of my mother's proposed care plan. As the social worker reads the first page, a family tree sprouts in my chest. I climb along the roots to my mother's room. I attempt to wipe away the tinned tomato soup stains on her glittery white top, the one she put on because she knew people were coming to see her. I caress the sharp bone of her cheek, her fine hairs downy under my fingers. I comb her wisps of white hair. She is the fairy who didn't look like a fairy that we used to have in our Christmas box. The one she never wanted to put on the tree. The green one with a rubbed-away smile. The one I found every year and realigned her wings.

Photo

I find the frameless photo of my dad sitting on a ferry tucked under an empty packet of cheese straws in a drawer by Mum's chair. The edges of the photo are frayed more than last time, rubbed by Mum's restless fingers, tapped and flicked by her no-longer-manicured nails. I take the photo from the drawer, place it on her cabinet beside her, next to the white silk orchids she believes she grew from seeds. She turns her head to the photo, *Hello, where have you been?* She turns to me. *He has a lovely smile, your dad.* I tell her that he does as I take in the scratches along his suntanned face, his blue summer shirt. I used to put the photo back in its frame, but she pulled it out every time — the glass a barrier to reaching my dad, her husband. I used to ask her when the photograph was taken. *Somewhere in Australia? In Adelaide? Maybe,* she would say. I don't ask now because the memory has gone, just like the memory of him dying three days ago has gone. She places the photo on her overbed tray among her packets of melted chocolate biscuits, magazines, and over-watered miniature red roses, then offers Dad some tea. Dad's smile remains. Wide. Silent.

Because of You

After a night in A&E with my mother, I drive her back to the nursing home. Her bed's the same scrunch of sheets as early last night, her magazines on the floor in the same spread that she stood on. The manager says a *cot rail* isn't in my mother's *best interests*, despite her fall. I disagree. This is her third fall. The manager folds her managerial arms, tells me in her text-book jargon that the home can no longer *meet my mother's needs*. I ask her why. She breathes in deeply, her metallic eyes pop, her fake designer folded arms almost touch her chin, and she says, *Because of you*. She means because I argued. As the manager turns to leave, there's a snuffling and scratching near the chest of drawers. At the end of the bed a kangaroo claws at a tangle of TV wires, stops, and raises its snout. A neon-red bean wriggles from the savaged wires, crawls up her belly, climbs inside her pouch. I edge forward to secure a better look as the kangaroo bounds around the foot of the bed, bristles rust-coloured fur in the spill of the worn table lamp, twists, and kicks her ears. A head appears from her pouch. A fully grown joey. A flash of red lunges towards me, pushes me into my mother's beige Easywipe chair. Sits on my chest. Thumps like it will never stop.

The Last Time I Visited My Mum

She'd dismantled all the photographs in her room. Her eyesight was still good enough to bend metal tags, remove wooden backings. She'd lined up the photographs, edges curling and tattered with spilled tea, along the lip of her overbed tray. The one of her husband, my dad, rested against a tub of yellow moisturiser; the one with her best friend against a half-full glass of orange squash; the one of me against her jar with an artificial peony secured in fake water. I sat down opposite her. She smiled, picked up the photograph of me, the one where we have our arms around each other, on the day she revelled in her bouquet of white lilies, told me they were beautiful, told me that she was proud of me. Her fingers clicked the back of the photograph as she held it to my face, said: *Look, it's my daughter!*

Sing

18

Millie lives in the halls at the top of the hill. An old house, converted into rooms. She pushes open the window. In the dark, in her everyday clothes, she leaps from the sill, catches between the bulbs of the seaside lights, swings over a tangle of students, over the unnecessary safety net of the sea. Eyes all on her, she throws a trick, lets go, and somersaults into the sky. She lands near Eva's laughter at the fairground. Eva smiles at her through round-framed glasses before stepping onto the Waltzers.

