



Amanda Lohrey Series

Ite, missa est

(Go, You Are Sent Forth)

Felicity Volk

The Amanda Lohrey Selects Series

Introduction

In this series, we showcase twelve long stories written by women and selected by one of Australia's foremost authors, Amanda Lohrey.

What Amanda Lohrey said about Felicity Volk's *Ite, missa est (Go, You Are Sent Forth)*:

'I chose this as the winner because it is a fully developed story. It took me somewhere interesting, it surprised me at several turns, i.e. it developed, and developed interestingly, and it took some bold risks in terms of subject matter. It has a subtle sub-text and a metaphorical dimension that takes it beyond the generic conventions of mere naturalism. It is well written in the sense that from the very beginning it has strong conviction of tone, an innate narrative authority and the dialogue is realistic but never feels formulaic or predictable. And finally, the main character has a complex sensibility, which is rendered on the page with seeming effortlessness.'

AMANDA LOHREY, recipient of The Patrick White Literary Award

Ite, missa est (Go, You Are Sent Forth) by Felicity Volk:

What effect does being without sexual intimacy have on our sense of identity? Exploring this question through the experience of a retired nun, Berenice, this story is also about the compromise required to sustain relationships when the people we love move beyond our reach, and the grace necessary to send them forth, with or without us.

Read an interview with Felicity Volk at www.shortaustralianstories.com.au

Other stories in the series include:

Jesus Sandals and Anchovies by Joanna Atherfold Finn

Danny Boy by Marian Matta

Night Trip by Erin Gough

The Road North From Toodleton by Belinda Rule

Something For A Rainy Day by Joanna Atherfold Finn

Memory Bones by Amanda O'Callaghan

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Beware of the God by Sue Booker

Empty Rooms by Sue Goldstiver

Shooting Star by Marjorie Lewis-Jones

Hostile Takeover by Claire Corbett

'A pleasure to read'
— AMANDA LOHREY

Contents

Ite, missa est (Go, You Are Sent Forth)

About the Author

Copyright Page

Ite, missa est (Go, You Are Sent Forth)

1.

He points a stubby finger at the meter. 'Twenty-two dollars and eighty cents, thanks, love.'

Sister Love to you, thinks Berenice, eyeing the mock-jade rosary. It swings from the rear-view mirror in the final oscillations of the cabbie's abrupt braking. She pulls a twenty and a five from the roll of bills in her purse and hands them to the driver. He takes his time unravelling the notes and straightening them for his wallet but, when he checks in the mirror, Berenice is still sitting expectantly in the back seat, purse open-mouthed in the nest of her lap.

The cabbie shakes his head wryly, fishes around in the console for loose change. The engine whines with the effort of keeping cool air circulating through the stationary car. Eventually he locates the required coins and turns to Berenice. She fingers the crucifix resting against the starched white of her blouse by way of explanation: *I gave to the poor; there's nothing left for tips*. But the driver doesn't seem to notice. *Render unto Berenice*, she says to herself as she snaps her purse shut.

The taxi accelerates into the glaring afternoon, leaving a trail of exhaust hovering in the thick air. Making her way up the concrete path, Berenice casts an apologetic glance at the thirsty square of brown lawn and dusty beds of bracken that their front garden has become after months of water restrictions. At least there are no longer weeds growing in the cracked cement of the footpath.

In her peripheral vision, she notices the curtains at the bay window shift. She feels a rush of irritation at her friend's vigil.

The door opens before she has a chance to fuss with her key in the lock.

'I saw the taxi pull up.' Mary O'Donoghue speaks with the lilt of her childhood tongue, overlaid by, but not altogether lost in, the geography of her maturity.

'Thank you, dear,' Berenice says with a grace she doesn't feel.

The hallway is cool. In its gloom Berenice knows she will have a moment of respite from her friend's probing gaze. Mary shuts the door gently on the invading heat and the cab's exhaust.

'Cup of tea?' she enquires of Berenice's back.

'Tea would be lovely.' Berenice drops her keys into the cavern of her black leather handbag. 'I'll just be a minute.'

'Yes, freshen up, dear. You'll feel much better.'

'I feel fine.'

'Of course you do.'

