

## I'll Dress One Night As You

CHRISSIE GITTINS was born in Lancashire and lives in South London. She studied at Newcastle University and St Martin's School of Art. Her poems have been anthologized, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and animated for Cbeebies television. Two of her children's poems won Belmont Poetry Prizes in 2002 and her first collection of children's poems *Now You See Me, Now You ...* (Rabbit Hole, 2002) was shortlisted for the inaugural CLPE Poetry Award in 2003. Her first adult poetry collection *Armature* was published by Arc in 2003. Her second children's poetry collection *I Don't Want an Avocado for an Uncle* (Rabbit Hole, 2006) was shortlisted for the CLPE Poetry Award 2007 and was a Poetry Book Society Choice for the Children's Poetry Bookshelf.

In 2007 her first book of short stories *Family Connections* appeared from Salt. Her plays for BBC Radio 4 include *Starved for Love*, *Life Assurance*, and *Dinner in the Iguanodon*. She has received a Hawthornden Fellowship, an Arts Council Grant for the Arts, and awards from the Royal Literary Fund and the Author's Foundation. She is a member of the Poetry Society's Poetryclass team.

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*I Don't Want an Avocado for an Uncle*

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*Poles Apart*

*Starved for Love*

*Life Assurance*

*Dinner in the Iguanodon*

# I'll Dress One Night As You

CHRISSIE GITTINS



CAMBRIDGE

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*For my dear friends and family,  
and in loving memory of Maby*



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# I'll Dress One Night As You

## LEAVING BRANCASTER STAITHE

The pink-footed geese flew in lazy Vs  
across the January skies,  
the hollering came first—  
so I knew to look up.

Spread like iron filings  
over a starched white tablecloth  
they settled on the marsh,  
    a single snow goose the eye of their storm.

That afternoon I left  
for your hospital bed—a flock stood sentinel  
in an empty field, their heads held down  
as I drove by.

The light slowly drained  
from the Lincolnshire Fens  
to a fine white line on the horizon,  
    and this time I knew you would die.

## MOTHERING SUNDAY

Shall I send a bouquet to an empty house,  
remind the kitchen of the crinkle of cellophane,  
whoosh a torrent of water into a vase,  
snip each stem to a sharp diagonal?

Or shall I cut a rose from the garden,  
place it next to a spray of acer,  
surprise your bedside table  
with blooms you'd forgotten you had?

The fragrance glides towards your chair,  
the cerise of the rose sings to you.  
Points of the leaves reach around doors,  
their new buds slowly opening.

EVERY NIGHT I STAYED

The way you used to come to kiss me every night I stayed—  
despite an extra journey on your walking frame.

You'd push off from the kitchen on your slippers,  
head down against the wind, 'I'm going now'.

I'd get up to meet you from the sitting room,  
our heads would rest together in the hall.

Then back you'd go along the straits,  
weaving from side to side,

till you reached the island of your bed.  
You'd lie across, beside your duvet,

lapped by waves of grateful sleep.

OUT OF PLACE

Your ornaments sit  
bunched up on the windowsill,  
the conch shell resting on a fluted plate,  
the goose tangling with the teapot.

Your photo—  
a smile from a shingle beach,  
faces away. Some other shots of us  
have slid right down the mantelpiece—

we are in disarray,

too close, no room to look our best.  
You hated anything  
out of place.

I found your negligée  
with a silky camisole—kept one  
and bagged the other.

I'll dress one night as you,  
wear your weighty beads and bracelet,  
I'll stretch my lips across my teeth,

half open my mouth,  
apply red lipstick in a compact mirror—  
the way you did,

then fold a tissue,  
imprint my lips in carmine,  
and hold it up for you to see.

## RETRIEVING THE CAPODIMONTE

I couldn't look at you cold and dead  
but I saw your clock in the shop—  
glowing, and chiming the quarter hour,  
proud amongst other clocks.

Your sundae set, short by one,  
was placed on a bathroom cupboard.  
The green glass shone  
that quarter to one,  
making mahogany sizzle.

I bought back the figure frying his eggs  
as he sat by the side of the road—  
he's back in my boot, in two plastic bags,  
waiting to become à la mode.

JAR

Half my life I led with you  
And could not see beyond,  
Half my life is gone from me,  
The half that can't be found.

Now I see you in my days,  
You're there to share my deeds,  
But not to touch, or kiss, or hear—

You're in the scenes that play  
Inside my head which show me  
What you were—the light fantastic

Of your love, which makes me spin  
And dare to dip my finger  
In the jar of life,  
The half I'll live for you.

## Helen's Daughter

There's an image of her on the wall—  
a painter's hand applied her cheek,  
I see her bloom, her clear grey eyes,

her still, far off smile.  
Her face, as she stands by the door  
in readiness for school, is in shadow.

Her eyes meet mine, her haircut's new,  
she's slightly older than her painted self.  
Each time I pass her image on the stairs,

still serene, her eyes averted,  
I think of her inside her room—  
her duvet ruffled up with sleep.

She kneels before her life—  
a girl in luck, a girl in tune  
with minims and with swimming pools.

