

A Season of Small Insanities

ANDREA PORTER is a member of the Joy of Six Poetry Ensemble that has performed in the UK and the USA. She has been published in a variety of poetry magazines in the UK, Canada and the USA. She received an Escalator Award in 2005 and an Arts Council grant in 2006. She is also a fiction writer and has had short stories published and has recently completed her first novel. Her pamphlet Bubble was adapted for BBC Radio 4 by the playwright Fraser Grace. She writes a blog, We Liked It but not Quite Enough (www.welikeditbutnotquiteenough.blogspot.com)

Also by Andrea Porter

PAMPHLET

Bubble (Flarestack Press)

COLLABORATIONS

Flirtations (Joy of Six Publications)

Evidence (Joy of Six Publications)

Package (Joy of Six CD. Apples & Snakes Soundblast and PBS
recommendation)

A Season of Small Insanities

ANDREA PORTER



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
14a High Street, Fulbourn, Cambridge CB21 5DH United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Andrea Porter 2009

The right of Andrea Porter 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.

Salt Publishing 2009

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

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 509 1 hardback

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



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Contents

I	A SEASON OF SMALL INSANITIES	1
	Mystic	3
	Laying On of Hands	4
	Account of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition	5
	Room	6
	Eves	7
	Traffic	8
	Visitors' Book	9
	Sodom Cookery	10
	DIY	11
	Sharp	12
	Fighting the Bit	13
	Unstable Particles	15
	Venus and Cupid and a Man Playing a Lute	16
	Orosia Moreno	17
	Head	19
	Room Service	20
	Night Porter	21
	North Sea Women	22
	Night Shift at the Petrol Station	23
	Asleep at the Wheel	25
	Zimbabwean Singer Detained in the Fenland Immigration Centre	26
	Postcard From Jerusalem	27
	Heike with her Dictionaries	28
	Mrs Stenman on her Newspaper House in Pigeon Cove, Massachusetts	30
	Azrael Visits The Angel Shop In Edinburgh	31

The Last Vertigo	32
Assassinations	33
Boxes	34
Three Haiku for a Saint	35
Man Insults Veiled Medusa on the Tube	36
Hands Free	37
American Carnie Freaks, 1902	38
Shaman	39
Heart FM	41
Plane Ride	42
Picking Things Over	43
Continuity Girl	44
Spindleruv Mlyn Bus Station	45
'Pray for Our Hometown Heroes in Iraq'	46
At Emily Dickinson's Grave	47
Yield	48
II MARRYING RICHARD HARRIS	49
Clockwork	51
Chat	52
Snow Night	53
Handling	54
Elegy	55
Black Hole	56
Altered State	57
Double Act	58
Marrying Richard Harris	59
Life Boats	60
Home Help	61
Caskets	62
Service	63

Second Hand	64
Registering	65
No Returns	66
Crossing	67

for my daughter

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are due to the editors of the following publications: *Boomerang*, *Canon's Mouth*, *Envoi*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Nth Position*, *Red Lamp* (Australia & UK), *The Same* (USA), *Rattapallax* (USA), *The SHOp*, *Seam*, *Tempus* (Canada & UK). Some poems appeared in the following anthologies: *A Room to Live In* (Salt Publishing), *Blinking Eye Anthology* (Blinking Eye Press), *Forward Anthology of Modern Poetry 2005*, *The Gift* (Gatehouse Press).

A small selection of poems appeared in the pamphlet *Bubble* (Flarestack Press). The poems were subsequently adapted into a BBC Radio 4 play by the playwright Fraser Grace and broadcast in 2005.

A version of the poem 'North Sea Women' appeared in a multimedia piece created in collaboration with Jane Wingfield (Digital Artist), Mark Wingfield (Composer) and Sian Porter (Graphic Artist and Writer). This work was commissioned by the European Fund, Norwich City Council and The New Writing Partnership. It can be seen at www.DNAvigate.co.uk.

I also wish to thank all those unsung heroes, the poetry editors and publishers who have supported my work. I would also like to thank Helen Ivory, Andrew Motion, Ruth Padel and Jo Shapcott who have awarded me prizes in various competitions. Many of these published or award winning poems or revised versions of them are included in this collection.