If this what it's going to be like, just take me now, Lord, Berenice mutters as she closes the bathroom door. But under the cool stream of water from the shower, sluicing the dust of the day and the cloying odours of the hospital from her body, she confesses she is being churlish.

'*Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo, et mundabor.*' The water cascades from her forehead down her large, hooked nose, still tender from the bronchoscopy.

'Wash me, I shall be cleansed. *Et mundabor,*' she says again, tilting her head to the shower nozzle. Water pools in her open mouth, washing away the residue of the local anaesthetic.

A crusty barnacle of Imperial Leather has attached itself to the soap dish. It flakes in Berenice's hands as she prises it from the porcelain. She drips across the bathroom tiles to the vanity where she deposits the fragments in a glass jar, to be melted down and recycled. This is it, she thinks as she re-

turns to the shower recess; this is what the vow of poverty comes down to: two old women competing over a bar of Imperial Leather, neither wanting to be the profligate who starts a new cake.

The last shard of soap refuses to lather against Berenice's skin. She rubs it rapidly across her pubic hair and finally it begins to foam. She washes between her thighs.

'I wash my labia in innocence,' Berenice chants aloud, borrowing irreverently from the Mass of the Faithful. Superfluous flaps of skin. What did she ever use them for? The occasional exercise of solitary pleasure which invariably left her feeling lost and somehow diminished.

The soap slips from her hand and is washed in a spiral towards the drain. Berenice bends awkwardly in the cubicle to retrieve it, hitting her back on the cold tap.

'Mary, Mother of God,' she exclaims, rubbing the grazed skin above her kidneys.

She folds in half with greater care a second time and, with her thumb, presses the sludge of soap vengefully through the grille of the drain.

In the bathroom mirror, Berenice explores her wounds from the day's tests. Her left nostril is reddened where the bronchoscope passed through her nose, down her throat to her lungs. Her throat feels raw and scratched, but she is otherwise unscathed; except, of course, for the injuries her body is steadily inflicting on itself, deep within, in darkness where the worst sins are always committed.

On the surface at least, Berenice is a well-preserved sixty-seven. Whatever her skin may have missed in the rejuvenations of sex, it has avoided the offences of childbirth. Her stomach is smooth and taut, and her breasts are resisting the attritions of age and gravity. She cups them in her hands, cool from the shower, and traces a thumb tenderly across each.

'I have never been known,' she says as if it has just dawned on her, to the woman looking at her body with grudging admiration. The woman's face dulls.

In the kitchen, Mary is recycling a teabag from Berenice's cup into her own. 'Just in time. I waited till I heard the shower stop before I poured the tea.'

'Sometimes, Mary O'Donoghue, living with you is like sharing a house with the Omnipresent Himself.'

Mary looks up sharply from the plate on which she's arranging biscuits, but there's nothing in her friend's countenance to suggest criticism.

'I've made us green tea, dear.'

'Would it be an awful bother if I had a cup of Bushells for a change?'

'But the antioxidants ...'

Berenice chooses a Milk Arrowroot and puts it on her saucer. She watches as a ring of spilt tea soaks into the biscuit. 'Apparently it's time to give in to my free radicals, Mary.'

'Oh.' Mary sags into a chair.

'Dr Lacey says the cancer's metastasised.' Berenice pours the green tea down the sink. 'My carcinoma has become carcinomata.'

Mary looks perplexed.

'It's all Greek to you?' Berenice jokes gently, unscrewing the lid on the teabag jar. 'The classics can make anything sound profound and beautiful, don't you think, dear? *Poculum aquae calidae*. A mug of hot water.' Berenice pours the kettle. 'It's spread, Mary. It's not my turn for a miracle.'

She adds a teaspoon of sugar and a dash of milk. 'But the good news is I can drink whatever tea I like from now on and I won't be recycling teabags anymore.' Berenice drops her teabag with a flourish into the ice-cream container of scraps on the sink.

Mary fails even a wan smile. 'How long?'

'Six months maybe; a year at best. There are still some results to come.'

'My poor, brave dear. What will you do?'

'I don't know. I haven't decided yet.' Berenice sits at the laminated kitchen table.