After studies they wash pans and serve at tables. After hours they sit in booths, look for songs and stories in between the kitchen steam. After work Millie writes a story of their life, spins more-than-friends songs for Eva's ears.

21

Sunlight hits red-stained glass, mottles the stone floor where Millie's best friend stands next to Eva. Millie wraps up her lyrics, throws them away into the clouds.

A pile of blue revision cards on the floor. Curtains drawn. She wants to pick up the cards, but her arms can't lift. Can't make sense of them. There are no smells, no sounds, no taste, no touch, only Eva in the eyelines of her dream.

29

It's eight years, one day, and two hours later when Millie sees Eva sing soprano in the Choir from Scratch. Millie takes up the invitation to go to the café Eva owns with her husband, Millie's one-time best friend. Millie watches Eva's breath steam the windows while her husband goes to the kitchen to take a call. Millie lowers her eyes when she says she never found anyone. She can go to the café any time, now she knows where Eva is. One day, she will ask Eva if she ever wanted something else. In the meantime, she'll go home and dream again that Eva never did.

Electric Café

Ali saw the light on in the café across the street and pulled on her coat.

She pushed the door — locked, but the waiter had seen her, opened the door slightly, and spoke through the narrow gap. He told her he was closing up for the night, but he could make her a coffee, if she liked, before he left. She thought about not bothering but nodded. He opened the door wider, apologised for the lack of heat. He suggested she could sit by the fire, there was still some heat left in it. As she sat, the electric cloud clicked and whirred inside her chest. *Stupid, stupid to come here,* she muttered to herself, when the cloud could have clicked and whirred in private at home. She had no idea why she was here. She couldn't leave now though — that would be rude. The waiter returned with her coffee — the cup clattered on the saucer as he lowered it onto the table. He glanced at her bare hand, suggested she might like to keep her glove on, and apologised again for the cold. She looked down — her hand was shaking. She pulled it away. The waiter returned to the counter. She watched his back as he washed up, then placed her hand on the growing heat inside her chest to force it back inside but, as she pressed, light leaked through the weave of her coat. She turned to face the window, careful not to move her chair for fear of making a noise and drawing attention to herself. In her reflection, the leaked spots of light merged together until the top half of her body became illuminated, her face incandescent. She needed to leave before he noticed, but as she edged herself from her seat, shadows moved on the darkened glass; sycamores were bending. A gust of wind rattled the door and threw it open. The waiter turned. She drew her coat tightly together but she

knew it was pointless — jags of lightning shot from her chest and the room was bathed in light. She fumbled for some coins in her pocket and placed them on the table. As she stood up, the waiter moved towards her. *You can't leave in this. There's an electrical storm brewing,* he said. *Why don't you sit back down and I'll make you another coffee.*

Smoke

The blue light flickered in the shed. The light wasn't supposed to be blue. Not only had Luke bought the wrong bulb at the hardware store, but he also hadn't secured the fitting properly to the ceiling. He sniffed the air — damp logs. In the corner of the shed rain dripped in the gap between the wooden frame and the roof. The top logs were wet and Bronwyn's discarded peach-pink wings were splodged with brown. Luke pushed at the rough plywood ceiling in the spot where he knew it would jolt the wire and stop the flickering. Rushed jobs. Always rushed jobs. Nothing ever done properly. Nothing ever finished. Earlier, after dropping Bronwyn off at his mother's house, Michelle had handed Luke one of her old, white jumpers. *To fix the leak,* she'd said, *when you go up to chop the logs. It will do for now, the sun's back tomorrow*. She threw a pair of tights at him too. *Good catch!* She smiled. *Fix the axe head, while you're at it. I'll do the accounts and be finished by the time you're back*.

