

This is the one thing that's true



*"Enlightened Endeavours"* by Jo Upperton [www.joanna.co.nz](http://www.joanna.co.nz)

By Tim Upperton

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## Author's note

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Tim Upperton

## Aubade

Slowly it opens now, my lover's eye.  
The wonder the heart's habit displaces  
at last. The ripped iron call of a magpie

at dawn. All the dead, familiar faces  
that rise up in sleep like so many moons.  
How to fill the blank, terrifying spaces

at the party? Everyone leaves so soon.  
A woman's laugh, the crunch of gravel,  
the cough and rumble of a car – a tune

for which there is no name. In the oval  
porchlight, battering, a dark moth,  
reeling in an excess of brilliance, baleful.

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Reeling in an excess of brilliance. Baleful  
porchlight battering a dark moth  
for which there is no name. In the oval,

the cough and rumble of a car, a tune,  
a woman's laugh, the crunch of gravel –  
at the party, everyone leaves so soon.

How to fill the blank, terrifying spaces  
that rise up? In sleep, like so many moons  
at dawn, all the dead, familiar faces –

at last, the ripped iron call of a magpie.  
The wonder the heart's habit displaces  
slowly. It opens now, my lover's eye.

## Seasonal

One morning it's all over.  
Tomato vines nod vaguely  
above their sticks. They never

thrive here: if it's not early  
blight it's late blight, or shield-bug,  
the fruit garish and nearly

good - a curate's clutch of eggs.  
Those knotted, speckled beans, brown  
like an old man's fingers. Dig

them all in. Dig in the corn,  
that all summer shook and kept  
its thin hands in its sleeves. Down

with them, the burst, purple-topped  
carrots, the peas' drunken row,  
the blackened, small courgettes sapped

by a single, vast marrow:  
the hopelessness of neglect.  
What does a vegetable know

of decay's indifferent fact,  
the groundward pull that pulls you?  
Oh, everything's spoiled, wrecked,

the cabbage drilled through and through.  
This is the slug's rank kingdom.  
This is the one thing that's true.

## Table talk

*For my mother, Ruth Upperton*

As if we would starve. As if we were shrews,  
frantic and burning up like twists of newsprint.  
The roast pushed aside in the pan to make way  
for breadcrusts to press down on all that juice,  
that fat, flipped salty and smoking into our hands.

Sausage-meat and onion. The mutton's heave  
in the oven on a summer Sunday, the blowflies  
slow and comfortable. The endless tramp of shoes,  
boots, the scrape of chairs. Elbows off the table.  
Potatoes boiled, mashed, roasted, mashed. More?

Yes, please. Carrots boiled yellow. Pale cabbage,  
flopped in a heap. Save the water. Elbows off  
the table, now. Bread pudding, nutmeg and burnt  
black sultanas on top, plump and brown inside.  
Tamarillos bleeding in custard. Prunes and junket,

semolina, Gregg's Instant Pudding, ten cents  
a packet. Chocolate, lime green, strawberry red.  
Whisk up a treat. Old woman, mother, lover,  
you didn't know what to do. Eight children  
and a house on fire. Yes, please. Thank you.

## Four bananas

Scrape margarine across eight slices  
of white bread, raspberry jam and Nutella  
and Marmite and jam again. Eight sandwiches –  
two each. Cut and wrap. It's not enough.  
Add four bananas that will come home bruised  
and blackened mid-afternoon. Seal in four  
plastic lunch-boxes. It's not enough. A thump  
of back-packs and a wrenching of zips,  
this daughter smiling and this daughter  
sullen, and these two in a stumbling panic –  
*Don't* slam the door, don't leave me here  
beside myself – these two, my hatchlings,  
my little ones, are gone, fallen through  
that bright rectangle to where the world  
waits with its claws and teeth, its every kind  
of sharp and sudden thing...  
I would halt traffic to let you pass,  
I would snarl and swipe at the dogs  
that bound from driveways, I would  
smooth and make safe and contain but all  
I am is here, I am always here – I wipe away  
the slopped cereal, inhale the sour smell  
of your rooms as I make your beds,  
the sheets in which the grains of your hot,  
dry bodies threshed all night already cooling.

## Kindness

Evening light the colour of olive oil  
poured from a high jug: streaming  
over the burnished back of the cricket  
riding its bowing grass stem; glossing  
the spade with its broken handle  
leaning on the strainer-post that is itself  
leaning, its crumbly lichen glowing,  
the wire tired and slack; pooling  
on the surface of the leylandii stump,  
with its surround of buttery chips  
from inexpert swipes of the axe.

Light is light, it is not kindness,  
but if kindness had a colour, perhaps  
it would be this – yes, you turn away  
impatiently, yet it's you who cannot  
bear to crush a snail; who once, in heavy  
traffic, abandoned the car, and in tears  
strode to a maimed pukeko that fluttered  
beside the wide road; you who killed  
that bird with a swing and a crack –

stay with me, as the light goes  
from gold, to grey, to black.