Mary reaches across and rests her hand on her friend's. Berenice gives Mary's fingers a quick squeeze before she picks up her biscuit. A soggy corner falls away and lands in her tea cup.

'It's not my day,' says Berenice.

2.

At half past nine, after the late news, they pack away the dishes in companionable silence, working around each other in the kitchenette with the precision and economy of dancers who have been partners over years. Mary deadlocks the front door while Berenice puts out the day's garbage and attends to the back.

At the toilet door, they *doh-see-doh*.

'I haven't flushed yet,' says Mary as she makes way for Berenice.

'Good, dear, I'll see to it.'

A neatly folded wad of tissue skims the surface of the toilet bowl, preserving the modesty of what lies beneath. Berenice can't remember exactly when this practice began, or why – in deference to the environment or their budget, the premium on water consumption having risen sharply in recent years. She can still feel Mary's warmth on the seat, and as she sits with her skirt hoisted around her hips she wonders if a clean toilet might be another luxury afforded her in her last months.

Her bedroom is cradling the heat of the day. She lingers in front of an open window, looking out over the dark street, beckoning the night's cool, quiet breath into the room. She lifts her crucifix over her head and places it on her dressing table. She unbuttons her blouse carefully, working from her clavicle down, then unhooks her bra. The blessing of ritual. Her skirt slips over her hips and she steps out of the pool of cloth around her ankles.

She presses her torso against the yielding fly-wire. A terrier trots along the footpath, tags tinkling in the empty street. It stops mid-stride under a lamppost, cocks its head at Berenice's silhouette, raises a leg and pees, then patters on. Berenice turns and gets into bed.

Around two o'clock on her way to the toilet, Mary notices a strip of light glowing at the bottom of Berenice's door. She knocks deferentially but there's no reply.

Berenice is propped up in bed, her head listing to the side. The reading lamp reflects dully in the glasses perched on the bridge of her nose. *A copy of The Lamb's Supper: Experiencing the Mass* is pressed to her abdomen, and above it her naked chest, her nipples purple, puckering in the night grown cold. Mary stifles her discomfort.

She draws the drapes silently and returns to Berenice's bed. She takes the glasses from her friend's face, folds them and puts them in their case. She closes the book and pulls the cotton blanket up over Berenice's chest. In a fog of sleep, Berenice pushes it away.

'You'll catch your death.' Mary stops abruptly hoping her words haven't registered.

'Too late,' says Berenice ambiguously. She reaches for the glasses on her nose and when her hand comes away empty, notices them sitting neatly beside her bed.

'Thank you,' she says.

'Your curtains were open. Anyone could have seen.'

'I suppose so.'

Mary smooths down the bed linen with a practised hand.

'You always were a good nurse.' Berenice watches her ministrations. 'I chose well, but I'm not sure you did. I can't promise I'll be a compliant patient.'

'We'll do just fine.' Mary plumps the spare pillow.

'Would you hold me?'

Mary hesitates. It's not that they haven't shared this sort of comfort in the past, even before they retired from the order – at the deaths of family members, and when grieving losses less defined but somehow sharper for having no name. It's just that Berenice has no clothes on.

Mary takes off her dressing gown and gets into the bed. Berenice turns her back to Mary and they spoon in the valley of the old mattress. Berenice's skin is warm through Mary's thin shift. She can feel her heart beating against Berenice's spine, a little faster, a little harder than usual. Berenice reaches behind her and takes Mary's hand, drawing it around herself in an embrace. She holds Mary's hand in

her own, pressed against her breast. Through the soft balloon of flesh, Mary can feel Berenice's heart too. It's beating out of time with her own and she feels inexplicably anxious until, after a while, they tattoo the same, regular rhythm.

'Can you smell me, Mary?'

Mary's nose is resting against the skin of Berenice's shoulderblade, just beyond the tickling reach of her short, grey hair.

'I think so, dear. You've just washed your hair.'

'But me, Mary, can you smell *me*?'

'Oh.' Mary inhales deeply once, twice. 'Yes. You smell like Weet-Bix. With sugar and warm milk,' she adds after further consideration.