Luke pulled out Michelle's jumper from underneath his parka and pushed it in the gap. The slap of dripping rain on the woodpile stopped as the jumper began to soak up the water. Luke ran his tongue over his new, impossibly white teeth. Dentures at thirty-nine; he still couldn't accept that. Michelle joked that at least he wouldn't have to worry about the time spent brushing away the plaque now — all he had to do was drop them in a denture cleanser. She said she was getting used to his new smile, but he knew she wasn't. If life wasn't so rushed he wouldn't have stumbled outside the woodshed two weeks ago. If maybe they had more time for each other. Even the fall hadn't slowed things down. He flinched at the memory of the crack of enamel on stone.

He sat down on the woodpile, pulled out the pair of tights from his coat pocket, and wrapped a cross around the loose axe head. He tested the top of the axe against his knee, checking it for safety. The light began to flicker again. Something clanked to the floor. The light went out. Luke tapped his booted foot around the shed, hoping it would butt up against whatever had fallen. It was no use — his feet weren't sensitive enough in boots. He rummaged in his pocket for the small torch on his keyring and swivelled the top to turn it on. As he ran the dot of light around the shed, it caught the tinsel on the peach-pink wings. He knew Bronwyn had never wanted the wings — she'd ripped them on purpose to make steam come out of Michelle's ears. From the shed window he looked at the house next door — smoke from his new neighbour's chimney puffed into the post-rain sky and drifted towards the stars. He closed the shed door, leaving the logs behind.

The dot of light from the torch guided him down the stone path. He kept his eyes on the ground, not because he didn't want to fall but because he didn't want to look up. He knew the house would be in darkness.

Drawn

His eyes peered through the arm she was sketching. She stopped. The body of the white line figure she had drawn on the inside of the café window distorted his nose, but there could be no mistake. One pupil shaped like a keyhole — for those he allowed close enough.

He mouthed and mimed *drink?* It had been ten months since they had shared the same air space — she could do that after all this time. But he could wait. She was working — she couldn't just stop. She wasn't prepared to stop — she was on a sketching mission, creating passers-by on the café window, one after another, as quickly as she could. She wanted to see how many she could create in twenty minutes. She glanced at the reflection of the red digital clock in the window: twenty-nine seconds to go. She looked for a passer-by, placed her white marker on the window, and began her next sketch, using a single line, from head to foot, and back up again, like she had done with all the others. As her hand moved the marker, she drew a figure with a head tilted to the left — him, his tilt. Twenty-two seconds to go — she started the next figure. Same head, same tilt, so she put a hat on him and gave him a bag. Twelve seconds to go — she knew her next figure would also be him, so she created a skirt. Six seconds to go — she began with a smaller line, but she didn't finish.

The klaxon sounded, the people in the café applauded. She swivelled to smile for the camera and gave the crowd a bow. When she turned back to the window he was gone and the people passed by in a blur.

The Artist

She'd spent all day painting the front door — his arms and legs easily captured, clear in her mind. Household emulsion was the only paint to hand. She swirled herself as a foetal curl in his wide embrace, a self-made Cerulean Blue.

When they'd met they'd laughed together at her paintings and she'd given up, sold her brushes and oils online for £5.

Now that the paint was dry she struck a match. Blue paint leapt from the yellow jaggers. The flames caught his feet, swept along his gripping thighs, moved up his belly, his arms, his legs, his chest, and finally his face. She was burning too. As their embrace darkened, she imagined ways to draw a phoenix with the charcoal.

Trumpets

My arms weren't supposed to be trumpets. I'd wanted my arms to be flab free, to be more finely tuned. There was an option underneath the ad that I didn't see. One slip of the pen was all it took: 'Trumpet Arms — Free Painless Connection'. Declan laughed at first, of course — who wouldn't? I would. And I did. We both did. Declan said it was typical of me — why couldn't my arms turn into an instrument that could bend? Something like an accordion. He said not only had I ended up with trumpets for arms, I couldn't even learn to play a tune on them because the horn was joined to my shoulder. I pointed out that even if it was the other way around, a tune would still be impossible. We were laughing as we rang the Returns Department.

