

# Mother

Nine Scenes

alternative / performance text

Daniel Keene

All goes unanswered, love is unanswered, out of the dark  
A tongue without speech, a hand without touch, a crude potter's thumb,  
Grooves us a moment, the Esperanto of sense  
Jabbers our language, all that we hold in common.  
Yet wings make grubs articulate, cocoons are spun for shattering,  
And though you keep your hand over my mouth,  
I will keep on singing, dry cicada under the spring.

*Dorothy Hewett*  
*from Unanswered Love Letter*

**Christie**

She is about sixty years old. Her hair is long and unkempt. She wears a ragged, floral patterned dress that reaches to the ground. Her feet are bare, almost black with dirt.

## **Prologue**

Are you listening? they asked me

I listened

I crawled under the bed

Are you hiding from us? they said

I didn't answer

I said I was a good mother

They said I was a bad mother

I didn't know what they meant

That moment in the doorway

I reached for the light switch in the dark

I switched on the light

I saw him lying in his bed

I stood there in the blazing light

his eyes were turned to me

turned into me

I was a good mother

they told me

I stood in the doorway

and I could see him

looking at me

Are you listening? they asked me

Do you know what you've done?

I listened

He didn't move

## One

*Christie picking through rubbish on a block of vacant ground*

*Crows calling*

*Bruised sky*

*Rust and rot*

yes

that night when Lenny come home he smelt the drink on my lips

he said what's that

he knew what that was

how many times do I have to tell you he said

he'd told me a hundred thousand times

I don't know I said how many times

you promised you wouldn't he said

I know I did I said

what good's your promises he said you addled bitch

I'm not addled I said I'm as good as gold

funny he said you're funny

I'm not trying to be I said

I was often funny when I wasn't trying to be as far as Lenny was concerned

you don't know what's funny and what's not he said

I know more than you think I know I said

that's not much then he said you know next to nothing

next to nothing is not nothing I said it's something

and you don't know what it is I said

I don't want to know what it is he said

you do I said I can tell you want to know

no I don't he said I don't want to know nothing about you

then why'd you marry me I asked him

because I was lonely he said

I was lonely too I said

so that's what happened and we're not lonely any more are we I said

he just looked at me with that look he'd get now and then  
and I couldn't tell what he was thinking  
but I knew it wasn't anything good

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I took a drink because I needed a rest I explained to him  
I needed a rest because of the baby who was very fractious today  
very what he said

very fractious I said

what's that mean he said

the nurse at the clinic told me I said

she said I had a very fractious child

and do you know what it means he said

yes I said the nurse at the clinic explained it to me

explain it to me he said

I don't want to I said

because I'd forgotten what it meant exactly

except that there was a lot of crying involved

because the baby isn't comfortable in himself I said

what's wrong with him Lenny said

it's nothing serious I said he's got the gripe and he's not happy

a baby that little's not happy or sad he said he's too young

he doesn't know what he is

he doesn't have to know what he is I said

just because he doesn't know he's sad doesn't mean he's not sad

I thought he was fractious Lenny said

you don't even know what it means I said

neither do you he said

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don't drink that stuff he said

where do you get it from he said

I'm not saying I said

then I didn't say anything else

and he just looked at me like I was a mad woman

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it was from Mrs Kennedy that I got the drink  
she lived two doors up the street  
she was as old as a stone  
she was kind to me when I needed a bit of relief  
she was as mad as a budgie  
but she knew how to mix a few things together  
common stuff you could get anywhere  
it was her mother's recipe from when times were worse she said  
and I laughed when she said that  
and so did she  
when did it get easier she said  
history doesn't happen to the poor  
and then she laughed again  
and I didn't know what she meant or what I should say  
but she didn't seem to care

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turpentine was in it I know that much  
I always had it with a bit of powdered milk mixed in to help it down  
she called it the good stuff  
better than anything you could buy in the shops she said  
and I gave her a little payment for it when I could  
although she always said I didn't need to pay her  
but I always did when I could afford to

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Lenny sat down at the kitchen table and I gave him his dinner like a good wife is  
supposed to  
and he ate it while I sat looking out the window  
aren't you eating he said  
I'm not hungry I said  
have you fed the baby he said  
of course I have I said  
what did you feed him  
I fed him mashed banana  
is that all

that's all he needs  
how do you know he said  
because I'm his mother I said what would you feed him  
of course he didn't know what he'd feed him  
you know nothing about children I said  
then Lenny didn't say nothing for a while  
he just fiddled with the food on his plate  
like a little boy who can't get his own way  
which is what he was like when he couldn't think of what to say  
which was very often the case

