

The End of Limbo

VALERIA MELCHIORETTO is Italian and was born in the German part of Switzerland. She moved to the UK in the early 90s and holds a degree in Modern Drama and an MA in Fine Art. Valeria has appeared in prestigious periodicals and has been widely anthologised. In 2005 she won the first New Writing Ventures. This is her debut collection which was sponsored by the Arts Council of England.

The End of Limbo

VALERIA MELCHIORETTO



PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB21 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Valeria Melchiorretto, 2007

The right of Valeria Melchiorretto to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2007

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 978 1 84471 308 0 paperback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

<Dedication>

Contents

The Suitcase	1
Cubism	2
Finding Myself in a Pair of Fisheyes	3
The Language of the North Wind	4
Naming Clouds	5
Walnut	6
The Unknown	10
Omission	11
The Tear Percolator	12
The Old Man and the Mountain	13
Happy Marriage	14
Ponte Della Sera	15
The Normal Head	16
Grandmother's Cataracts	17
Podding Peas	18
Making my First Friend	19
Ritual	20
Concerto	21
From the Intestines of a Mystical Dog	22
The Mississippi Flows Through Our Living Room	23
House Without Roof	24
Dwelling in Amber	25
Rodinsky's Room	29
Reason for Knocking on an Empty House	30
Short Let	31
Twin Room	32
Lazarus Proposes Marriage	33
The End of Limbo	34
Exclusive Persephone Interview	35

About no God in Particular	36
Sweet and Sour Songs	37
In the Devil's Pockets	39
Peasant's Heaven	40
The Garden of Earthly Delights	41
The Gospel	42
Venice is Burning	43
Mapmakers	45
Papal Blessings	46
Cricket Sound	47
Tape Recording	48
Polar-Sphinx Moth	49
Spheres Unrequited	50
The Girl with the Shoe Fetish	51
Seven Sisters	52
White Noise	53
The Dowry	54
Wintering	55
Lapsang Souchong	56
The Silk Road	57
Wind Horse	58
The Hundredth Monkey Phenomena	61
A Hungry Animal	62
Subliminal	63
Absence of Absence	64
Meeting Mondrian by the Red Square	65
Full Void	66
The Virtue	67
Published	69

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are due to the editors of the following publications and webzines in which some of these poems first appeared: *Ambit*, *Lampport Court*, www.thepoem.co.uk/limelight, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, *Poetry Wales*, *Salzburg Review*, *Shearsman*, *The Shop*, *Unpublished*, *The Wolf*, *x-magazine* and www.nthposition.com. Some of these poems were included in *Piqué Templar Poetry Anthology 2006*, *Poems for a Better Future Oxfam Anthology 2004*, and *Departures Housman Society Anthology 1998*, as well as in *Podding Peas* published by Hearing Eye in 2004. Some of these poems are also on www.writtenpicture.co.uk.

The poem *Finding Myself in a Pair of Fisheyes* was published in *Poetry Review* and highly commended for The Geoffrey Dearmer Prize 2005.

The poem *Cubism* was highly commended for The Forward Prize for Best Single Poem 2006 and consequently published in *The Forward book of poetry 2007*.

The Suitcase

My life is divided from kitchen and dining room.
It is a long hallway, walled by peripheral vision:
a living room spacious as a departure lounge.

Here waiting stretches time's muscle
through the weight of shortcomings.
All I carry is a suitcase containing the time of day.

Its lining familiar as my skin, its handle worn,
slightly arched like a collarbone, a potential key
to sagas, the yarn of my emigrating ancestors.

The suitcase is rigid yet made of impressions.
In generations we will have wings, mutate like finches
with beaks as sharp as knives and forks.



I admire the spiders, how homely they are,
never satisfied with a napkin-sized dwelling.
They aim for tablecloth-sized webs,

even though mostly it catches nothing but light,
pure as goodness in the killing of flies.
Only a spider's loom can capture such lumen.

If I could embroider my life with this threat
I would make a needle from one of my unattached ribs
from the twelfth ribcage raw. The needle's eye being vast

and infinitely dilating. I would tread light though it
as if through the lumen of my arteries,
as if through a gateway to new dimensions.

