

Things in a

NEW
POETRY
PROGRAM

**In the tunnel the windows
become mirrors.**

**I want to pick up the lobster phone
And call you...**

An (other) order of things: the souvenirs of the everyday – objects, images, fragments of speech, domestic scenes – are scrutinised through television screens, train windows, cameras and display cases. Apparent transparencies become splintered to create new optics: these ‘things’ collected and contained, far from amortised, suddenly look back at the viewer. This is writing as surprising and familiar as the repressed when it erupts into life; as piercing as pleasure or pain.

Anna Gibbs

Beth Spencer's condensed narratives elide the categories of poetry & prose – she uses poetics to nudge fiction over the edge. Episodic, surreal, tender & tough, these poems traverse suburbs studded with the encoded artefacts of family, popular culture, memory and desire.

Pamela Brown

Beth Spencer's *How to Conceive of a Girl* was runner up for the 1997 Steele Rudd Award for short fiction. Her essays and criticism on a wide range of topics have been published in Australia and overseas and broadcast on ABC Radio National. She has been the recipient of several awards, including *The Age* Short Story Award and the Dinny O'Hearn Memorial Fellowship. A double CD of her radio work, *Body of Words*, and a companion CD-Rom, *Box of Words* – containing fiction, poetry, essays, interviews and class notes – is published by Dogmedia. She has a webpage at www.bethspencer.com.



Glass Box

B E T H S P E N C E R

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SCARP
fip

We go inside.
Inside it's like sex, the colours, the crowd...

This is a silver train.
(Jenny wants the gold medal.)

The art gallery is a house of dreams,
a dream home.

My domestic science teacher
would be impressed.
I know my station in life,
I have the ticket
(see? under my fingernails)

artless

You are in a sleeping car with
your reading glasses on.

Be *careful* going past
Granville...

I am a hillbilly coming down from the mountain

It's affair weather in Sydney

We get lit and walk through the park –
the fairy lights –

You're married, of course,
and I'm just window shopping.

This is my river.

This is my fire.

This is me.

Things in a Glass Box

Beth Spencer



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Safety in numbers: basic maths.
Nobody breaks rank.
You stay with the pack.

(Count upon this /
because the probability is...)

Once on an art excursion
I slipped and dropped a red plastic bucket into the river.
'Well,' Mr Davies said, 'That at least will still be there
in a hundred years.'

I go to university and have dreams
about red trains and blue trains.

One day I meet a young student art teacher
who wants to work at a Technical School.
I ask why.
'Well, they're so good with their *hands*,' she says.

Trains rushing past each other in the night
Clatter clatter

(See this exhibit?
see it's complexion, image, air, cast, colour
/ presence)

(dissect it, analyse it!)

On a train, a boy says to me
'you are so *class* conscious'

(as if I invented it)

I had a thorough education.
altho it depends what it is you are looking for.
Please disregard...
Please overlook...

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(Spectacle 3; a portable block, like everything else)
and sang 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight'
at the top of our voices.

We made chip butties from white bread rolls and potato chips
and shared them out for lunch between us

1st Class, 2nd Class, 3rd Class...

The boys would snigger
when the teacher said 'periods'

I'd get called 'sexy' by the boys at the station
and then they'd yell 'Aw she's flat as a pancake *anyway*'

We were taught to take the measure of things:
(Cu + Sn = ?)

Mr Knightly, our favourite science teacher,
pointing with his two remaining fingers,
doing tricks with bunsen burners and crucibles
& coloured powders.
He was our favourite because
we could always get him
to play the nature films backwards.

At the inter-tech sports we got to run on
a cinders track and once
we got to wear spiked running shoes (borrowed).

Exhibit C –

The sound of thousands of kids banging
cardboard and plastic folders on the seats
in the grandstand: Sunshine Tech,
Lillydale...Faulkner, Coburg, Box Hill,
Railway station suburbs.

Jenny Anderson was bound for the Olympics,
set to set the world on fire, we were *certain*,

Diorama : The Melbourne Museum

Okapi (-ah -) *n.* bright-coloured partially striped
Central-African ruminant discovered 1900,
with likeness to giraffe, deer, and zebra.

- The moth eats
- The museum preserves
- The Okapi arrests

She sits in her glass case
watching the stairs

Feels her danger
but doesn't see, *the tiger*
springing out
teeth bared

Lost) in deep forest

(Found
in 'perpetual
heat
moisture
gloom
& silence'
[in a glass box]

With the smell
of the stone stairs

The smell of the
stonestairs
(like)
schoolgirls

At Blacktown station
a man with red hair and a rough red beard
searches the carriages and comes out empty handed,
arms stretched out in a question mark to someone
unseen, further along

6) the backs of small cheap av jennings homes
with individual marks of improvement
(a sunroom, a porch, a pergola)
and a larger (bosses?) home being built on
the edge of a factory

7) 8) & 9)
a mass of shredded clear plastic spilling out
of a row of red dumpmasters
like frozen smoke

a tangle of wires on an old light pole,
like a delicate sculpture

a boy wearing a 'dah-dah' t-shirt

In the Museum of Fire
Lillydale Tech, 1972

Exhibit A –
Jenny Lovett's bright red socks:

the ones she wore the day
Miss MacIntyre took us to Georges
for a needlework exhibition. Twenty of us
with our hitched up dresses and scruffy shoes
and blue-grey Tech school jumpers
(the colour of the woman's hair
behind the counter) striding heads high
past the \$500 outfits,
the Toorak shoppers. Setting
the store-detectives off like alarm bells
as we passed.