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I can't sit here all night I said I've got things to do  
no one's asking you to sit here all night he said  
what have you got to do you can hardly walk straight he said  
have you washed the baby's clothes at least  
yes I have I said he hasn't got many  
they're out hanging on the line if you want to take a look  
of course he couldn't take a look because it was dark by now  
and there was no light out in the yard  
when are you going to fix that light I said  
he didn't answer me  
he just stood up and scraped what was left on his plate into the bin  
that's a waste I said all that food you're throwing out  
it's not much he said  
didn't you like it I said  
no I didn't he said  
so that was dinner over and done with

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I woke up in the middle of the night and the bed was empty beside me  
so I got up and went to the bedroom door  
and I stood there listening  
and I heard Lenny singing to the baby  
and it was like the baby was singing back  
gurgling and whispering with that tiny voice of his



and it sounded so far away  
as if the baby being so young made him a long way from us  
and there was his dad trying to sing him back  
to sing him back home to us

## **Two**

*Christie on an empty street*

*Footfalls*

*Stink of diesel*

*Rain*

I've got nothing  
I never had much but I've got nothing now  
for some people that's as good as me being a criminal  
I'm treated like a criminal  
the looks I get are terrible  
I have to turn away  
I don't know what my face must look like  
I hope that it doesn't look like I feel  
I'd hate to think I looked like that  
I don't want my feelings on show because I'm ashamed of them  
I never thought I'd feel like I do when people look at me  
I never thought I'd feel so worthless  
I couldn't have imagined such a thing  
I imagined different things about myself  
I forget what they were  
but they were better  
I thought better of myself  
I don't think anything about myself now  
I've given all that up  
I wouldn't know how to any more  
I don't know who I am

I'm just nobody

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who knows what I might have been  
or even who I was once upon a time  
there's no what might have been and no what will be any more  
I wake up every day thinking it might be my last  
and sometimes I lie down at night wishing it had been

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a little boy chased me a few weeks ago  
like a wild little bird he was  
pecking at my heels and calling me all sorts of names  
he couldn't have been more than ten years old  
but the language he used would have shamed a fucking navy  
you get away from me I said you get back home where you belong  
but he didn't take no notice  
he just kept at me like a magpie peck peck pecking  
so I had to turn around to him and lift my hand  
I said to him if you don't leave me alone I'll give you a crack around the ear hole  
and then he laughed he cackled  
you've got arseholes for ear holes he said  
haven't you got nothing better to do than cause me fucking trouble I said  
no he said I fucking haven't  
so I took a swing at him and caught him right across the top of the head  
and his head was as hard as a rock  
he just stood there looking at me  
cunt he said you old cunt piss off out of my street you old cunt  
it's not your street I said  
anyone who wants can walk down this street and no one's got a right to stop them  
you stink he said  
I might stink I said but I know my rights  
and I've got manners too which is more than I can say for you  
cunt he said sneering at me like a mad rat  
so I leaned down close to him  
I looked right into his screwed up little face and I said listen

I said you go home and tell the cunt you came out of that she's got a cunt for a son  
and he didn't say nothing after that  
so I just turned and went on my way as if I didn't have a care in the world  
but my heart was racing and I could hardly walk  
I felt so weak and I suppose I was afraid  
not of that kid but of everything  
I was suddenly afraid of everything in the world

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so that's how I'm treated on a regular basis  
but I've learned how to stick up for myself  
which is something I only learned very late  
the rest of my life I was never able to say a good word for myself  
and was never able to stop those that wanted to hurt me from hurting me  
there's some people who like nothing better than to come at you like a rabid dog  
and there's nothing you can do to protect yourself  
but you have to learn to take the slings with the arrows as they say  
and look after yourself as best you can  
no matter how bruised and battered you might feel  
which in my case is most of the time

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I've not seen that little rat-face again  
I think I must have put the wind right up him  
I've walked down that street of his other times and he hasn't shown his face  
he had a sweet face really when it wasn't screwed up with hatred  
that's what it was it was hatred  
it's a hard thing to see it in someone so young  
but it's not a surprise to me any more  
I've seen it more than once  
I can't account for it  
I suppose there's all kinds of reasons someone so young can be so sour inside  
I wonder if my little boy would have turned out the same  
but I find it hard to think that he would have  
he would have been kind I'm sure of it  
all he knew was kindness

but maybe that don't matter  
maybe he would have forgotten all of that  
when he got out into the world and had his heart broken  
most likely he would have been too weak to defend himself against all the cruelties he  
    would have found  
but he was spared all that  
he was spared it like I haven't been  
I'm the one who's got hard  
and he's stayed as soft as he was  
which is a kind of blessing  
for him I mean  
a blessing for him  
/  
it's not a blessing for me