## Say Something To Me Of Life

Say something to me of life—  
that it is not random  
like a stray celandine setting seed  
in the middle of a lawn,  
that one pre-heartbeat babe  
has just as much a chance  
of growing up to skip rope  
as any other.

Say something to me of death—  
that it is not random,  
that a child may dodge a bullet,  
a woman avoid tripping  
so her tender throat is not pierced  
on the corner of a table.

Say something to me of life—  
that death will not interrupt  
at any moment like a doorbell  
ringing and ringing in the middle of the day.

## The Man Who Carries A Picture Of Hitler

I cut it from the album,  
the black felted page sticks to the back.

Head bowed, Hitler is reading the paper—  
content with his success.

My grandfather guarded him well,  
told me he didn't kill Jews.

And in that off moment,  
with the vase of mimosa at its best,

when leaves were new through the window,  
my grandfather pointed his camera.

I drive round Birmingham  
with the photo deep in my wallet,

face to face with a shot of my son.  
The crown of Hitler's head brushes

the wet bottom lip of my five year old,  
his face is resolute, unflinching.

The rain falls and the birds still fly.

## She Gave Me Her Childhood Books

*for Liz*

So that now, when I remember huddling with my friend  
on a cold stone wall in the playground,

we're joined by the King of Peru  
who falls down a well

and comforts himself with a rhyme.  
The bell sounds for lessons, we fetch up in a line.

Beside us loiters a row of ducks,  
an old sailor, a knight with quiet armour.

When keys are thrown at chatty Colin  
the knight shields the blow.

When Fay is given the ruler,  
the sailor throws a jig.

When Barry is tied to a chair,  
the ducks peck at the knots.

Through the night newts climb out of a jar  
to visit my dreams,

the Lord High Coachman laughs from the window,  
a half bald doll squeaks her secrets in my melting ear.

## Transmission

The brick was loose, like a sore tooth,  
a sack spread out on the floor caught the falling mortar,

one last tug freed it from the wall.  
Mrs Jump next door had run her chapped hand along the wall.

Four bricks from the fireplace, she reckoned—  
so the same on the other side.

The second and third came out like a dream.  
Spot on. My mother, at six, peered through the hole.

She reached out, touched the hardboard panel,  
the polished oak of its surround.

When the switch was on, how would it sound?  
At five o'clock she pushed a chair against the hole,

snuggled up to Children's Hour. A smile  
waltzed across her lips, her eyes were fixed

on the hearth—a pile—a three-brick wall.  
Later, Mrs Jump installed herself beside her set,

for Athur Askey, Tommy Handley,  
Winterbottom and Murgatroyd—

'What does your watch say?'  
'Tick tick!'

She breathed in then sighed.  
The smell of currant cake, oxtail soup,

steak and cowheel pie was being transmitted  
from the other side.

## The Grandmother I Never Knew

touches a silver vase of rosebuds  
on a dark carved dresser,  
her gaze steady.

She's losing patience.  
The latticed window behind  
opens onto fake cloud.

She wants to be polishing  
her own windows,  
packing her husband's chest

with brown paper, sewing  
the gathers into her daughter's  
shantung dress. Not

standing here, poe-faced,  
posing for this  
one photograph

we have of her.

Chorister, St Saviour's Church, Southwark, 1607

I aim my voice at the vaults,  
my truest notes, with all  
the sweetness I can muster—

balm to his buboes,  
calm to his fever,  
unction in his resting place.

This afternoon, across the bridge,  
I must exchange my surplice  
for Titania's gown.

He used to be my Oberon,  
each day he stroked my cheek,  
I could load my eyes into his

and let my heart speak  
through his brother's words.  
His lips were mink on mine.

What's left? This smell  
from seventy smouldering wicks,  
a rare forenoon toll,

the sight of his tomb shining  
from the choir floor  
for as long as I can to sing?

I'll dress in foolish columbine  
and strip a songbird's wing.

## Self-Portrait, Filippino Lippi, c. 1485

You're there, ahead of the exhibition,  
gazing from your grazed surface,

lips parted, eyes knowing  
just enough to penetrate your viewer.

I'm taken in.  
As I notice your re-drawn ear  
I believe in the warmth of your cheek,  
the recess within your chin.

Your stasis stands as a moment  
when a boy-man glances my way,

when hair, lips, lines and paint  
adhere in a look,  
triggering my blood to tilt.

## Landscape and Portrait

There's rain enough to re-surface the sea,  
waterfalls—white fissures down the hills.

I'm clouded in, my house enclosed  
with muslin drifts of spray.

Another layer lies between the sky  
and my gentle sitting room.

There are birds painted blue, rubbed with sand,  
frogs jump from rounded bellies,

a mermaid's tears turn to stone.  
Oil paint cradles a giant fish,

gives orange to a bedroom floor,  
sounds a warning temple bell.

Your canvases lie and stand,  
stacked and propped against your life.

I'm keeping them together,  
a textured birth above my head.

You paint me, in my dreams,  
bring sable brushes to our bed.