I am grateful to the wonderful Arvon Foundation for giving me two bursaries so that I could attend their residential poetry courses. I would also like to thank The New Writing Partnership for an Escalator Award and the Arts Council for a grant.

I would also like to thank the poet Jacob Polley who encouraged me to put forward this collection for publication and gave me such valuable feedback on these poems.

Not least I would like to thank all my fellow members of Joy of Six (www.joyofsix.co.uk) and all those other poets and people who have provided friendship, support and wine along the way (they know who they are).

I A Season of Small Insanities

Mystic

Long ago she shed her skin each summer,
pale parchments were left on floral sheets.
Only those with a gift could interpret these
as the end of days, the dark beginnings.
She wore stiff calamine lotion as a mask
that cracked and crazed with each smile.
She moves in darkness now, slips quietly
from shade to shade, whispers the mantra
of ancient numbers, all the factors of sixty.
She uses her power to block out the sun
so totally that she leaves white shadows
where she walks. She can eclipse patios.
She is becoming translucent, she reads
scorched earth, famine in her own entrails.

Laying On of Hands

The night before we stood on a hill overlooking Lourdes.
The procession unravelled, an ammonite of light.
They sang something involving 'Marias' and 'Aves',
words wove with The Beach Boys on the transistor.
Get around round round, I get around.

We both lay naked in your tent, the twisted boy
and the lanky girl trying too hard to fit together.
We stayed after every candle in the valley went out.
The hinge of your calliper was imprinted on my thigh.

Next day cutting through heat and light and wheelchairs
this boy-faced priest smiled. He put you in his shadow.
He had an accent, smelled of garlic and lemons.
He placed his quick hands upon your head, incanted,
then turned and reached up for mine. No eye contact.
You can fuck off wanker I thought you said.

We bought a plastic bottle shaped as the Virgin Mary,
filled it with holy water as a present for your Mum.
Later as we sat beside the coach park you fought
intention tremors to put your hand on my left breast.

Account of the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition

'The sun left us on April 22, and we did not see it again for four months'

— ROALD AMUNDSEN

This is another day for stillness.
I will sit quietly and conserve.
Cleaning the floor is too energetic,
that would demand more time
spent later in an icy shower.
Turning this page is manageable.
I will read Amundsen's account.
The trick to keeping cool is to see
Ole Engelstad's great snow cone
rise in the air to 19,000 feet,
and reach Lat. $86^{\circ} 21'$ south
at the foot of the Devil's Glacier.
After the journey when I look up
and see you, I will not burn.

Room

The distance gauged between the corner
of a coffee table and the curve of a sofa.
Our boundaries set by the furnishings,
are fixed by custom, until you bring
an old chair down from the attic.
It alters the map. Like the blind we explore
the edges, reshape a different interior.
We move more carefully for a while.

Eves

Adam insists he still needs Mother Eve
to complete dominion over the wasp.
Child Eve hurtles into autumn leaf piles,
smears apple jelly on her breasts and thighs.
Woman Eve shows herself to passing serpents
who flicker their tongues and coil around her.
Mother Eve drives home, tired and anxious.
She inspects Child Eve for signs of knowledge
while Woman Eve sips a cocktail on the terrace.
When Adam comes home, they knead his neck,
ease out the knotted day from his flesh. He sighs.
His shoulders recall that fired moment of becoming.
The Eves smile, they can see the power of one
but they understand the wisdom in numbers.

Traffic

The swallow at the base of his thumb flexes its wings.
Her right hand flutters to the strap of her scuffed bag,
inside; sunglasses for bruises, lipstick, a leather purse.
The purse is empty, except for a photograph she tore
from a magazine left in a drawer, of Johnny Depp.
That was fourteen weeks ago; she keeps him
behind the cellophane window made for family.

She has learnt some sayings now.
There are dogs and cats in rain, mouths full of frogs,
tears in fallen milk, a bird in his hand, socks to be pulled.

At the crowded junction he grasps her left hand.
She hesitates, looks up at the lights.
He says her name, is it Katya or Irena now?
The last vowel sound escapes from his mouth
as a quick pump of air, a tiny explosion.

They cross as the cars come to a stop on red.
Here traffic is obedient, compliant to the rules.