### **Three**

*Christie in a Rest Home armchair*

*Dust*

*Stillness*

*Last words ill-heard*

they let me in here when I'm too down in the dumps to stay outside  
outside is where I'm happiest  
but even the happiest times can turn miserable  
that's as easy done as said  
sometimes it happens so quick that I think to myself I'm living in a dream  
you're dreaming Christie I say to myself  
you were always dreaming that's the truth I know it is  
I'm not afraid of the truth  
I never have been  
I may have avoided it now and then  
but it wasn't being afraid of it that made me

not afraid for myself anyway  
it was always other people who couldn't be told  
who mustn't be told  
you tell some people the truth and they can't take it in  
it ruins them  
I've seen it  
/  
I had to tell my father he was dying  
my mother couldn't do it I can't do it  
Christie I can't do it she said slobbering like an old dog  
so I had to  
the doctor said it might be best coming from one of the family  
and I was all the family there was  
/  
my father was in some shit hole of a place where they put the terminal  
the poor ones anyway  
but he didn't catch on  
he was a bit gone in the head by then  
his liver was gone completely  
but he liked to think that he'd battle on  
he always thought that he could battle on  
I think that being pissed most of the time helped him think so  
but I had to walk in there and tell him he was on his way out  
so I got led into the public ward by the nurse  
who drew the screens around us as quiet as you like  
then she was off  
I thought there was no use beating around the bush  
so I just come out with it as plain as I could make it  
you're dying dad I said they told me that you're dying  
he didn't speak  
he just stared at me like he didn't know who I was  
then he shut his eyes  
that was the last I saw of him  
he was dead that night

I've often wondered what would have happened if I'd told him he was doing good  
and that there was nothing to worry about  
he might have hung on a bit longer  
although I don't know what for seeing the state he was in  
it would make the cat weep  
he was as yellow as old wallpaper and weak as a baby  
it was me telling him that killed him  
it was knowing he was dying that was the cause of death

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I know that I'll be dead one day as well  
but I'm not going to let knowing that kill me

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there are mad old women in here all dying from one thing or another  
some of them are going quietly they hardly wrinkle the sheets  
there's others who don't stop moaning day and night  
oh I'm in pain they say in terrible pain  
well pain's all relative isn't it love  
we're all in fucking pain one way or another I tell them

I've got no time for pain

I've got no interest in it

how can I be interested in something as common garden as pain  
it'd be like being interested in breathing

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they call this place a rest home

it's a laugh isn't it

the next stop's the morgue and everyone knows it

there's a room out the back where they put the corpses before they're carted off

they've offered me a bed but I said no

you might as well put me straight into a coffin as into a bed in this place

I've got no intention of dying just at the moment I tell them

it's all charity in here of course

it's all about the good deeds of the few to ease the suffering of the many

there's a lot of that goes on

I don't know what good it does anyone

I saw an old girl sitting in a bus stop not long ago  
dead as a doornail she was  
her little bit of shopping on the bench beside her  
she didn't know what hit her probably  
but there she was doing what she always did when she dropped off the twig  
not stuck in a bed among strangers all waiting for the end  
it's like walking the fucking plank as far as I'm concerned  
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I used to have the baby in bed with me when he was very new  
he was like a little hot water bottle

Lenny didn't like it much

I can't get to you he said

get to me for what I said

you know what he said

well I'm not interested in that right at the moment I said

when will you be he said

I don't know I said I've got other things on my mind

what things he said

I'm a new mother now I said and my life's changed

I've got to sort myself out

sort what out he said

how do I know I said I'm just getting started

what am I supposed to do in the meantime he said

you have to be patient I said

he didn't like that too much

but I wasn't budging

and I put my arms around the baby and lifted him up and laid him on my belly

we haven't thought of a name yet I said

what should we call him

call him anything you like said Lenny

you have to like the name too I said

he didn't say nothing

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I think Lenny didn't know the baby very well

so he didn't know what to call him  
but he knew how to love him  
/  
yes he loved him I know that  
/  
something from the bible I said that's always good  
a name that means something and that you can read stories about  
how about Jacob I said  
Lenny said that sounds like a Jewish name  
and I said it was a Jewish name  
and Lenny said we're not Jewish  
we're not anything I said  
but Lenny didn't want a Jewish name  
why don't you want him to have a Jewish name I said  
Lenny didn't answer he just shrugged  
what about Abraham I said just to have a laugh  
for fuck's sake Lenny said  
Irish names were out too  
and so were any of the names of the royal family who were just scum the lot of them  
    according to Lenny  
there aren't many names left I said  
what about Lenny he said  
but that's your name I said  
it can be his name too he said  
I wouldn't know who was who I said  
yes you would he said  
and I knew I would I suppose  
but I wasn't sure the baby wanted to be called Lenny  
he wants his own name I said  
it would be his name Lenny said  
but it's your name as well I said  
what's wrong with my name he said  
there's nothing wrong with your name I said  
I think it's a beautiful name it's a beautiful name because it suits you



how does it suit me he said  
it just does because that's who you are I said  
you're Lenny  
what would you rather be called I said  
you could have your name changed if you wanted  
I don't want my bloody name changed he said  
if you changed your name then we could call the baby Lenny and there wouldn't be  
any mix ups  
what would I be called he said  
I don't know I said  
how about Adam  
and I could change my name to Eve  
you're a bloody idiot he said  
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so we called the baby Lenny and Lenny stayed Lenny as well