I've had my arms for a week now — I didn't read the small print: *No Returns*. I haven't been out — I told work I have chicken pox. My new arms have made me more childish, it seems.

Declan feeds me, washes, and dresses me, helps me in the bathroom, pulls the duvet over me. He says he doesn't mind. I say we should get some help in. He says he doesn't want that, not yet at least. I know he's embarrassed. He doesn't want people to know I have trumpets for arms.

Night-times are the worst — feeling the cold brass against my sides when I roll over in bed or when, in my sleep, I reach out for Declan, and his *ouch* wakes me.

I sleep in the campervan for the time being, despite Declan's protests. The brass chills my sides, but when I reach out, there isn't an *ouch* anymore. The

first night, I worried about how I would escape if the van broke into flames, until I realised that although I couldn't bend my trumpets I could push up the lock and press down the handle. Declan leaves the hatch in the roof open so that I can see the stars. He lies with me for a while; he can see the stars too, but he isn't watching them.

He's back at work, so between us we've sorted a routine. After he's helped me out of bed, and in the bathroom, and after he's helped me to dress, he leaves soup in a two-handled beaker — I can hook my trumpet arms through these, let them rest against the swirl of the instrument, and hold the beaker to my mouth. His first idea was to attach knives and forks with rubber bands, until I pointed out I wouldn't be able to do anything else with those at the end of my arms. I've worked out ways to do most things when Declan isn't here.

This morning, as he left for work, I saw him glance at my brass arms and swallow a sigh. As he shut the door I could hear music somewhere. When I was sure he'd gone, I pushed up the door lock, pressed down the handle, and followed the sound of the trumpets.

Spectacle

Parade

Siobhan's in the spectacle she planned as a student — a glass, black-framed carriage, pulled by three horses, each with a plume of black feathers. Nate walks at the back. People step from shop doors to see. A man and a woman stand in a supermarket doorway. Under twisted mouths they talk about thirty-nine being no age. A man carrying a book, entering an optician's, thinks he recognises Nate from a play a few years ago, but says it can't be so. Two young boys in bright jackets snigger about the possibility of someone slipping on the grass into the grave. From the past, Siobhan's black-rimmed eyes take him in. Her voice drifts through the air, calling him back to their student days.

New students

Between two brown wardrobes a sash window is open, but it still smells of last night's lager. Underneath the window, on one of the two beds, a woman with yellow crimped hair lies face down. Dressed all in black, with her studded boots still on, she looks at odds with the blue flowered duvet. "The Boxer" leaks from the room next door. It's 1986 but someone still loves Simon and Garfunkel. The girl on the bed turns her head to one side, opens one eye — aware of the sense of him. She lifts her head enough for her crimped, umbrella-shaped hair to spring out, but she soon lays her head back down. She keeps one eye open though. A breeze through the window spreads more of last night's lager. "The Boxer" starts up again, only louder. She jumps up, holds her head with both hands. Her black leggings snag on the bed. She's torn a

hole. *Shit*, she says, and thumps both fists on the wall. Her Dublin vowels sound exotic to his small-town ears. *Shut the door*, she says, *she can't stand that shit*. Even shit sounds exotic — he's not allowed to swear at home. She moves towards him. Last night's lager drifts with her. She whistles through her teeth when she discovers he's here to study theatre too, unzips her black rucksack, takes out two lagers and a bottle opener. She flips the lids, then takes his hand. Over the clink of bottles between her fingers, she says, *Come on, let's go somewhere to plan our life on the stage.*

Watermelon

Imagine you stand with your dad in a field where watermelons are sold — you orbit the green globes, select one together, crack the spherical shell on the truck's bonnet, soak up the smell of watery heaven as the knife slices, your dad smiles and passes you watermelon curves as the sun warms your freckled faces.

Imagine if you only ever went to buy watermelons with your dad once in your lifetime.