'Good.' Berenice seems pleased with the response. 'I want you to tell me when I smell old,' she says. 'You have to promise to tell me when I smell like I'm dying.'

Mary hopes it's rhetorical.

'Do you promise?' Berenice asks again.

'Of course.' She strokes Berenice's chest, wondering if what's growing inside her lung is as soft and malleable as the tissue outside.

When she thinks Berenice's breath has the steadiness of sleep, she tries to withdraw her arm, the first in a long, slow series of extrications that will find her back in her own bed. But Berenice's grip tightens on her hand.

'How old do you feel?' Berenice whispers.

It's getting on for three o'clock, Mary's left arm is pinned beneath her, numb, and an incipient cramp is lurking along her calf. A hundred, she could say. Like death warmed up, under other circumstances.

'Every day of my seventy years.'

'I don't. I don't feel any different from whom I was at seventeen.'

Mary rolls onto her back, patting Berenice's arm as she finds a more comfortable position. She shakes the blood back into her hand.

'I can pinpoint the exact moment when I stopped getting older. It was the day of the athletics carnival. Year eleven. I was such a good runner – a natural. You should've seen me. There was only one person I needed to beat – Cate Ahearn, a senior – the rest weren't in our league.'

She turns to face Mary. 'It was my first year in the senior competition and my first chance to race Cate. Our previous times were close. I'd trained really hard to shave a little extra from my best.'

Berenice coughs uncomfortably and pushes herself up. She sits with her back pressed against the bedhead, hugging her knees to her chest.

'All morning long a storm had been threatening. Our race was scheduled for two o'clock and I was desperate that it would be cancelled. But the rain held off. I beat her. Easily. I don't think I've ever felt closer to the divine.'

Mary chuckles.

'Does that sound sacrilegious?'

'No, it sounds honest. God isn't only present in our humility, nor the devil only in our ego.'

'The next day Sister Claire, the principal, called me into her office. She said she wanted to explain something to me in private before she made a public announcement. She had decided Cate Ahearn would represent the college at the inter-school championships even though I ran the better time.'

'Why?'

'She said I had everything. I was top of my class academically, captained the debating team, represented my year on the student council. Sister Claire said running was all Cate had and it was her last year. It would be my turn the next.'

'Did you mind?'

'No. I thought it very wise.'

'And that was it? That was when you stopped growing up?'

‘Well, I may have grown up a bit since, but I don’t feel any different from that girl in Sister Claire’s office.’

Except you won’t get to race next year, Mary thinks.

3.

When Mary wakes before dawn the next morning she’s alone in Berenice’s bed. It hurts to stretch out fully in the space vacated beside her. There’s a specific set of muscles involved in sharing someone else’s sleep, she thinks as she massages her shoulder, and hers have atrophied. She sits up gingerly, trying not to twist her neck.

A light is on in the kitchen. Berenice is sitting at the table in dressing gown and slippers with the telephone directory open before her, making notes on the back of an old envelope. She starts when Mary comes in and pulls the directory closer to the edge of the table.

‘I’m sorry, did I wake you?’

‘Not at all, dear. Cup of tea?’

‘Thank you.’

‘Toast?’ Mary potters at the bench behind Berenice’s back.

‘Lovely.’

She is trying to respect her friend’s privacy, but when she sits down at the table with a plate of buttered toast, Mary can’t help herself. ‘It’s a little early to be calling tradespeople, isn’t it?’ A lame opener but it’s the best she can come up with.

‘Just doing some homework.’

‘*Escort services – social*,’ Mary reads upside-down. ‘I don’t understand. Are you going somewhere?’

‘Prostitutes, Mary, they’re prostitutes.’ She doesn’t mean it to sound brutal or unkind.

‘I don’t understand,’ Mary says again. ‘You want to talk to a prostitute?’ Her mind is canvassing all the missionary yearnings the prospect of imminent death might be stirring in her friend.

‘No, dear, not talk. Not just talk.’

The words steep in the silence of the room.

‘I don’t understand,’ Mary says finally. But this time she does, sort of.

‘I’m seventeen, Mary. And I’ll be dead within a year.’

‘But you’re not seventeen. You’re sixty-seven and you were a nun for forty-six of those years.’