## **Four**

*Christie in a church*

*Cold light*

*Brief echoes*

*Smell of priest*

when I was left alone with the baby I called him something else  
I called him Beau  
because I read somewhere that Beau means beautiful  
I never told Lenny  
/  
those were lovely times alone with Beau  
I'd make a nest with the bed clothes  
and we'd lie in there in the afternoon all dozy  
and I'd make little cooing and whistling sounds  
and pretend that we were all alone in the world

all alone in the big tree I imagined we were in  
I imagined the sky and the sunshine on our wings and the grubs I'd feed Beau  
and I'd peck at him with my fingers peck peck  
I'd hold him high in the air over my head  
and he'd look down at me and he was flying  
and he wasn't afraid  
he was a bird as much as the bird just outside the window or in the tree in the front  
yard or in the sky over the house  
and I'd forget about the damp in the passage and the paint peeling in the kitchen  
and the cupboards empty most days and the hole in my one pair of stockings  
and the stink of the sewer from the drain out the back  
and the drink I kept hidden in the laundry under the trough  
I didn't need a drink or the sorrow and the tears that came with it  
nor the ache in my guts after  
and I'd forget Lenny in the kitchen doorway when he come home from work  
his face black with the heaviness of the day  
and me less than he wanted me to be  
and him less than himself  
/  
they were beautiful days  
/  
I come in here to bless myself with the holy water  
and to have a bit of a wash if no one's watching  
the water's so cold  
you think they'd warm it when they pour it over a baby's head  
but they don't  
no wonder the poor little buggers cry when they're baptised  
but I suppose that's another coming into the world  
your head soaked in cold water  
and someone jabbering at you about God and the devil  
I don't believe in God and I'd be surprised if he believed in me  
he'd be a cruel bastard if he did exist  
still I like to bless myself now and then  
it's got nothing to do with God

I like to be blessed by the water  
being blessed means everything's not so bad for a moment  
for a few seconds

it's just you and the cold water

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I saw God in a dream once  
he was an eye in a black cloud  
the cloud was like a giant rock in the sky  
and the eye was all milky white like a soft boiled egg  
and he was looking looking looking

/

Lenny come home one night and the baby was crying  
I was sitting at the kitchen table with my hair hanging down  
and all the weight of the world on me where too much of the drink had put it  
I couldn't answer

I couldn't hear the baby crying

I looked up at Lenny and I said he's alright I said he's been good today  
and Lenny's off through the house down the dark passage narrow as a gutter  
his big man's shoulders banging on the walls

his big boots thumping

he's off through the house like an animal down the shoot

his rough hands swinging his eyes dark as a cold night

and into the front room where flies were buzzing

the baby's nappy full of shit

a crust of snot under his nose

belly-up on the carpet his arms flung out like he was waiting for the nails

he's good I said he's good I shouted from the kitchen chair

christ there's me as well you know

in this coffin of a house you nail it shut every morning you go out the door

then Lenny come back into the kitchen holding the baby

liar I said liar

you said you loved me

I'm still here I said

don't you dare lay a hand on me

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there were other nights I don't remember how many  
the baby crying and Lenny as quiet as a stone standing in front of me  
his face tired and pale and his tired hands around my hands  
Christie he'd say Christie  
and then he didn't know what to say  
and I didn't know what he was asking or what he wanted  
and I could feel the drink coming up in my throat  
and the stink on my lips  
and I wanted to howl but nothing would come out  
nothing

/

then one night I woke up and the bed was empty beside me  
and the baby was just a round hollow in the pillow where his head had been lying

## **Five**

*Christie on a park bench*

*Birds' wings*

*Shadows*

*Wet earth*

my mother told me she told me so  
the old hag gnawed her gums her breasts flat as plates under her cardigan  
I told you she said I told you you'd never be a good mother  
like you weren't I said  
she slapped me with her flat iron of a hand and my nose bled

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she was sitting in her rented room at the back of a cobbler's  
the cobbler pounding nails the other side of the wall  
the place stank of shoe polish and glue  
and her rotting towards seventy

/

what did you come here for she said  
I can't do anything I can't change anything  
I don't want anything changed I said  
I want everything like it was  
she said nothing just stared at me  
and she had cockroaches for eyes  
I'm going mad I said  
don't make me laugh she said  
and the cockroaches were crawling down her cheeks  
you were mad when you married that man  
and the cockroaches were sitting on her lips  
I told you he was no good she said  
and the holes where her eyes had been had been stitched shut with black thread  
don't look at me like that she said  
and cockroaches swarmed in her mouth  
I'm going mad I said  
mama please  
and I reached out to pull the thread from her eyes  
mama please  
but she couldn't hear me any more  
and I saw her shrink down in her chair to a lump of threads  
like something the cat sicked up  
mama I said please  
I'm going mad  
/  
Lenny sent me a note  
I'm at my sister's are you straightened out yet it said  
I was straight as a broom handle  
I went round there in a clean dress and my hair combed  
are you coming back I asked him  
he looked at me hard his fists jammed down in his pockets  
where's the baby I said  
my sister's taking care of him he said  
your fucking sister I said