We serve it topped with Ian Turpey's moustache,
go on a *Supermarket Spree* –
trolleys careening around corners
bashing into shelves full of tomato paste and kitty litter.

'You watch these important words,' Ian says.
'No spread works *harder* than *Becel!*'

I take my string bag when I visit the shops,
and push 'pause' before I leave.
(Under the sink: a small forest of paper bags,
a strip-mine of aluminium bottle-tops.)

Then one of Mr Douglas's 3 sons
has another lot, who'd each be
big enough to have three more
if this was real.

– The world never stops!

It keeps ticking, ticking.

I lay out my lives (nine, ten, a dozen)
in a long straight line...
or I channel flick and take them all at once.

Laugh,
cry,
go red

with excitement
till my heart
click, clicks:
a small
time bomb.

(*Pure emotion*. 'How does it feel
– your house burnt down?')

I want a red car,
so I jump up and touch the ceiling rose with my fingertips.
The dust, the artificial pink...

Then oil wells flame in a desert storm,
a sea turns black and thick
& fish belly up, while we ring for Pizza

The chimney stacks:
(no comment)

The skyline glitters
out of reach
like a big birthday cake
for someone's party that the rejected are
too dejected to go to
(and weren't invited in the first place)

We are the world's nocturnal shuffling creatures,
hunched shoulders, long thin overcoats
pale lined faces.

Short, fat, balding, beautiful, long-legged,
smart, witty, dull and mean.
We come in all types.
Shuffling through the trees,
leaning against the white rail,
knocking our heads against lamp-posts
doing hand-stands in the dark,
avoiding the dog shit

'We are the rejected,' we shout and we hear the echoes
and sighs all around us in the bushes and on the benches,
a woman is kneeling at the white rail.

'Hmmm... Hmm...' says the water.

'We are the rejected!' we shout.
'Not my problem' say the cars going up the hill (somewhere).

We are the weepers,
the left,
the ones with
big question marks in our eyes
the ones still hoping.

Gnawed fingernails, chewed hair.

'We are REJECTED!'

'Hmm.. Hmm..' says the water.

We are the rejected.

fetish/eyes

A foot pressed gently on a foot
& your heart lurches
Not your foot, but your foot —
your foot on the way to the party,
your foot in bed at night
inching up your spine, curled, bare —
your foot that you've tasted, felt, loved.
Your foot being gently pressed by another
and your heart lurches
and you pretend you didn't see
what you saw: a foot on a foot (gently)...

Eleven

i put the chocolate egg for Janet
in the hole in the wall
where the vent was busted.

Janet. thin boy's body.
freckles. blue plastic glasses.
rabbit smile. owl eyes.
lover lover lover lover.

i put the egg for Janet
in the hole in the wall
(where the vent was busted).

Your poems are controlled
and rhythmic and full of commas
little fences for your thoughts,
pegging them to the past, to the land, to 'universals,'
while mine flit all over the place,
erratic, like my driving.

What can I say when I find out you drive a volvo?
(Of course.)

You wait for me to say something
but I don't, and that makes you even angrier.

Even now I feel compelled to write
'It was a very old volvo'; to be fair
because it made a difference, to you.

I say over dinner that meeting you
has changed my attitude to marriage:
I envy your wife and daughters
(meaning: I envy you,
for having a wife and daughters – a little joke).

It all sounds so nice...

But you're the perfect father with your huge ornate
'Family Life' belt buckle
like a wrought iron gate keeping
the family jewels locked up tight.

Back home you write letters to the girls
from the fairies,
putting them in a box under the willow tree
with a few leaves.

The youngest one is on to you,
too smart for her own good:
'This fairy writes an awful lot like you, Dad.
You're sure it isn't you?'

And you lie carefully to
keep her believing in things.

and the second hand has caught on the minute hand
and repeats and repeats...

Then you walk in.
– the house creaks and tips back into place
– your smile billows and the kitchen becomes a sailing boat
You stamp the kettle on the ring
and the jets flare.

Shutter Moment

In the Barber's window of childhood
the styptic woman
keeps faithful to her man.

Inside, where Captain Blood croons
and the crowds roar
a barber is putting california poppy
on my father's hair.

On the edge of a halo of brown curls
flecked with grey, I kick my heels against a red chair.
And on the ceiling, far up, a mosquito clings,
legs like the fine black ribs of a parachute.