‘I’m seventeen,’ Berenice repeats simply.

‘People don’t ... you know, at our age.’

‘How would we know? We can’t even say the word.’

You mean me, Mary thinks. What would I know? I can’t even say the word. ‘Well, they don’t. Maybe, if they’re married. But no one wants to with people like us.’

‘Shrivelled old spinster virgins? They do if they’re paid.’

The only *male* prostitutes Mary has encountered featured in a piece from the *Catholic Digest*. They were working on the streets of Buenos Aires prior to their conversion, looking after men. The pennies are dropping now like she’s hit the jackpot at the pokies. ‘Are you a lesbian?’

Berenice laughs, ‘No!’ She’s relieved to be able to offer her friend that reassurance at least. ‘It might be easier if I were – their interests seem to be better catered for than mine.’

She points ruefully to the scant list she has so far compiled in her neat, careful hand. It could be the weekly grocery list. Mary is unsmiling and Berenice begins to take the measure of how drastically she has shaken her friend’s confidence in the order of their world.

‘It’s just a thought, Mary.’ She offers an olive branch. ‘Maybe I’m in shock. Maybe, in a day or so, I’ll be surprised at myself too.’

‘It’s wrong, Berenice. You know it’s wrong.’

‘So’s cancer.’

'It's not God's fault.'

'I didn't say it was.' She looks at Mary in surprise. 'I'm not trying to get back at Him.'

'Then what?'

'And the Word became flesh, Mary - *Et verbum caro factum est*. I want to become flesh too. I don't want to die having been just words.'

Mary's face is tight. 'It's wrong.'

How easy, thinks Berenice as Mary withdraws to her bedroom.

4.

In the afternoon, Mary returns from the weekly trip to the supermarket pulling a faded tartan cart of fresh produce behind her. 'You can help me unpack,' she says brushing Berenice aside as she tries to assist her entry into the house.

When the last package is unwrapped, the table resembles a providore's counter. Cheeses, muscat grapes, prosciutto, a glossy fillet of salmon, chat potatoes, baby aubergines, semi-dried tomatoes, stone fruits, cartons of thickened cream, ciabatta and knots of fresh herbs jostle on the marble laminate.

'What have you done?' Berenice asks, totting up how many centuries of soap recycling would be required to pay off the feast.

'If you're going to indulge in one deadly sin, you might as well sample some others. Tonight we do gluttony. And this one I'm prepared to share with you.' Mary pats her friend's cheek. 'Now, off with you. Dinner will be ready at seven.' She turns her back abruptly to avoid an inevitable quip about The Last Supper. To her relief, she is left alone holding salmon, pink as a lung, over the sink.

5.

In the candle light, the red wine is liquid garnet in its glass. Shadows quiver on the dim walls as Berenice twirls the goblet in her hand.

'I'm sorry we don't have real crystal,' apologises Mary.

'*Calicem salutaris*. The chalice of salvation.' Berenice smiles and tilts the glass to her lips.

The blasphemy bruises. Mary rises from the table to hide her wound and begins to clear the litter of plates.

'Let me do that,' offers her companion.

'No. You have another job.' Mary places the telephone directory in front of Berenice. She is opening it to *Escort Services* when Berenice reaches an arm about her hips.

'You're a good friend, Mary O'Donoghue.' Her eyes are lit by love and gratitude; but by something else, too, that doesn't belong to Mary and this pains her.

'The voice of the grape,' Mary chides, gently pulling herself free of Berenice's grip.

'You're a good friend,' Berenice says again before relinquishing her.

'*Good* is open to dispute now dear, but I am well-meaning.' She kisses Berenice's forehead and puts a pen in her hand.

For a while there is nothing but the muted chatter of dishes in the sink and the whisper of turning pages. Mary would like to look over her shoulder and ask how it's going, but she imagines herself a chaperone at a bizarre courtship ritual, her circumspection as necessary as her vigilance.

'I think I've found one,' Berenice finally announces.

'Uh-huh.' Mary is more disappointed than she had anticipated.

'Hymn for Her. H-Y-M-N for Her,' Berenice spells it out. 'The thinking Catholic woman's prostitute,

wouldn't you say?'