and I could see his neck tighten  
are you straight he said  
so I breathed in his face  
what do you smell I said  
toothpaste he said  
I'm allowed to brush my teeth I said  
then I heard the baby crying  
he wants me I said  
he doesn't know you're here said Lenny  
of course he does I said babies can tell if their mothers are close I said  
they can smell them or something  
if you don't smell of grog then how can he know it's you said Lenny  
don't break my heart I said  
haven't you got any feeling I said  
he just stood there like a tombstone  
and I suddenly come over all dizzy  
and I fell  
I fell right there on the front doorstep  
and that bastard didn't even bend down to pick me up

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I was still on my hands and knees when I saw Beau coming down the passage  
he was on his hands and knees as well  
as he come towards me  
he must have thought I was playing

/

we had a lovely time until Lenny said I had to go and picked up the baby  
I said I was taking the baby with me  
and he said not on your life  
I said the baby was my life  
and Lenny just stood there with the baby in his arms and said pig's arse he is  
that's when I started howling and couldn't stop  
I could hear myself howling like an animal  
it didn't sound like me  
it was just a sound coming out of me

I didn't know where it was from  
Lenny's face went white and he pulled the baby close  
and he put out his arm and pushed me back out the front door  
and I was left standing on the step when the door shut

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I was still howling when the cops came  
now missus they said what's all this  
now missus they said  
and one of them put his hand around my wrist  
I could feel his wedding ring pressing into me right on the bone  
so I took a swing at him and caught him on the side of his head  
and his hat flew off  
and then I was in the van  
and I was carted off like a lump of fucking meat

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the police know all kinds of people who say they want to help you  
they can't help you  
because they don't know what you need  
you can't tell them what you need  
you don't know what it is  
it might be money  
most of the time it would be money  
but you can't ask for money  
they haven't got any money to give you  
and money's not the answer they say  
not the answer to what  
to whatever's bothering you  
being poor's bothering you  
but apparently money's not the answer  
if it isn't I don't know what is

/

after that day I visited on Sunday afternoons  
with Lenny leaning over me like a warden  
I whispered Beau in the baby's ear so Lenny couldn't hear me

and the baby giggled

Lenny's sister was always there

she had a keyhole for a face

thin as a ferret and a church goer of course

as barren as a plank and just as hard

/

Lenny was like a little kid in front of her

I knew he loved me

I could see it in his eyes when he looked at me with the baby in my arms

but he couldn't let her see that look

I knew what she thought of me

he had to think it too when she was around

and she was always around

she stuck to Lenny like shit to a blanket

/

it was an stinking summer

the country dried out

cockatoos came into town from the hills

screeching over Brunswick and Collingwood

they sat on telephone poles and tram wires

gangs of them screaming like banshees

when they shook their feather clouds of red dust came off them like smoke

they sat along the guttering of the Rising Sun Hotel

and on the chimneys of the Grace Darling in Smith Street

their beaks stuck open going mad with hunger

dust storms blew in and the sky went dark yellow

you'd have to shut your eyes and mouth

I put a scarf around my head like an Arab

and pushed against the wind down Johnson Street my dress flapping like a sail

I cadged drinks in The Prince Patrick and The Crown

and at the Leinster Arms in Gold Street

until they barred me for being a nuisance

and I had to stay outside with the cockies dying of thirst

/



I saw Mrs Kennedy most days  
and she gave me some of her good stuff to get me through  
because she knew how it was she said  
you could see she'd had a rough time or two  
there was something in her eyes that told you she'd seen the worst  
she never said nothing about herself and I never asked  
I just told her that I thought she was a good woman  
I don't know what that is she said  
but I know you've got to survive no matter what  
and I don't know whether that makes you good or bad  
/  
I wanted to ask if she thought I was good or bad  
but I didn't dare

## **Six**

*Christie inside a derelict house*

*Cold rooms*

*Rats scratching*

*Stains*

when Lenny stopped paying the rent on the house I went round to his sister's place to  
see him and he wouldn't even let me inside  
so I stood there on the front step like a fucking beggar  
and he told me that I could move in with him and his sister  
there was a sleepout I could have  
he wasn't paying for a place where he didn't live  
and I said aren't you coming back  
but he didn't answer  
you'd be close to the baby was all he said  
and so you and your sister can keep eye on me I said  
I'm thinking about you and the baby he said  
oh yeah I said

