

*The Clockwork Gift*

*Also by Claire Crowther:*

Stretch of Closures

**CLAIRE CROWTHER**

**The Clockwork Gift**

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*for my grandchildren*



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I

**THE HEREBEFORE**



**PETRA GENETRIX**  
*for Selima Hill*

I won't replace lost wedding cutlery,  
its broad straight limbs,  
with new shallow spoons,  
their writhing shoulderless handles—

Lines get broken.  
All I see in museums  
is the frozen watchfulness of a previous home.  
Ancient knives found under Eden Walk are flints

polished in an age defined by how it ate.  
There's no matching greenstone and dolomite  
though I could still buy old patterns,  
shell, feather, rat tail.

'Granny, did you throw away your silver?'  
'The table of the moon is laid with it.'

## LIVE GRENADE IN SACK OF POTATOES STORY

The schizoid boy who never takes his pills  
and has been ordered not to visit any female  
family member, here he comes, half-naked,  
down to my basement. Later, a police dog bites  
his scrotum. I buy chips and biscuits. Mutter  
names. I take care of these grandchildren.  
Like that unfed, sleepless child – the number  
of games I thought up, but she's live, a grenade,  
buried and ready to explode, dug up  
decades after the war, lost in a sack  
of potatoes. They come for my expertise.  
It's worth their battering the door  
to share my anger. *Nonna, oma, nain.*

## ONCE TROUBLESOME

*'Let them call her a wicked old woman! she knew she was  
no such thing.'* Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent*

It isn't New Year yet so Happy What?  
Till then, it's Boxing Day every morning.  
Empty bags hang off the radiators.  
Chilly: hot

cold

Cordelia position.

Did it mean

we didn't love each other  
that morning he gave me up  
though that same night he said let's marry?

My striped dress hung

along my body

bounced

boldened

bitmapped

my abdomen as I walked, a balloon

sinking back down

its own string

after the decision.

The baby would have had to sleep in a drawer.

Immortalists

(not you who refuse to believe improbable notions)

think:

the smallest cell refuses to die

in its everness.

Now I live in an attic

garden is the chewed melon skin of sky.

Old bins, old books. Death's hardly ethical

in the light of such continuity. Last week,

the CEO of a charity named in my will

wrote to suggest ways to retrieve what I've lost.

Look, Christmas photos  
of others' other  
children. After  
*Pocoyo, Juggling Balls.*

## OPEN PLAN

They took the walls away without warning.  
The roof floated, a miraculous *over* of shelter.  
We were caught out. We cooled quickly. A sty?

My hands made paws? My lover stamped in the open.  
Who took the decision? Editorials argued  
about iconoclasm. We'd had a tradition

of opening the inside but obscuring doors.  
But doorlessness isn't just trailing ivy  
over a letterbox or bricking the front

to look like the side. Our family walls were all sides.  
The trick was to show passers-by a gleam of room.  
One of our walls had had an exquisite *trompe l'oeil*

library. No stranger could find a way in  
and no one knew how we had done it, which book  
the idea came from. Every unwall'd home

can't be called a ruin. I missed the rally.  
Thousands met in a park—that seems so ironic.  
Were they protesting about their gazebos?

My bed is a perfect copy of straw, comfortable.  
I hold you as close as when we were walled in,  
though nearer the pavement, though clearer to them.

## MINE, THEN

*for those grandmothers who parent AIDS orphans*

We sat on the bench outside the clinic  
and I explained that they might need medicine.

I said, 'There is weather coming,  
full of variety.

Wouldn't you like an umbrella  
if it rains?' On the way home

it was as easy to make them laugh  
as to find a vein.

I could see straight through that mousey light  
to evening,

past houses pale  
as my own finger,

across the pewter surface of salted road  
edged by leafless trees.

The ground heaved  
with sealed-in bluebells.

They worried I would be less upset  
than when my own child died.

You need one person to be loved by  
like a lightning flash needs dousing in a peach cloud.

## XYLOTHEQUE

My husband mocks the ghost who hovers near me  
on walks. A ghost wouldn't climb a stile  
or skirt cows so widely. And why would she edge  
round barely flooded fields? Leaky shoes?

Aren't ghosts violent, my husband suggests.  
No, you need a body for that, to be  
as well as mean and seem, though the ghost wears  
blue jeans, sequinned boots and says

she was bullied for being beautiful  
as a teenager and loved a mechanic  
from Dollis Hill at twenty. The ghost noticed me  
in the doctor's surgery. I held

a child who snuffled my hand like an animal.  
Dying is being born. You imprint on the person  
you see last. I remember her panic.  
Receptionists corralled the waiting room.

Calling her up now seems like human-stealing.  
My husband mocks: 'You saw a death. Why  
exaggerate?' Maybe because, without ghosts,  
we are a wooden library, books about wood

bound in wood with leaves for pages, words,  
the seeds and nuts of ancient beech, birch, oak  
and rowan. I look for her where  
box trees curl like knots of neglected hair.