

DWELLINGS

Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington

As a sixth birthday present, Grace made Florrie a dolls house out of balsa wood tacked to a pine frame. She spent days shaping and sanding it, putting dolls made from paddle pop sticks, cotton reels and bits of rag inside it. She painted a sign in strong, blue cursive letters that read ‘Florrie’s Dolls House’.

When Florrie unwrapped it she squealed with pleasure, jumping onto Grace’s lap and hugging her; looking into her face and breathing endearments.

‘Don’t make me sick,’ her father, Peter said. ‘Get off her lap’.

But, for once, Florrie defied him and continued to sit with Grace, causing one of her legs to go numb. She licked Grace’s face, saying ‘You taste yummy,’ giggling quietly.

Grace glanced towards Peter but he was absorbed in reading a magazine.

It was the music he heard first, and then the lyrics—something about smelling the moon in her perfume. It was barely audible over his clicking of the computer keys, but it intrigued him enough to stop typing mid-sentence and pull back the blind.

Florrie gave the dolls house pride of place at the foot of her bed. She kept it there for years, even into adolescence, painting it pink and yellow, with the blue sign always at the front, making it the centrepiece of many of her evenings. When she was 14 years old Peter removed it to the garage.

‘You’re too old for make-believe.’

He hung it from a hook attached to one of the garage joists, like a house flying in air, as Florrie set her face against him.

Not long afterwards, Florrie snuck into the garage and, positioning a stool on top of a chair, climbed teeteringly to where she could reach it. She took two cotton-reel dolls from the house and tucked them into her pocket.

Sunglasses stared back at him from the lawn below. She was lying on her back, reading and he could make out what looked like a smudge of chocolate at the corner of her mouth. The novel’s cover looked familiar even from a distance. It may have been a painting of the Yorkshire moors. He went in search of his cigarettes and bottle of Courvoisier.

After Grace moved into her own apartment she phoned Elspeth and Florrie regularly and visited every couple of weeks, timing it so that Peter was out while maintaining her courtesies with Kathleen. She took the girls gifts of sweet biscuits and scarves and sat down with them in Elspeth's bedroom. Elspeth insisted on that, telling Kathleen they needed private time together.

For Grace those visits 'were a chance to be three again'.

Elspeth would bring Earl Grey tea from the kitchen in a white teapot on a tray. Grace had given her the teapot a year previously after Elspeth had exclaimed with pleasure when she saw it in a shop.

'I want to be grown up' she'd said. 'I want to collect everything I will need to move out of home. Florrie and I will go when I'm 18.'

'Don't tell Mum', Grace said. 'She won't want you to leave.'

'We have to. You know why.'

Elspeth tipped the tea into matching cups in a thin, slow stream. She said it tasted better that way, raising the pot with a flourish while Florrie watched and giggled. The tea fell from the spout in a wavering strand.

Those visits passed in long drawn-out rhythms as if the intimate cycles of their lives remained connected—as if the same blood flowed between them. Sometimes they sat silently for minutes.

He downed the last of the Courvoisier. 'Arabella,' he called, and the breeze hoisted her name across the garden. He saw her on the blue floral swing, the white fringe of the sunshade framing her face. His fingers ached from typing. She sucked noisily on a blood plum. She patted the cushion next to her. He took a strand of her flyaway hair into his mouth. She rested her head on his shoulder and he took the heavy plum stone from her mouth, rolling it around his own mouth.

As Elspeth said they would, she and Florrie moved away from Peter and Kathleen just after she turned 18, renting a neat flat in Pearce, only five minutes away from where they'd grown up. Elspeth was working as a receptionist at a doctor's surgery, and although Peter said Florrie would never be independent, Elspeth defied him: 'I will look after my sister.'

Since moving out they'd had almost nothing to do with their father, who soon started a relationship with a younger woman and moved to Victoria. They feared he would start another family.

'What a creep', Elspeth said. Florrie looked glum if his name was mentioned.

She lit the circle of candles around his photograph, enjoying the way the image captured that odd expression of triumph he always had after he finished his daily exercise—two hours every day regardless of everything else. She looked closely

at the photo she had taken one spring afternoon through his window. It wasn't perfectly clear, but you could just make out her own reflection in the glass. Like a double exposure. Bonding them together. One life force overlapping the other.

Grace continued to visit them and Elspeth always served her tea and Vovo biscuits.

On one of her visits Florrie brought the dolls house into the lounge room. Elspeth had retrieved it while it still was in good condition and it was now strewn with 50 or more dolls and beds, chairs and chests-of-drawers. There was even a small garden at the front of the house with plastic trees and a white picket fence from a child's toy set.

'Elspeth fixed it for me', Florrie said. 'In the last few weeks I've made lots of new people.'

Florrie and Grace revived stories of Mrs Grumble who went to the local store to buy four packets of anger, of Mr Grumble who planted fighting trees in his garden and watched them grow with their boxing glove leaves. Of Aunty Grumble who baked animosity pies and of Grandpa Biscuit who sat in a chair and snored most of the day while fungus grew out of his ears into the shapes of balloons and floated away. It had been therapeutic when they were children and it was therapeutic again.

Arabella's mother saw the streaks of mascara.

'Sweetie, what's wrong? Did he hurt you? Did he touch you?'

Arabella looked at the pile of bridal magazines under the bed and looked back at her mother. Her eyes shone like stars.

Grace had forgotten the worlds that she and Florrie had invented; how much they'd relied on those games, stories and codes. Florrie started to giggle with pleasure and snuggled up to Grace, curling her arms around her body.

'I love you. I want you to visit every week.'

'I'll come as often as I can.'

'Do you remember the story you used to tell about the skeletons that danced out of the closet?'

'No.'

'How the skeletons of memory danced out of the closet and chopped up Mr and Mrs Pieface.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cassandra Atherton is an award-winning writer. She was a Visiting Scholar in English at Harvard University in 2016 and a Visiting Fellow in Literature at Sophia University, Tokyo, in 2014. She has published 17 critical and creative books (with three more in progress) and over the last three years has been invited to edit six special editions of leading refereed journals. Cassandra has been a successful recipient of more than 15 national and international research grants and teaching awards including, most recently a VicArts grant and an Australia Council grant. She is the current poetry editor of *Westerly* magazine.

Paul Hetherington is the author of numerous scholarly articles and has published and/or edited 27 books, including 13 full-length poetry collections and nine chapbooks. Among these are *Moonlight on oleander: prose poems* (UWAP, 2018) and *Palace of memory* (RWP, 2019). He won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards (poetry) and undertook an Australia Council for the Arts Literature Board Residency at the BR Whiting Studio in Rome in 2015-16. He was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize in the 2017 New South Wales Premier's Awards. He is Professor of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI), and one of the founding editors of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*.