I might as well be a corpse as in that sleepout I said  
what kind of life would I have living like that out the back  
with eyes on me day and night  
what kind of a life have you got now he said  
my own life I said  
I want what's best he said  
best for who I said not for me I said  
for the baby for the baby he said  
pig's arse I said  
he should be with me I said  
he should be with his mother  
Christie he said  
Christie have you looked at yourself lately  
every morning when I have a wash I said  
I see myself staring back  
I see that baby's mother  
I see empty arms where a baby should be  
I see hands with nothing to do  
I see a mouth that hasn't been kissed  
I'm dried out with crying I said  
I'm heavy inside like someone's cut me open and stitched a lead weight inside me  
like someone's taken a stick to me  
look in my eyes Lenny  
look in my eyes and tell me what you see  
/  
he didn't say nothing for a while  
he wouldn't look at me  
you can move into the sleepout any time you want he said  
what if I don't want to I said  
then I don't know what you'll do he said  
and that was the end of it  
he turned away shut the door  
/  
I went home and looked at myself

I wanted to see what Lenny had seen  
something had made him turn away from me  
but how can you turn away from yourself  
you've got to see yourself when you're not looking  
you've got to look at yourself as though you're someone else  
how can you do that

/

I sat on the back step of the house that wasn't mine any more  
I sat there as night-time filled the back yard  
all the green weeds and the flowers I'd planted  
and the vegetables dying in the plots that Lenny had dug  
were all disappearing into the dark  
and I tried to see myself  
to see what Lenny saw and what my mother saw  
and what the baby saw  
I saw my hands on Lenny's skin  
and my hands holding the baby's tiny hands  
and I saw my arms around my mother  
helping her into bed and all her ruined life like sweat on her skin  
and I saw my face against Lenny's face  
on our pillows in our bed in our house that wasn't ours any more  
and I saw my baby's face still raw from being inside me pressed into my soft belly  
and I saw my arms red from the hot water in the trough  
and my hands wringing out the sheets and hanging them on the clothesline  
I saw my face rounded on the side of an empty bottle  
and staring at me from the window of the Rising Sun Hotel  
I saw my face bruised by the back of my father's hand  
and I saw my face kissed by Lenny  
I saw my face in the black glass of the kitchen window when the night was late  
and I was sat there my hands on my knees and my hair hanging down  
and the baby crying in the front room  
I saw my face the way I'd never seen it and the way I'd always seen it  
and I looked out into the back yard  
where the washing on the clothes line flapped like a bird against the cold of the sky

and that was all I saw

/

I don't remember the next days

just Mrs Kennedy feeding me the good stuff

me not much of myself just in pieces

and the looks of neighbours

like sharpened knives when I shut the house behind me

and left for good

/

I left the key in the door

I never went back

nobody lived there any more

## **Seven**

*Christie in a narrow lane*

*Reek of piss*

*Junkies' leavings*

*Shine of puddles*

the trains went by on the Upfield line behind Lenny's sister's house

I was welcome in the house at dinner time

and I could lay the baby down to sleep at night

I'd sing him a song but I knew he was forgetting who I was

they pushed him to church on Sundays

but I wouldn't go

Lenny's sister pushed the pram like the fucking baby was hers

I laughed

I said if it was hers it must have been an immaculate conception

/

the trains went by to Upfield and back

the mirror rattled on the wall when they passed

and my face in the mirror trembled

I went in and out as much as I liked  
I used the back gate and down the sideway  
I didn't go through the house  
when I heard Beau crying in the night I put my ear against the window of the sleepout  
I heard Lenny singing to him from across the yard  
/

all the houses were grey and all the people in the houses were grey  
the whole world was like an old photograph that had been left in the sun  
the edges of the world were curled up and brittle  
I stopped wearing shoes

I thought if I wore shoes I'd tear a hole in the world and fall through  
I don't know where I thought I'd end up  
but I stepped as light as bird

I kept to the lanes

I knew all the lanes between Collingwood and Brunswick  
some were like gardens and some like sewers

I'd hear kids playing in their back yards and dogs barking  
and different languages and music playing

I'd smell hot dinners cooking and grass just mowed

I'd go along close to the fences and feel all the life on the other side

I'd go very early in the morning or late at night

when the whole world was like a river that had stopped running

and there was just me

moving as quiet as a bird

/

I got so lonely that I wasn't lonely any more

that's what happens to people

when that happens they're gone

nothing in the world can bring them back

/

I think I was a child again

I let my hair go wild and spat in the street

my feet were scuffed and hard

and there were scabs on my knees where I'd fallen over outside the Railway Hotel

I played peek-a-boo with Beau and whispered his secret name  
I stood outside the Cornish Arms and sang songs for drinks  
and in the Moreland Hotel I could collect the empties  
as long as I didn't bother anyone  
and they'd give me a couple of bottles to bring home to the sleepout  
clink clink up the sideway  
Lenny's sister's eyes like two wormholes  
looking out at me through the flowered curtains

/

I remember Lenny watching me from the kitchen window  
his eyes pouring love all over me through the white blossom in the back yard floating  
down like snow