Cubism

Giovanni had mined Les Collines de l'Artois for two years,
and was now ready to wash down the dust of his teens,
as rain washed the streets under that ugly, new Eiffel Tower.

In a bistro he heard himself order two glasses of red,
one for his throat and one for a man, who like him
spoke French as Frenchmen don't—unless they have a cold.

After they couldn't count the empty glasses, no matter what language,
they made their way to his new friend's place, no, 13 Rue Ravignan,
4th floor, 2nd door left after the steep stairs, and mind your head.

I don't know what the two discussed. Giovanni probably talked
about the pit, how even the largest mountain can be reduced
to briquettes, how each coal cube has the mountain's grotesque face.

Being a miner he knew all about cubism, because that's what he saw
when he walked the underground galleries with his lantern.
He could see a flickering mosaic of memories and rock.

The two men were kept awake by the biting blue winter
which Pablo painted for a living. He filled the stove with coal,
ripped a page from his sketch book and lit the fire.

That night they were both cold until a magenta sun rose
in Pablo's mind which ended the Blue Period. Years later
Picasso would remember the tunnels of my grandfather's teens.

Finding Myself in a Pair of Fisheyes

I arrive on the desperate island in the late afternoon.
Shadows are so long they have lost a sense of balance.

The guidebook advises a visit to the twenty-two churches
built next to each other for comfort and I read

that the alters were carved from bone of unknown origin.
The last ferry to the mainland has already departed.

The waiter serves me a dozen grilled sardines. The recipe:
divorced from water, remarried by fire. I bless them

with lemon, seek out their skeletons, and throw salt
over my shoulder. Later, in the only guesthouse in town,

I haggle with the landlady. Her French sounds fake.
Taking a step at a time, she shows me upstairs.

The room is lopsided but clean. I'm spellbound by five
flower paintings that adorn the square, furnished corridor.

Identical still lifes in hospital green and blood red
on a clashing ground. I stay up all night, comparing them

maybe to find the answer to all questions concerning
the personal. I tiptoe barefoot as if not to disturb

what lies behind those dying tulips: tulips so vivid
and as wide awake as church-bells on a Sunday morning.

The Language of the North Wind

I owe you the eloquent language of the north wind
which blew me where without vision I would not have gone.
I froze to the spot in the forest of shapeless afterthoughts
while you, Dreamer of the Absurd, painted memory relics.
First I grew inwards like a bad toe nail to keep you company
as you were afraid pigments would evaporate like dew.

In that arctic night when you refused to go through the garden gate,
anger made me rob your ambitions and as they carried my initials
I ate them. They made me grow the other way until I saw grass
on the skyline. You said stars were motionless snowflakes,
winter could never end. When I squinted I saw it was not so—
stars could add up to something larger than night, a Last Supper

on a bed of sky. You said, talk of dawn would crumble the paint
and stretched your favorite childhood tablecloth with the image
of your mother and proceeded to paint me on the other side.
That's when I defrosted my feet, drew perfect circles in the air
the shape of distant planets I didn't know I wanted to visit
then learned the north wind's language and spoke it aloud.

Naming Clouds

For Luke Howard (1772–1864), of Tottenham, Namer of Clouds

In this corner of my life, happiness comes like a Chinese takeaway.
I take up the hobby of collecting clouds, crowd them into my afternoon,
measure them for volume and catalogue them. It is almost a tradition
since the namer of clouds lived in this neighbourhood.

The spiders take over each corner, weave webs with the consistency
of clouds in which my thoughts get caught like winged things.
They are arrested by sticky threads, thin and temporal as hope.

I stick to business and weigh the humid constructions in the sky
by means of scales from the judgement hall. Scales with which the heart
ultimately must be weighed against the body. When night falls,
I suspend judgement about empty or full hearts, kiss each cloud goodnight
and wait and wait for dawn to fill the corners of my eyes.

Walnut

A Manifesto

The walnut is the wardrobe, can't you see;
not in, on or under the wardrobe,
the wardrobe is not an apple
(Cox, Granny Smith, Bramley or French Delicious),
partly because I do not wish to discuss apples openly
due to their core.