I remember the cockerel my father received as a housewarming present

I remember our neighbour dropping his garden fork to stomp around his sprinklered lawn towards my father. I remember our neighbour's head thrust back, his mouth wide open, his tongue in the air as he imitated the cock-a-doodle-do-ing in our back garden. I remember my father's smile dropping to the ground. I remember the snap of the spring-hinged door — my brother in shorts, a grin across his face as he bolted into the garden to follow our father who now held a hessian sack. I remember our neighbour's face resting on the fence — his lips rippling with the thrill of it. I remember the hush as my father and brother stalked in long grass. Then the constant squawking. The flutter of red and black. I remember the tick of the station wagon — my father placing the wound-with-string sack in the back. I remember my brother picking up a long stick from the driveway.

I remember them returning with an empty sack — my father telling me they'd released the cockerel into the woods, saying it was the kindest thing to do.

I remember the repeated whack of my brother's stick behind his closed bedroom door.

Desert Notes

Sunlight now replaced the limelight he'd been forced to live in. He spent days walking through the burning sand dunes with his father's electric guitar slung low against his hip. At the palm lagoon no one could see his clumsy fingers. He let rip on the soundless strings, relieved to be unplugged.

Chamfer

I want to post a tweet before I go outside to get my daily steps in, but someone has posted a black-and-white photo from the seventies of a girl sitting on her father's shoulders. The smell of cedar wood planed on a Sunday morning curls around me — I'm nine: I stand at the garage door beside our house in Birmingham where my father constructs a jewellery box for my mother's birthday, upstairs "Rainy Days and Mondays" plays on the wall-length stereo unit as my mother lies under a frayed eye-mask, and I listen to my father's agitated voice telling me *he's a cabinet maker, not a carpenter;* I hear his words meld with him shouting at me to *go away*, telling me that I don't belong here, that I should be helping my mother.

I longed for him to tell me his secrets, to show me how to saw, to plane, to chamfer, but he told me girls didn't know how, didn't need to know how, only boys needed to know how, but I couldn't dovetail his words with my brother who sat in his room tipping marbles into an empty squash bottle, jeering at the thought of constructing anything.

Now, I move towards my own garage. Instead of going to get my steps in, I walk towards my father's body-length workbox, the workbox my brother didn't want when our father died.

I open the lid.

England, 1971

Sarah reached up and clicked open the cold metal latch on the council-green back gate. In the passageway, at the back of Nan's house, Sarah glanced at Pop's shed. The light inside wasn't on.

The door on the back porch was ajar, as usual, ready for her visit after school. Pop smiled from his armchair as Sarah dropped her satchel on the sewing machine foot pedal and hung her duffle on the lowest brass wall hook. Nan's armchair was empty — a whistling kettle drifted from the tiny triangle that Nan called her kitchen, followed by the clatter of crockery in the enamel sink. Sarah climbed onto the oak chair at the table Pop had finished French polishing last week. He banged his pipe against the carved oak cabinet next to him, pulled open both doors. Button polish rags filled the room. Another tap of his pipe, a clack of the Gold Leaf tobacco tin being opened. He rubbed the tobacco between his button polish and tobacco stained fingers, then placed some strands into the pipe bowl. He curled his hand around the yellow-and-green box of *Swan Vesta* matches, striking a match at the same time, and sucked and puffed on the pipe stem before closing his eyes. Sarah closed her eyes too and tasted an autumn woodland. Nan forced both their eyes open with the thump of her worn-out breadboard dropped onto the chequered tablecloth. One of her stout hands upended the oblong bread to carve two half-inch slices from the top. She thrust a bone-handled knife into an enamel bowl, extracted a thick lick of brown-and-white fat and then spread it across the slice. The slither of the cold fat on the white bread made Sarah's tongue twist. Nan passed a slice to Pop. He rested his pipe in his mahogany tobacco

stand inside the cabinet, but he didn't devour his bread and dripping — the plate remained on his knees. It was three days now since Pop had eaten. Nan's face began to crumple. She muttered that she needed to see to the potatoes.