Visitors' Book

(Holiday Cottage Entry)

When coming down stairs
from the top floor
careful of last step.

Also watch out for mat near toilet—
likes to send you flying—
you need to get a grip.

A&E in Kendal—
nurses and doctors great.
Asda next door to hospital
do family meal—
£10—
very filling.

Sodom Cookery

(Genesis 19:26)

The skinny boy without front teeth
will come soon, take his dulled knife,
hack at my belly, take handfuls home
in his dirty sack to give to his mother.
She will salt beef strips for the winter.
Too much salt though can ruin them.

The wild ox licks my left thigh, he has
hollowed a valley down to my femur.
I shudder at each rough urgent stroke.
Ox tongue pickled in aged wine vinegar
with cracked peppercorns and herbs
made a cheap meal in these hard times.

I loved to cook, above all my own fat hens.
You must remember to baste chicken.
There is nothing worse than food ruined
through lack of care and sheer stupidity.
I only glanced back because I thought
I'd left the stew pot boiling on the fire.

DIY

The vibrator was to be a present for a friend.
She'd heard that excuse before, however
not a single facial piercing twitched.

She talked me through the pros and cons:
texture, variable speed, the length,
a facility for clitoral stimulation,

whether the capacity to glow in the dark
was *really* essential, but safer
than a bedside candle during power cuts.

We discussed inbuilt obsolescence.
Some women prefer the simple,
more straightforward kind: point and go.

She mentioned the unreliability
of complex wiring and attachments
and that frequent use could wear out parts.

She personally recommended
having flexibility to find your G-spot.
She advised against lending it to a friend.

There was a voice activated one
new on the market, you turn it on
by talking but they've had complaints.

Only shouting seems to make it work.
Thank you, I said, I'll take any one
that can laugh or whisper my name.

Sharp

In the drawer my bread knife has grown dull
through disuse, the edge is gone from the steel.
I always buy a wrapped, sliced loaf these days.
My father would clamp loaves firmly down
with his left hand and saw thin even slices
with his right. It was his role, like carving beef,
jointing a rabbit or taking the top off my egg.
I knew about cutting, that it was an art to hone,
like suitable comments around a joint of beef.
Any sharper and you'll cut yourself, young lady,
my mother would say. I learnt how to be silent.
Bread, meat, rabbit, egg; for each a particular knife.
The right tool for the right job, he would announce.
I watched, one day I would be trusted with knives.

Fighting the Bit

He hooks up the curb chain.
A 'martingale' stops the mare throwing her head.
*A stargazer, you have to break her,
she must learn not to fight the bit.*

She told me if you sing every verse
of 'Onward Christian Soldiers'
while you boil an egg it will be perfect;
white firm, yolk runny.

As her syphilitic fever rose,
Mrs Beeton whisked the egg whites
to stiff peaks. She whipped in
the air from her lungs, each lie.

I am not a ghost haunting
the Rutherford labs.
I didn't see them crack open an atom,
or catch the white of Shiva's eye.

No omelettes without breaking eggs
she writes in her letter. If I hold
it up to the light I can see the
stain of a yolk, a thread of blood.

On my night walks the moonlight
picks out the old battery hen sheds.
They are settling down into quiet decay,
even the rotted planks are muted.

In Saudi, imported Japanese swordsmen
separate a head from its neck, tender
in the completion of the task. It is neater
and faster, like slicing the top of an egg.

Every night she gazes into the sky,
skimming light from the dark like fat.
She can name the hunter, bear and belt.
Her head is thrown up and back.

Unstable Particles

A recuperative holiday with an English host can reduce the amount of radioactive caesium which has built up in a child's body

The girl from Belarus lies inert in bed,
a new pink candy-striped duvet
twisted round her skinny body.
She wants to stroke her pale face.

She has taken down the old rosettes.
Second in the Obstacle Race.
Best under Ten Miniature Garden.
Does this thin child need a night light?

A child should not have to feel her way
through strange dark corridors
or trail her fingers along the walls,
to find where she needs to be.

This girl will grow, sit in a kitchen,
drinking tea with frail descendants.
Three weeks to feed her oranges.
Three weeks to host those eyes.

A whip of air from the window lifts
the corner of a faded Buffy poster.
This sleeping child holds out a half life,
part of the woman reacts and splits.