/

it was never about love  
I loved Lenny and Lenny loved me  
and we loved the baby

/

but something went black inside me  
something burned and cracked like a bone left in the fire  
something that seemed to weigh as much as the world  
and all the love in the world couldn't shift it  
nothing could fix it

I went to mama and I told her about it  
she looked at me the way you look at a beaten dog  
Christie there's nothing you can do she said  
but you're not on you own  
there's a lot like you  
more than you can count  
all as poor as sparrows  
I think it must be meant to be she said  
there's some who have to carry the weight of the world  
then she pulled out a string of rosary beads and held them in the cup of her hands  
and she told me about Jesus who was just like me she said  
he was just like all of us

the poor bugger suffered for us she said and we suffer for him  
I had to laugh out loud  
Jesus must be hard up if he needs you for a friend I said  
God help us all if it's come to that  
you little bitch she said  
and she held the cross up in her fist and put it right up to my face  
fuck off with that I said  
you're nailed to your cross my girl she said  
you're nailed to your cross like all of us  
she almost screamed at me  
and her fist was shaking and the cross was shaking in her fist  
and she lifted herself out of her chair and stood bent over almost double  
with her tits sagging inside her nightdress and her hair hanging down  
and the tears pouring from her eyes  
and she opened her mouth and wailed  
and a long string of spit was hanging off her bottom lip  
and then I knew she wasn't long for the world  
I knew that she was dying  
she was always dying  
but she was dying properly now  
she was as close to death as she was to me  
me just stood there not knowing what to do  
just howling mama mama crying too like she was  
it would have been a sight if anyone had seen us  
but there was no one to see us  
there was no one but us two mother and daughter howling  
and death right there in the room with us  
and Jesus of course  
nailed up on his little silver cross trembling in her fist  
/  
I never went back  
/  
I went home to the sleepout after I'd seen Mrs Kennedy  
and I had more than a few just to give myself the strength I needed

that black bone was still heavy inside me  
and cracking cracking  
children run past me in the street and one of them spat at me  
they was like little dogs yapping and biting  
but I paid them no heed  
the world swam all around me  
it was like I was walking under water  
but I got to the sleepout at last through the gate and up the sideway  
I heard Beau crying inside the house as I passed but I paid no heed  
there was nothing I could do for him nothing I could mend nothing I could change  
I curled up on my bed I stayed there for I don't know how long  
until I looked up and I saw Lenny standing over me  
and he was saying it was time to go  
time to go where I said  
and he didn't say nothing  
he just lifted me up off the bed like I was a child and set my two feet on the floor  
and walked me to the door and up the sideway to the front gate  
it was dark by then and there was a man standing out on the footpath waiting  
he put out his hand and I took hold of it  
but I couldn't seem to grip nothing  
and I said time to go where  
then I can't remember nothing else  
except I was on my knees in some room I didn't know  
and I was throwing up into a plastic bucket  
my hair was all hanging down in the sick and I stank  
I stank  
/  
I came to in the ward  
I was in a bed with clean white sheets and the curtain drawn around me  
and I was crying  
I don't know why  
and it was like the first time I'd ever cried in my life



## **Eight**

*Christie on vacant ground*

*Black hollows*

*Sewer stink*

*Rustle of weeds*

mama died while I was in the mad house  
someone found her in her room on the floor beside her bed  
and there was ants crawling on her  
she must have been there a while  
Lenny saw to it she had decent a burial  
which meant the hole was deep enough and there was something to mark the spot  
she's with her Jesus now  
I hope he appreciates the effort she made to believe in him

/

I tried to pray to Jesus once or twice  
but I was just talking to myself  
that's how you drive yourself mad I said  
is it I said  
yes it is I said  
then I won't pray no more I said  
good for you I said  
and that was the end of it

/

of course they don't call it a mad house  
they called it a hospital  
but I was still locked up  
way back when even if you was mad they never locked you up  
you were allowed to wander about  
you were a sort of amusement  
I suppose that's what I am now to some people  
but I'm not mad

I've thought I was once or twice  
but I've always been lucky enough to come across someone worse off than me  
there's a great comfort in that  
it's a real pick-me-up when you come across some poor bastard worse off than yourself  
but they're few and far between as far as I'm concerned  
of course you can still find them  
living in a drain or under a fucking rock somewhere  
no I've never been mad  
but I've had terrible storms in my head  
great claps of thunder and rain inside my head  
like in one of them glass things you shake to make it snow  
and sheets of lightning going on and off inside my head  
like giant light bulbs exploding  
it still happens now and then

/

as soon as I got out I went to see mama  
fucking pointless really  
but I felt I had to  
I stood beside the trampled down piece of dirt and I thought how small it was  
that's all I thought

/

mama I said as if she could hear me  
mama I said I'm a better mother than you were  
I hope that before I die my baby will know I love him  
which is more than I ever knew about you  
and that's a shame I said  
but there's nothing can be done about that  
like a lot of things that nothing can be done about  
Jesus or no Jesus