She returned with the potatoes, buttered, in a glass Pyrex dish, telling Sarah to pull herself nearer to the table. As Sarah looked up from moving her chair, Nan lifted the lid. But the steam didn't hide her tears.

Kelly Loves Traffic Light Jelly

The supermarket man has moved the jelly higher up. I can't see the pictures on the packets now. Mum says we don't have time to stop for jelly anyway — we have to buy Nina's present. Kelly rhymes with Jelly. Every Tuesday after school Dad used to say, *Let's make Traffic Light Jelly, Kelly*. Dad was the man who made all the bulbs for the traffic lights for all the streets in our town.

Nina's got jelly at her party. It's not Traffic Light Jelly though. Traffic Light Jelly is red, yellow, and green. First it smells of strawberries, then lemons, then limes. Nina's party jelly is pink and smells of violets, but that's okay — Mum says we all like different things. Dad said we have to make jelly properly though. I tell Nina her party jelly doesn't wobble properly. Mum is walking up from the bottom of the garden with Nina's mum. Nina's mum is showing Mum the new garden full of fluffy flowers. Mum doesn't like flowers, but she is saying, *they are lovely*. When they go past us, Nina kicks me in the shin. I yelp. Mum turns. Her mouth does an *O* when she sees the muddy boot mark on Nina's pink ballerina skirt and Nina rubbing her eyes. Mum rushes up to me. She tells me to say sorry. I say sorry. She takes my hand and says, *I think it's best if we go*. Nina's mum does one of those sing-songy looks people do a lot now Dad's not here, with her neck stuck on one side.

In the car Mum says, *What did you say, Kelly? Were you talking about Traffic Light Jelly again?* I shake my head. Nina's mum hadn't made proper jelly. It was supposed to wobble, but it slipped off my spoon. I want

to tell Mum that jelly has to be left in the fridge for ages. Nina's dad doesn't make jelly either. Dad made the best jelly. Dad made Traffic Light Jelly for my party. My party jelly was the best ever. Mum stops at the traffic lights. The lights go red, red yellow, yellow, green. You are supposed to go now, but Mum doesn't drive off. She just stares at the green light.

The Box

In the darkened room, tin foil shimmers in the light of the TV. Her orange hair dances around the box as she places it in her daughter's hands and kisses her cheek. They lift the lid together.

They make space helmets from the tin-foiled box and land on their new planet made of light.

How to Draw

1. Now that the kids have gone, you dig out the sketch pad and unused box of pencils that you were given when you were eighteen. You lick the tip of the pencil. You've seen people do that, although you're not sure why.

2. Your drawing doesn't look anything like the photo on the lounge table of your aunt with the fuzzy hair. Your drawing looks like a lumpy strawberry. You scrunch up the paper. Throw it in the kitchen bin. You put the box of pencils away in a drawer.

3. Months later, on a day when the sun leaks through the trees, and all feels right with the world, your cat is sitting still. You could draw your cat. You take the pencil box out of the drawer, pick up the pencil next to the thin one. You sharpen it, even though it's not blunt.

4. Your husband comes home early, looks over your shoulder. He asks you why you are drawing an elephant.

5. You scrunch up the paper. You throw it at the bin, along with the pencil.

6. You are shopping in the town. You pass the art shop on the high street. You buy an expensive-looking pencil and sketchbook.

7. Your cat is curled up by the fire, on a rainy day. You curl up too, take out your expensive-looking new pencil and sketchbook.

8. You decide it's not worth spending any money on art materials. Trying to draw at your age was a fucking stupid idea.

9. Three weeks later, you discover a biro has slipped from the drawer into a colander that you are about to wash strawberries in. You draw a strawberry. The strawberry looks like a head. You scrunch up the paper but not so tight this time.