The drill's bright bit, its tip, its jewel

In a lane as straight as a child's rule,  
as twilight falls, not dark, not quite,  
I swim another lap of the pool.

The water encloses me, comfortably cool.  
The attendant passes, flicks on a light.  
In a lane as straight as a child's rule

I swim alone. And though it's cruel  
to keep him here on a Friday night,  
I swim another lap of the pool.

My windmilling arms unwind a spool  
of roiling yarn, soon lost to sight,  
in a lane as straight as a child's rule.

Fit for the task. I'm the perfect tool.  
My dead gaze swerves right, swerves right.  
I swim another lap of the pool.

The drill's bright bit, its tip, its jewel --  
I am the pen in the hand that writes.  
In a lane as straight as a child's rule  
I swim another lap of the pool.

## It will not gleam

The fitful flap of sheets pegged on the line  
is a kind of sadness, like desultory applause  
that starts only to fail, all decrescendo,

for the stand-up comic whose routine  
trades in all the ways a man walks into a bar,  
all the reasons, the sad old reasons.

In the crazed porcelain of the handbasin,  
with its thin green smear of algae that grows  
stubborn and small, there's a dullness.

It will not gleam. A smell of almonds  
and camphor, of bitter dust, the dust  
that collects on top of books you are reluctant

to open for all the sadness that waits there.  
This is what becomes of our human traces,  
the sloughed skin, the nameless hair.

Sadness in the static of the radio, wandering  
from its station, the voices tiny, overwhelmed;  
in the potted geranium, its hopeless

red flare, its unanswered call. The sadness  
of punctuation, its hesitations; of correct  
grammar, its syntax winding to inevitable

conclusions. The sadness of loss, and most  
of all, of the unthinking, ordinary moment  
when sadness is forgotten, the good joke

that's on us, in the end, when the moment slides  
unnoticed into elegy, the sheets hanging  
now, caught as they are in grey stands of rain.

## History

Turn the pages, slowly. Each word afloat  
on narrative's sea, each glyph the principal  
character in its own story, each clinging on  
for dear life. A is *aleph*, an ox. Upside down,  
its blank, horned face blazes through millennia.  
Imagine each letter like this. Imagine  
its cursive bend and swoop the black-clad  
curve of a peasant's thigh as he bows  
among dew-weighted barley. Here, the tendril  
on the pale nape of a concubine's neck.  
Here, the serif of a beggar-child's bare foot.  
They cluster, they importune, they whisper  
but we don't listen to them, we turn the pages,  
slowly, lifted by the grand wave. A letter, a word,  
a page, a book. Smoke coils and thickens, ash  
carries on the wind, lifts and settles, and this, too,  
is history: the burning of a thousand thousand libraries.

## Spirit

All your life you tear at it, you rip it like paper.  
A crossword clue ghost, at the end it rips back. A spurred  
word, it's very fast, like *sprint* only no prints there –  
who needs feet when the ground tilts so far beneath you,  
wonderfully green yet complicated, a cross-hatching  
of highways and fences, amazing! But oh for a roof  
that isn't red, red ... a differently shaped pool! What's  
so pleasing about a kidney, anyway? Why ever go back  
down? You bank and test the wind's strength and make  
it yours, like a plane you're flying and you know how,  
it makes sense, but where is everybody? Why are you  
alone up here with this fierceness? Your bones hollow,  
like a bird's, fill with light, and air. You are becoming light.  
You are a new singing and it is cold, colourless and bright.

## The starlings

Anger sang in that house until the scrim walls thrummed.  
The clamour rang the window panes, dizzying up chimneys.  
Get on, get on, the wide rooms cried, until it seemed our unease  
as we passed on the stairs or chewed our meals in dimmed

light were all an attending to that voice. And so we got on,  
and to muffle that sound we gibbed and plastered, built  
shelves for all our good books. What we sometimes felt  
is hard to say. We replaced what we thought was rotten.

I remember the starlings, the pair that returned to that gap  
above the purple hydrangeas, between weatherboard and eave.  
The same birds, we thought, but how long does a starling live?  
For twenty years they came and went, flit and pause and up

into that hidden place. A dry rustle at night, fidgeting, calling,  
a restlessness: bird business. The vastness and splendour  
of their piecemeal activity, their lives' long labour,  
we discovered at last; blinking, in the murk of the ceiling,

at that whole cavernous space filled, stuffed like a haybarn.  
It was like gold, except it was more like shit and straw,  
jumbled with their own young, dead, desiccated, sinew  
and bone, fledgling and newborn. Starlings only learn

a little thing, made big from not knowing when to leave off:  
gone past all need except need, enough never enough.