Also the wardrobe is not a cherry, pear or pine cone,
not an acorn, fig or almond.
It is not obvious but essential that the walnut
is not a chest of drawers, a chair or table,
stool or kitchen cupboard,
at least not in this particular case.

Take this walnut,
I trust you
not to crack it, to know there is a centre:
a soft, dark, earthy flesh, not sweet but true.

Open it if you must satisfy your hunger, it is waiting
but don't forget, that in there sleeps a tree
casting shadows on hot summer days.

The wardrobe is the walnut.
I don't just hold the camera and take a photo
because I refer to something that might not be visible
even though I invite you into the picture.

Let's go deeper into the woods,
let's dare to name the shadows
by shaping the mouth to call them,
so there won't be a way back
as there is no mending a cracked nut shell.

We can all take a small bite and make some truth ring
(an authentic sound).

This truth is so clear even the ears of corn can hear it,
not like the formal sound of church bells:
heavy and noisy to wake the dead
but like a temporal melody,
like the pure sound of bluebells
moved by a warm breeze.

When I say: the walnut is a wardrobe,
it might not be true for you.
After all authenticity leans against the tough wall of the nut
having a cigarette break and somehow fails to be helpful,
maybe because it is corruptible.

I am open to interpretations as long as they feed me
but not cheap burgers and fries, they just exercise the jaw,
yawning empty words.

It is not my intention to put a message in a milk,
Coke or wine bottle in the hope someone, someday might read it,
(even God on judgement day),
simply because they might not speak my language
or refuse to discuss the unseen without consulting their lawyer.

If I did send a message, I would address the formless,
maybe the formless in everyone of us,
having fixed a meaning in words
and not bothered to enclose a stamped addressed envelope.

The formless has endless forms and they reflect the shape
my soul makes when it reflects the world.
A soul that can't avoid insisting on the world as an anvil
on which it gains its shape.

Shall I name the walnut and the wardrobe
with my mother's mother tongue
or with my first language which is the second language I learned
or shall I call it walnut the way you call it but with my accent?
What difference would it make to both of us?

I know a walnut is only a walnut, nothing but a walnut
and a wardrobe is only a wardrobe, nothing but a wardrobe
but what matters, what is forgotten is how they relate to each other,
and what also is forgotten is how we (you and me in our own ways)
relate to the walnut and the wardrobe
(to the unseen in the walnut and the wardrobe)

and yet
I keep the key to this wardrobe
(that is a walnut that is a wardrobe).
The key to it is this manufactured moment.

The wardrobe's doors are like wings which open
to a room beyond a room
and the wardrobe's mirror always holds
the image of the person opening it.

In this instance I speak of my wardrobe
full of garments that tell my story
with every moth damaged jumper,
with every silk scarf, and each shoe
(left and right in their own way)
telling of places I have been,
and each sleeveless dress
tells of the marks the sun might have left on my skin.

And equally so, I can't look at a walnut
without remembering my uncle's tanned face,
my uncle who grows walnuts in his garden.

If I was to explain,
I would start with the way the foxglove doesn't fit anyone or anything.
The inside of the foxglove fits perfectly into its outside.
I only name it and so relate it
to the walnut tree that now casts a shadow on it.

The Unknown

From my mother I inherited a path paved with gallbladder stones,
wide as childbearing hips, twice as long as impatience.

From my father's side I inherited stories he told with his eyes.
Stories of death that no one mentioned, deep as afterthought,

he might have heard them like whispers from a war prisoner bed.
Mother would say thoughts were like boats, they need an anchor.

Nobody in our family could navigate an afterthought but it shook
our imagination like seasickness until we were green under our rosy cheeks.

In his sleep his eyelids flickered as if a factory was constructing nightmares
daylight didn't want to know about. Now I choose my path with care.

Omission

He was christened Fortunato; fortunate to be born alive
and into peaceful times after the poppies wilted in the corn.
Fortunate for reasons his mother knew, who sensed
his lifeline to be longer than that of his school mates.
On sepia photos his chubby face carries his name with a glow
and his smile spills each letter with an unbound thrill.