Delicate

They say I should have given away your clothes by now. It's been four years, they say. It's not healthy, they say. I smile and say I'll see them soon. Now that it's spring again, I sit on the bench, as always, under the apple blossom where you sat days before you died, long before your five years were up. That spring you sat, your legs outstretched, covered your skirt in blossom, and repeatedly flexed your feet to admire your toes, painted Pretty Pink. You sat under the tree, ready to go nowhere, pulled a comb through your blonde hair, pressed Sheila Pink lipstick to your lips. You stood, the blossom fell, you swished your skirt from side to side, told me girls should be delicate as petals. As if I needed telling again.

When I was a child you would lead me from the garden and hold open magazines for me to see how to be, but I didn't want blooms and blousiness, nails and eyelashes that could cool a room in summer. I wanted mud and paint and playfulness. I would watch you catwalk the kitchen and tell myself you were the person I never wanted to be.

But even so, I'll only bury your clothes when all the flowers have gone.

Air

Sit

Red uniforms circle around her as she waits in her chair for a ping and a tray of plastic food.

Rise

The seat tilts her to frame. She shuffles to her room.

Float

Under drooping lids she travels back to salt, sizzle of grass, foot-holes in the ancient churchyard wall. In the graveyard, they kiss behind chipped stone angels, stare over the estuary, listen to the water lapping, look up at pinholes of light searing through clouds. They grow wings in streaks of sun, float above the water, nestle between wrecked rowing boats. Lit only by the hope that no one will find them.

Previous published

The Villagers

Mslexia Flashcard

Seventy Percent Water

Flash Fiction Festival Two Anthology and

National Flash Fiction Day FlashFlood

Rattle and Spin

Bare Fiction Magazine

Travel Flash

National Flash Fiction Day FlashFlood

Mirror in the Bird Bath

Visual Verse (published as *Lopsided*)

How to Enter Another Galaxy

Ellipsis Zine

Kindling

Bath Flash Fiction Volume Four, With One Eye on the Cows.

The Last Time I Saw My Mum

The Nottingham Review

Previous published cont...

Smoke

Short Édition (Edmonton Airport, Canada)

Drawn

Downtown and Driftwood

The Artist

National Flash Fiction Day Write-in

Trumpets

The Lonely Crowd

I remember the cockerel my father received as a housewarming present

Flash Fiction Festival Three Anthology

Desert Notes

Visual Verse

Kelly Loves Traffic Light Jelly

National Flash Fiction Day Anthology, Box of Stars Beneath the Bed

Delicate

Downtown and Driftwood

Jeanette Sheppard is a writer and artist living in the UK. Her stories have been widely published and anthologised. *Mother Jellyfish*, her novella-in-flash (unpublished), was Highly Commended in the Ellipsis 2019 flash fiction collection competition. She is artist-in-residence for National Flash Fiction Day. *Seventy Percent Water* is her debut collection.

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Seventy Percent Water depicts with startling sensibility the way that beloved persons may disappear – sometimes bit by bit. The collection is dazzling in its clever use of language, beautiful imagery, wry humour, and deep understanding of humanity and feeling.

Sophie van Llewyn, author of Bottled Goods

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In thirty-one tiny stories, none more than two pages long, Jeanette Sheppard offers us the vast worlds of her imagination. She gathers everyday moments like kindling and deftly sparks them into flame, creating heat and magic. These stories move with the fluidity of dreams, rich in image and emotional resonance. A highly original debut, Seventy Percent Water is not to be missed.

Kathy Fish, author of Wild Life: Collected Works from 2003-2018

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Jeanette Sheppard writes convincingly about relationships – familial, romantic, social – and what happens when these human connections rupture. Her stories are moving, her prose surprising. I love this collection.

Damhnait Monaghan, author of The Neverlands

•

In Seventy Percent Water, Jeanette Sheppard writes with deep sensitivity and powerful imagery. Her empathy and humour shine through, resulting in a debut collection that is highly memorable.

Diane Simmons, author of Finding a Way

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