

## Unexpected Weather

ABI CURTIS writes poetry and fiction and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Sussex, Brighton, where she also completed a doctorate in Creative and Critical Writing. She won an Eric Gregory Award in 2004 and her work appears in various magazines and anthologies. *Unexpected Weather* is her debut collection and is a winner of the Crashaw Prize 2008.

Also by Abi Curtis

PAMPHLET

*Humbug* (The Tall-lighthouse)

# Unexpected Weather

ABI CURTIS



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*for Miles*



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# I: Fata Morgana

*A form of mirage in which images appear in the sky, often inverted or distorted. Named after Morgan le Fey, the sister of King Arthur, who had the power to create such illusions.*



# Lady Jane Grey

*After Paul Delaroche*

You saw it when you were a child  
and your parents took you to the National Gallery,  
up the bank of clean steps and through  
the shifting, polished halls.

This was long before we met.  
You stood with your thin boy's limbs  
before her: Lady Jane, groping  
in her blindfold towards the executioner's block.  
Your breath stopped.

I saw her years later when I was 16,  
about her age, standing on the same spot:  
the creamy spillages of silk  
that made of her the painting's only  
source of light; the lace of her collar against  
a white-pink skin of neck, like a lick  
of foam clinging for a moment to a swan:

the shadows in the fabric's folds about to drop  
and slither back, her fingers reaching for the block  
guided by a man in rough fur and black,  
her small lips closed as if in sleep.

In the background women swoon,  
turning their backs, caressing the grey  
bricks. You saw it. You told me:  
the executioner cocksure in his red tights,  
leaning on the axe, in his face  
a kind of love. This death was private,  
concealed in the tower from an audience,  
but here the bright straw confronts us, spilling

from the canvas, spread like blonde tresses  
around the wooden block,  
ready to soak in the blood.  
According to the books she only panicked once,  
crying blindly,  
*What shall I do? Where is it?*  
seeking the place to lay her head,  
hoping it would be quick. Almost eager.

Once, I didn't know you.  
It seems unlikely, unforgivable.  
I think of this painting as a portal:  
the many shades of grey in the stone background  
suggest a staircase, a door, elsewhere.  
Wait, show me where to reach my hands.  
Wait—  
I'm not ready.

## Loom

It comes slowly on a web of mist.  
Enlarged and indistinct, billowing  
on easy gales dropped like stones  
through the water of the wind.  
It comes slowly through a weave of indigos  
and greys, the warp and weft  
of the dawn weather,  
sliding the sea into the land.  
I view the guillemot and wonder,  
how *loom* can name its meat,  
as well as that which towers over,  
that which weaves;  
and who might eat a flying thing?  
Spread the spindles of its wings,  
split its crying beak and glean  
only a breast of flesh  
from beneath a film of feather.  
It comes so slowly  
stretching its limits  
like milk in a bowl of water.  
So slow, it moves backwards.  
While I wait, I watch the twist  
of a blue-furred caterpillar  
inseparable from its own white wires.  
The sun shuttles overhead  
and as the boat approaches  
it shrinks to take an outline that suggests  
my dark room turned inside out,  
the overlaying drift and push of us,  
the reconciliation of our silhouette.

## Death by Lightning

I left you in the house, your eyes on me,  
suffering from a relative of grief,  
took myself from here to the neighbouring village.  
I don't usually walk, preferring donkey or moped,  
but neither could fare in the weather:  
rain slopped from eaves  
turning the streets to streams.  
Thin fish lost their bearings and followed  
to be found tomorrow, breathless,  
heads in the railings.  
I doubt they knew anything about it,  
sent to sleep by strange air lifting their scales.  
Rain was in my neck, my boots were buckets,  
sky a marbling of dark and unfamiliar faces,  
clouds deep as difficult ideas, luminous at their edges.  
Light cleaved the sky. I counted and wasn't disappointed  
by the sound of a giant piano dropped  
onto a collection of empty cauldrons.  
I smiled: the sky was furious for me  
so I might stay inside the cupboard of my head.  
But soon the water overcame, tipping  
from flat roofs, stabbing from the arms of lampposts.  
Paving slabs lifted to expose whole villages  
of slugs and toads.  
The sea, two miles away, suggested itself on the wind.  
Light revealed a shape at the graveyard gate: a woman under  
a yew older than landscape. Room for two. I joined her,  
politely distant, staring at the knots and carvings in the trunk:  
tracks of every death that's marked elsewhere in stone,  
hems of marriages leaving the gate, home for ivy,  
sheets of frost and mushrooms shelving out like flesh.  
The woman watched the rain as if to concentrate  
on just one drop and shuddered when the thunder  
spread its voice above the leaves.  
She was not beautiful.

She didn't hold her body supple as an animal.  
I could not name her type of smile.  
Later, I learned she felt the shock in her foot;  
shared what I cannot remember.  
I looked up through the branches holding  
tight their fists of leaves.  
I have that image stencilled in my eyelids.  
I smelled the metal in the air and tasted  
nothing.  
You know, if you watch anything through flashes  
of lightning, it appears suspended  
as if life were frame after frame and never moving.  
I was senseless: a snapshot of myself under a canopy.  
I'm still here, now in the living room  
where we question each other.  
I didn't replay memories or gain an answer,  
but I've read the best stuff has the power  
to take off the top of your head.  
You've changed, though you never left this room.  
Every day you run your hands over  
the root-system printed red on my chest  
and in the dark part of your eye  
I detect a storm.