/

I walked around the graveyard thinking this is where I'll be one day  
it's a relief to know there's a place where no one can bother you  
except those that were supposed to have loved you

/

Lenny had stopped locking the back door since I'd been away  
I come in the house through the back door  
and I walked down the passage to the baby's room and I stood in the doorway  
/  
I stood in the doorway and I reached for the lightswitch in the dark  
/  
I reached for the lightswitch in the dark and the light come on and I saw him  
/  
I was still wearing the little paper wristband they give you in the madhouse  
with your name written on it  
which is I suppose in case you forget  
I looked at it and I said my name out loud  
Christie  
/  
he was lying there as bright as day  
his eyes wide open  
and he was looking at me  
and I knew he didn't know who I was any more  
/  
you're mine I said  
and I moved closer to him  
the house was quiet Lenny and his sister were asleep in their rooms down the passage  
and I thought of Lenny alone in his bed  
and I wondered did he still reach out for me in the night like he used to  
even when he was asleep  
and even though I was asleep I'd feel him reaching  
and I'd turn to be closer to him  
and how quiet it was when our bodies touched  
how marvellous it was that bodies touching made no sound at all  
and I wondered did he still lie with his body curved to the shape of mine  
even though I wasn't there  
/  
I leaned down to Beau and I said have you been lying awake in the dark  
/

I'm Christie I said I'm your mum

/

I climbed in bed with him and he let out a little cry

it was a sound so small but it tore right through me

maybe only a mother can hear that sound

or maybe only love knows that sound

only love can sound like that

love when it's forgotten or love when it's found

or love like a hungry bird squawking

he was my hungry little bird

and I pecked him with my fingers like I used to to make him laugh

but he didn't laugh

there were tears falling from his eyes like little stones

and then I thought I heard Lenny's boots coming down the passage

his shoulders knocking on the walls either side

how many times have I told you Christie

his sister right behind him with her bible voice and her eyes out on stalks

I squeezed Beau close to me

I wanted him to be quiet

I wanted him to be like he was when he was inside me

I wanted him to be as quiet as that

and not know how cruel the world can be

why should he know that

/

but no one came down the passage

not Lenny or his sister or no one

it was just me and Beau and with the light still turned on

and I fell asleep with Beau wrapped in my arms

/

he didn't make a sound the whole night

he didn't move

## Nine

*Christie with a bunch of wild flowers*

*Frost*

*Trembling hands*

*Stars*

he only ever had one candle  
one candle shaking when he breathed on it  
I saw how his eyes opened wide  
I could see the candle shaking in his eyes  
/  
do you know what you've done they said  
/  
I reached for the lightswitch in the dark I said  
I saw him lying there with his eyes wide open  
he'd been lying in the dark like that for God knows how long  
he didn't know who I was I said  
/  
he wasn't here long  
not long enough to speak  
if only I could have heard him speak  
all the words are lost  
all I never got to have and all I never gave him  
what would I give him  
not tears not curses  
I'd light two candles for him then three and every year one more  
until we could switch off the light and still see our faces  
his and mine with another year between us  
and no time wasted falling down drunk  
and me a good mother and him a good son  
/  
yes that night when Lenny come home he smelt the drink on my lips

he said what's that he knew what that was  
how many times do I have to tell you he said  
it wasn't the first time or the last  
there weren't any last times then

/

I stood in the doorway and I saw him looking at me  
and I wondered how long he had been lying in the dark like that  
waiting for me to come to him

/

lost I've lost all of him pale hair and a first tooth and lost all of me

/

I thought I saw him walking down the passage and out the front door

I thought I saw him standing on the roof of the sleepout

I thought I saw him hiding under the table in the kitchen

I saw him walking with my mother near her grave

I saw him with a bottle of stout in the Railway Hotel

I saw him in the madhouse weeping

I saw him carrying Lenny crying in his arms

I saw him asleep in the bed beside me

a grown man wearing boots and overalls

with a shovel in his hand

he was my gravedigger lying there beside me

his eyes wide open

they were eyes of polished stone

lost lost lost he's lost what is he now

dead skin dead bones

never happy never sad never old

a voice I won't hear

a face I won't touch

an empty bowl and empty spoon

a withered leaf I can crumple in my hand

or press here on my breast and feel it break

/

I know what I've done I said

don't tell me what I've done  
I said I'll grow old and go barefoot  
all mothers grow old and walk on stones  
I'll have no face and no name anyone remembers  
he would have remembered me  
he would have been the last to remember  
maybe in a dark room somewhere  
a grown man lying awake thinking of me before he fell asleep  
he would have felt my hand on his face again  
have you been lying awake in the dark I'd say  
have you been waiting for me to come to you  
/  
I'm here I'd say  
I'm here

*Frost*

*Trembling hands*

*Stars*