'Let me guess, "We'll take you to heaven".'

'Close. "Cum to paradise".' But this one she doesn't spell for her friend.

'So, *ite, missa est*. Call.'

Suddenly Berenice feels sober and tired. 'Not tonight.'

Mary is relieved. 'Weary?'

'Very. The wine. It's been such a lovely evening. Thank you, dear.'

6.

For the fifth day in a row, Berenice is out at dusk with her hose sending a generous arc of water across the front lawn. The cicadas have returned with the damp and the green. If their song doesn't give us away, thinks Mary, watching from the lounge, the resurrecting garden will. It sits like an oasis in the dust bowl of the street, a beacon to any water inspector who happens past and a constant taunt to the neighbourhood vigilantes.

Mary checks the calendar hanging behind the kitchen door. Thursday, the seventeenth. Until they're back on an even numeral they're not entitled to be watering. She unhooks the calendar and takes it to the lounge window. She raps a knuckle on the glass. When Berenice finally responds, Mary holds the calendar up and taps insistently at the date. She knows Berenice won't be able to read the print but the point is made.

Berenice shrugs helplessly. 'The water of life,' she mouths at the glass and goes back to her hosing.

As she returns the calendar to its nail, Mary realises it's not the watering that's bothering her. It's that she's no longer content to hope the matter of the escort might have been forgotten. She puts the kettle on.

Berenice can feel Mary at her back, a cup of tea in each hand. She keeps hosing the lawn, but not for long. It's not in her nature to be deliberately rude.

'I'm watering.' She kinks the hose to stop the noisy spray.

'I thought you might like a break.'

'I've only been out here for fifteen minutes. I'm not about to keel over.' But already she's making her way to the tap and Mary takes their tea to the porch.

They sit on a tatty cane outdoor setting that, failing to attract a buyer at the previous year's diocese *trash'n'treasure*, had been passed their way. Their silence hides in the cicadas' buzz. For all her parsimony, Mary has to admit the green lawn is kind on the eye. She slurps clumsily at her cup and the tea burns her upper lip and the roof of her mouth. Her eyes water.

'What are you planning to do about the ... escort?' Mary can feel a blister forming on the ridge behind her front teeth.

'I've called.' Berenice's tone is even.

'Oh.' Her tongue won't leave the balloon of liquid alone. Back and forth, back and forth. 'When?'

'Monday. When I was at the doctor's again.'

'You could have called from home.'

'I suppose so.'

Mary feels the incoming tide of hurt. 'What did they say?'

'They said, hello, Hymn for Her. What's your pleasure?'

'And?' Back and forth, back and forth. How can skin be so fragile yet so resilient, she wonders with her tongue still at work.

'And I said I wanted an escort but I was old. He said, that'll be extra. I asked how much. He just laughed and said he was kidding but I'd have to promise my heart was in good shape. I said it wasn't my heart they'd have to worry about. I meant my lungs, but I think they thought I was being crude. Well, I don't think they thought it was crude, but I thought what they thought I was saying was crude.'

If you know what I mean.'

'I'm with you, dear.' *Us against them* – the tide stalls, its cold waters reach no further than Mary's toes.

'So I asked how it was done. And he laughed again but before he could say anything smart I said, well, where do I meet my escort and how do I choose. He said they could come to me and I thought, that would be a hard one to explain to the Bishop – *I've spent the money we've saved through the subsidised rental program on a prostitute who came to the house; and, yes, I do mean the house that's owned by the church.*'

Mary thinks, the Bishop isn't the only one who'd be put out.

'So I asked if a hotel was possible. He said of course, where would I like? I said I didn't know, where would he recommend? He said, well, where would be convenient? I said I lived in Elizabeth Bay.'

'But we don't.'

'I know.' She picks at a piece of rattan fraying at the wrist of the chair's arm.

'He told me about a place where he said they had an understanding and he could make a booking for any time from an hour to a week. I said I thought a couple of hours would do the trick. He said, so to speak. He asked what I liked in a man. I said I didn't know. He said, what's your fantasy? I said I didn't have one. Help me out here a little, he said. I thought for a while. I said I'd like to meet someone gentle and kind. And older. Someone understanding and patient. Anything else, he asked, like he was ticking boxes. I said a knowledge of the classics wouldn't go astray. The one time I actually made a joke, and he didn't laugh.'