## In-betweens

I can't help noticing,  
tying my shoelaces :  
those eyelets let them through.

That's how it is with you.  
the soft gap of your mouth,  
allowing the traffic

of breaths, whispers and words.  
Pinpricks in your ears for  
threading lines of silver.

The million lips of pores  
are channels for your scent  
into the fibres of

your clothes; in turn fastened  
through their white button holes :  
covering the folded

skin that joins your middle,  
vanishing to the star  
deep inside your belly.

All this, as you're stretching  
to the shelf, sighs living  
beside each strand of hair ;

fingers slipping a book  
into its empty slot,  
toes poised on ladder-rungs.

Are the pages settling?  
Eyes slide round sockets to  
seek me through sifts of dust.

I rise from my lacing,  
try to resist blinking  
to keep what's between us.

## Fata Morgana

From the summit of Elias they saw my dark, elongated towers,  
squares of amber light, a hint of a railway, church spires,  
hanging in reverse over an indigo of polar sea.  
I am a mass of land silent as a whale that features nowhere on the map.  
When they returned, I hadn't waited.

I am colder than you think, at the ground.  
It matters because what settles above is warm  
like the air defying the curve of a valley.  
I have the power to change the shapes  
of sliding boats: you can never be sure  
they will arrive at all.

I don't travel in a straight line, but when you meet my eye  
it may as well be a road,  
continuous as the future  
above which shimmers a promise of water.  
Water above which shimmers a promise  
continuous as the future;  
it may as well be a road  
but when you meet my eye, I don't travel in a straight line.

Will they arrive at all?  
You can never be sure of sliding boats:  
I have the power to change their shapes,  
like the air defying the curve of a valley.  
It matters because what settles above is warm  
and I am colder than you think, at the ground.

When they returned, I hadn't waited.  
I feature nowhere on the map; I am a mass of land silent as a whale,  
hanging in reverse over an indigo of polar sea:  
squares of amber light, a hint of a railway, church spires.  
From the summit of Elias they saw my dark, elongated towers.

## Body Baskets

Take arms, and after you have wrapped them  
about your waist for the last time,  
pull them out to leave round red blocks,  
empty pockets in a torso.

Coax the glowing optics of veins back through  
a needle hole and coil them up neatly,  
let them twinkle at you.

Then slide thumbs across your cheeks,  
with their brush of roughness.  
Pop each chunky digit from its socket.  
(Nails may flash their silver coinage.)

Wolf-legs with their wires of hair,  
pad up the careful stairs;  
wrench hard, then topple them.

Next, sift off milk-film of skins  
that lie over the clicking-sticks of bones.  
Render them kinetic spares.

With ears that gather whispers,  
words mistaken,  
the clacket of office chairs,  
the shimmy of trains in the rain;  
the best thing is to flip them,  
live pancakes,  
then throw them to the oysters.

The tricky nose with its thousand pickle jars  
of wooded walks, of beer-sticky bars,  
delicious runway oil, and summer ending,  
is best poached,  
to turn it white and weary with remembering.

The stomach has done its paunches,  
its lunches by streams,  
its tumbles in stratospheres of cream,  
has felt the touches of cold fingertips  
across its uncooked fleshs,  
light as a cummerbund.  
So forget it.

Turn your attention to  
the strawberry-pips of a pair of lips  
which follow the circuit of a smile to the Eyes.

Eyes orbit  
a delicate root-system of red upon white,  
the deep of their windscreens swallowing light,  
their waters fledged with cygnets.  
Ask them to forgive this,  
then blanché them.

The organs are easy,  
apart from the queasy second-scent of life  
that comes from the lungs:  
the last soft wheeze of their inverted trees.

The heart's not as difficult as you might expect,  
just a bubble of thick fibres,  
just the four-wheel driver  
of everything.

Come close and blood's  
no liquid but a fleet of boats,  
skimming the labyrinth.  
And closer still the atom spins  
back to itself,  
unravelling each filament it finds

as though no more than the light  
of a long-gone constellation,  
or the frayed ends of a ball of twine.

## George Gabriel Stokes

stands upon the Giant's Causeway watching  
Atlantic breakers shape and remake

whites and greens and slatey-blues.  
Clouds answer by opening and bunching like hands  
possessed by a wind that tunnels as blood

through the dark artery of headland.  
He has taken long strides over columns  
of cooled lava and returned

to this place beneath a storm.  
Some believe the Causeway is the work of Finn McCool  
in fierce wrangle with a giant Scot  
crashing his feet until Benbulbin reeled.

George remembers Mary, tired at the stove:  
astronomer's daughter who replaced his God.  
Her skin puckered at the belly for what she gave,  
but nothing more than that to show:

two, the little girls, just stilled like unwound clocks;  
one, the boy, a doctor, pushed morphine through his blood—  
too much. An accident.  
Then something else replaced his God:

George thought of platelets spinning in the body's liquid,  
of vortices living off the height of tall and taller buildings,  
a tear, close-up, re-shaped by breath upon it.

He looks at Dundee Castle, East Portrush, leaning  
at the lip of rock. There was a violent storm here once  
that forced the falling of the kitchen

with a scatter of cooks and cookware across  
the bleak, hexagonal cubes into the broil below.  
George Stokes observes the turning sea, lost  
in calculations and a drifting thought

of Claude Navier, thinking the same before him;  
building bridges at Asnières, Choisy,  
suspended over the Seine,  
watching the hulls of boats churn up the calm.

The Navier-Stokes equations are used to understand motion in gases and liquids.