Names are charms and that of my father protected him
through a new World War when still bloodier poppies bloomed.
He saw them flower in clusters when he was deported
across Germany to Danzig, on to prisoner camps in Poland.
Poppies flourished on battlefields and along railway lines
like a wide gapping stigmata on the palm of Europe.

Thousands lost life, limbs or loved ones but he was spared.
My father was lucky to be among the witnesses but luck
had a sour aftertaste as his name had become a mock of facts.
He shed syllables until it sounded like another adjective
until it stated a true account. He signed his new name as Nato,
which means 'born', to simply declare himself among the living.

The Tear Percolator

From the kitchen window I could see the locomotive
rip through the swollen and inflamed backdrop.
I was kneeling on a stool almost as tall as myself,
leaning right out into the open, late summer air,
resting my head like a Raphael angel.

Indoors the espresso hissed, spitting black drops.
Steam blurred the vision, questions always drowned
in suppressed air . . .

My father wore a thin coat of lead under his skin.
He cried on occasions, percolated tears from behind
the retina. The crying gene was built in like an oil pump,
responsible for cooling his worn system.

Our grey Sunday outings: the news agent's by the station.
The factory ground on the way back was full of
ship-engine-embryos and train-skeletons.
I looked at his cloudy face, a taste of metal on my tongue.

The Old Man and the Mountain

The old man lived on top of the mountain
and the mountain lived on top of him.
He was a warrior, a cynic, a martyr,
imprisoned by the swastika yet survived.

The old man, my father, was from then on alone,
was as scarred as the mountains and as distant.
He turned my childhood into a silent waiting room
from which my bravest doll was exiled.

Every evening he disappeared into his world
to water his cross with unwatered wine.
Thorns blossomed in the back room of his mind.
Eating the daily bread of resentment was the way.

Speaking German was banned from our home,
so as children we whispered it in the dark.
He had never worn brown shirts, yet they tied him,
timeless time ago when he became a prisoner.

So many painful thoughts pushed into oblivion
by the sound of snoring cathedrals
in the name of those who have not felt nor touched
that invisible mountain handed out by history.

Twice the earth was dug over to mark the season's change:
first the harsh ground of the fields, then the grave.
Endless winter melted suddenly, flowing into rivers.
I went and planted potatoes on top of the mountain.

Happy Marriage

Auntie Holly looked at me with her bottled-up eyes
like two circles of mushrooms in a forest.
Eyes that made me forget the words of the song
we sang on Christmas day. I used to make a wish
when I lit the candles on the evergreen tree.

She knitted jumpers for my uncle, big enough for giants,
lovely, warm and cosy for cold winter days and nights.
Soft as moss and loyal green they were,
without dreams, without edges, without compromise,
nothing fancy, nothing out of the ordinary.

He was a woodcutter by trade, nothing vague.
Dead leaves stuck to his boots, even Sundays.
His voice was loud, no hidden messages.
Always talking about the same things,
unfortunately never for the last time.

I wondered how they had met, Aunt Holly and him.
I knew she always wanted children,
as many as there are trees in the forest.
What had she ever seen in him but a child?
On Epiphany they put away tinsel and tree.

More than just a thread had vanished. After that
everything dulled like wine stains on the carpet.

Ponte Della Sera

For M. T.

I felt sorry for her. Not that I knew my aunt well.
Neither of us made the effort, me being a child
didn't help. People rumoured about her miscarriages
no one could keep count but I imagined
she carried them in her handbag which one time
I am sure I heard rattle or was it a cry?

Not sure what she saw in the mountain stream
clutching her handbag by the Roman viaduct.
Maybe she saw her children's faces in the water
blood red with evening, and reached for them
in the water, icy with death or wanted to cross
the bridge's reflection, flickering like nerves
leading to the other side of the evening.

Was the real viaduct made of maroon pills,
a bridge she had crossed every day for years
until it collapsed? Maybe each day, each face
was a stone in her shoe, a brick in her bridge
which naturally lead to the bank of the evening.

We don't talk about her much but at times remark,
how short and cruel days are in March, and feel
we know, anguish to be older than the viaduct
and that, at the end of the day, it is not viable
to guess the weight and content of a handbag.