In the corner a pot plant waves shiny leaves,
but I don't listen.

If I sit *very* still with my knees together
so quiet my breath won't disturb a thing,
so silent not even the mosquito notices

I can touch a finger to the mirror,
feel the velvet tips
of my new blue coat,
count all the letters of my name,
and wait to go home.

I like the sound of lollies
not just the taste:
I tell myself this.

And tonight on PRISONER:
Jessie drinks the brew
Lou has laced
with draincleaner.

Falling for you all over again

for Chris

Once I came up here with you and
after an afternoon walking on the cliffs
looking down into the Jamison Valley
facing drop after drop, sheer heights,
wind, nothing, everything,
we rode on your bike
down the mountains in the rain,
and with my cheek against your warm back
I could close my eyes and
dream that I was flying.

(Mouth) poem

I opened my mouth and you slid in
and now I'm holding onto you, withholding
missing you, possessed of you
bitter & bitten
can't spit it out.

In the museum I visit the Egyptian Room, while my mother knits
in the park. The room is dark with lit tables. Long gold boxes
with smooth serious carved faces and black-rimmed eyes. The
Egyptians, says a sign, 'were great sensualists and lovers'. Under
glass on the table is an unwrapped mummy's foot, withered and
yellow. *Note* the painted toenails: says the sign.

The People's Palace Hotel is four storeys high. The back stairs are
long and precarious. In the Ladies' Room there are two baths, both
of them deep and stained, with clawed feet. We wash in the basin.
All night long there is a shuffling and moaning in the hall-way
and in the mornings we purchase tickets for breakfast – sausages
and toast. I feel like a queen as I buy opal chips in a street stall and
thumb my way through brown paperbacks at ten cents each.

For fifteen days we sit by the white bed. It is necessary, this
idleness, like too few seats. A penance for our guilt.

The nurses come and stand by my brother and smile. They hold
his wrist in their hands, count out his pulse against little watches
pinned to their breasts. He opens his mouth and they press a
thermometer between his lips. They touch him deftly as they shift
the sheets around his body, as if they have known him all their
lives.

In the afternoon my mother takes a photograph of me dipping my
hand in the fountain at King George V Square. I am wearing my
bridesmaid shoes and my second best dress. I wear my hair like a
model and smile up at the camera.

*Withdrawing the hooklike instrument, he chose another. This one was
a narrow, spirally twisted rod that had a small spoon-like tip. Pushing
this up into the cranial cavity, he began, slowly, bit by bit, to draw out
the brain through the nose, discarding each piece as he went along.*

One day, instead of the hospital, we take a taxi and search among
the tall weeds at the Adelaide cemetery for my grandfather's grave.
My mother has a photo and a number.

The Witches Sabbat / Bonfire Night

- 1) Sirens in the suburbs
trains rushing
and you snap my heart like a piece of chalk
- 2) We drank mother's-ruin and cheap champagne
the firecrackers explode an exact seven seconds

(the next day: the littered yard)
(a soft pile of white ash)
- 3) In the park
the red feet of a homing bird
circle the grass

a black dog and a white dog
- 4) a girl bends to light a cigarette,
& a child's hair catches fire in the sun.

Breaking Ice (getting to know you)

in and out of the room the ex-
girlfriends slam like so many doors

my feet burn
hair tied together in knots

the inquisitors are silent, breathless
they mouth their questions to the walls

in the hollow of my stomach
a chant begins: *guilty! guilty!*

(Everywhere I walk, everytime
in the rooms the crowds vanish...)

Somehow this flaw in the familiarity we seek is even more
upsetting than the traffic noise and the shuffling in the hall-way at
the People's Palace.

More upsetting even than the woman with the withered yellow
skin who called to us from the steamy depths of one of the baths
while we were washing in the basins. 'Pass some soap, love' – her
voice dry and cracked. My mother and sister stiffen, and say
nothing, but I take the soap to her and get to see the brown patch
of hair between her legs and the way it ripples and moves when
she reaches across to take the soap from my hand. Her toenails are
painted red and there is an empty glass on the floor.

In the watery green corridor of the hospital after church, we pass
quickly by a grieving family outside a closed door.

My brother tells us stories about the other patients. The handsome
motorbike rider in the corner, asleep now, after being smuggled out
last night to a party with the nurses. The wheelchair races up and
down the hall at night. The nurses come again and touch him and
take his pulse.

My mother keeps her knitting in her bag. We alternate ourselves
amongst the too few chairs. We take turns with the water fountain.

My brother sleeps during the day, and stays awake at night.

Somewhere in the hospital is the little girl from the white car.

*The priest wearing the jackal mask approached the body, which had
been turned slightly on its right side, exposing the left flank. The tent
throbbed with the soft, rhythmic chantings of the priests...The masked
priest dipped a small rush pen into a pot of ink, then drew on the left
side of the body a spindle-shaped line about 5 inches long.*

The whiteness of the hospital, and the yellowness of the museum,
this is how I spend my days. And at night, the People's Palace.