Mary chuckles and pats her friend's arm. They sip their tea. It's cool enough now that it's more comfort than irritation to Mary's blistered mouth.

'What happens next?' Mary asks.

'Nothing.'

'Why not?' She could weep with joy.

'Because it already has. Happened.'

The blisters pop. Mary tastes warm, liquid salt.

'I went that day.'

The trouble with hosing the lawn, thinks Mary, is that the weeds begin growing in the pavement cracks again. I'll have to get onto them quick smart if Berenice is determined to keep watering. She senses her friend's scrutiny and returns her gaze. It strikes her as odd that, from Monday evening until only a few minutes ago, Berenice looked as she always had, but now, she is changed.

'Do you want to know what happened?' Berenice offers.

'I don't think so.'

'He was a nice boy.'

Her friend is lost in middle-distance.

'We talked.'

'I thought you didn't want to die having been just words.' Mary picks up the china and carries it inside. The screen door clatters behind her.

If that's the only unkind comment she makes, thinks Berenice, I've got off lightly. But she realises in that instant she will not be telling Mary that talking was in fact all they did.

Her friend has not moved when Mary returns. The grass is even more verdant under the bruise of dusk and the air is sweet. Mary stands behind Berenice with a hand resting gently on her shoulder. She brushes Berenice's hair back from her cheek tenderly as they watch night swallow the street.

She leans over Berenice and places a box on the table beside her. 'I got you this last weekend. I was saving it for ...' Her voice tapers away.

The present is wrapped in mauve tissue and a sprig of lavender rests under a voluptuous bow of deep purple satin. It clearly hasn't come from Kmart, nor even a chemist.

'It's so beautiful,' exclaims Berenice, her hands clasped over her mouth in delight.

'You haven't opened it yet.'

'My dear, it's so beautiful.'

'Go on.'

Berenice removes the lavender and brushes it under her nose. With a gentle tug, the ribbon unravels from the package and the tissue slips softly apart. The base of the box is crafted from gilt-covered cardboard embossed with a black oriental design. The lid is the inverse, gold on black. It glides away smoothly to reveal a creamy sphere of soap nestled in a bed of gold silk. Etched across the centre of the cake is the word *desire*.

'It's soap,' Mary says.

'I know,' Berenice smiles. She chuckles, 'A soap-cake named desire.'

She inhales the soap and rubs her cheek against its smooth skin. 'Wash me, *et super nivem dealbor*.'

'You are already - whiter than snow. It's just soap.'

'I know.'

'I'll draw you a bath,' says Mary, retreating from the contagious treachery of Berenice's tears.

Inside, the fragile relief of not seeing; and the juddering of old pipes, the explosion of water on enamel, splitting, spattering, fizzing, frothing, before it settles again into a steady stream, a deep pool.

END OF STORY

About the Author

Felicity Volk

Daughter of two English teachers, both poets, Felicity Volk considers that the quote, “In the beginning was the word”, would be an apt start to her own story. The printed word and the spoken – her father’s mellifluous voice reading each evening from Tolkien, Kenneth Grahame, the Bible – gave Felicity’s young world its rhythm and its poetry.

Felicity studied English literature at the University of Queensland and wrote short stories and award-winning poetry around her academic pursuits – an arts/law degree. She set off to Canberra on graduation to work for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), swapping the pleasure of crafting words for herself, for the purse of crafting words for others.

An insistent voice called her back to her own blank page after diplomatic postings in Bangladesh and Laos, and following the birth of her two daughters. With support from the Eleanor Dark Foundation (Varuna – the Writers’ House) in the form of two residential fellowships and a grant from arts-ACT (the ACT Government), Felicity wrote a collection of short stories – several of which have been published and won awards – and her first novel, *Lightning*, published by Picador in July 2013.

Felicity is currently working as adviser to Australia’s Global Ambassador for Women and Girls in DFAT and is writing her second novel. She lives in Canberra with her two daughters.

Visit Felicity’s [website](#) and [Facebook](#).

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