

Jennifer Clement studied English Literature and Anthropology at New York University and French Literature in Paris. Her memoir *Widow Basquiat* was on the “Booksellers’ Choice” list in the U.K. She has since published two novels, *A True Story Based on Lies*, which was a finalist in the Orange Prize for Fiction in the United Kingdom, and *The Poison That Fascinates* (Canongate, 2008). She is also the author of several books of poetry: *The Next Stranger* (with an introduction by W.S. Merwin), *Newton’s Sailor*, and *Lady of the Broom*, each published in bilingual editions in Mexico. Shearsman published a *New and Selected Poems* in 2008, which selected work from all three previous volumes and also added new work. Clement’s work has been translated into ten languages.

Jennifer Clement was awarded Mexico’s prestigious “Sistema Nacional de Creadores” grant and was honoured with the UK’s Canongate Prize for her story *A Salamander-Child*. In 2001 she was also the recipient of a US-Mexico Fund for Culture (FONCA, Fundación Cultural Bancomer, the Rockefeller Foundation) grant for the San Miguel Poetry Week, which she founded in 1997 with her sister, Barbara Sibley. She is currently President of PEN Mexico.

Also by Jennifer Clement

Prose

A True Story Based on Lies

A Salamander-Child

The Poison That Fascinates

Poetry

The Next Stranger / El próximo extraño

Newton's Sailor / El marinero de Newton

Lady of the Broom / La dama de la escoba

New and Selected Poems

JENNIFER CLEMENT

Widow Basquiat

a memoir

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Exeter

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a second edition was published in 2003.

This new edition contains some minor corrections.

Widow Basquiat

'Suzanne, you are a cartoon.'

Jean-Michel Basquiat

For Suzanne

“Widow Basquiat” was a morbid nickname, given to me
by Rene Ricard, many years before Jean-Michel died.

—Suzanne Mallouk

SHE IS THIS GIRL

She always keeps her heroin inside her bee-hive hair-do. The white powder hidden in the tease and spit. The cops can't find it. The drug addicts can't find it. Suzanne holds her head high. She's carrying a world without corners. She's holding up the sky. Slight enough to go down chimneys, Suzanne looks like a little girl dressed up in her mother's clothes. She wears Love-That-Red lipstick by Revlon and has blue-black hair and white skin. She closes up all the buttons on her shirt.

Suzanne can knit, ice skate, sing, read palms and smoke dozens of cigarettes to keep warm inside. Little girls love her because she tells them, 'Hey, little missy, I can hear your heart.' They think she's a music box.

When Suzanne was ten years old her mother said, 'let's have a tea party.' They sat together at the kitchen table. It was the first time Suzanne ever drank tea. She put four teaspoons of sugar in it. She said 'it's too cold.'

Her mother said, 'I'll only tell you this once so mark my words.'

'I broke the rocking horse,' Suzanne said.

'You of all my children were made like an angel. But you want to look over the edge to hell. Always know where that line is and never cross it. And here are nine kisses,' her mother continued, 'for every year of your life.'

While she kissed her again and again on the forehead, Suzanne wished her mother wore lipstick so that the kisses would be painted on her and everyone would know.

She wanted to say, 'But I'm ten really.'

WORN WITH SOUNDS

Suzanne's mother claims to be a witch. She puts her head down, claps her hands and concentrates. She calls this 'cursing people'. Once a man who owned a television store in town asked her, 'Who winds you up in the morning?' That night his store burned down. But she can't stop Suzanne's father from beating up the kids.

'He's an Arab,' she says, 'what can I do? Curses don't get into those black eyes.'

Suzanne has a scar on her forehead from when he threw her down the stairs. It is shaped like the number 5.

Her childhood is worn with sounds: chairs against walls; 'You good for nothing punk!'; the snake belly-slide of a belt, the soft drum sound of a three-year-olds head against a wall; 'You good for nothing punk'; tears that mix with *Captain Crunch* cereal; 'You good for nothing punk'; a hand the size of a maple leaf slapping; the twist and crack of arms and wrists; 'Walk on tip-toe, shhh', whisper. 'He's home.'

'Don't worry, honey,' Suzanne's mother says to Suzanne. 'One day you'll set the world on fire.'

PAPER DRESSES

Four draft dodgers and Suzanne sit at the kitchen table. Suzanne's mother is known in the underground of draft dodgers so men come to Orangeville, Ontario, Canada to sit at this table dressed in love beads and leather bracelets to ask Suzanne where they can get some pot. Suzanne giggles and pulls some plastic bags filled with marijuana out of her white knee-high boots.

Suzanne wears paper dresses and maxi-coats. One draft dodger likes to tease her by burning cigarette holes in her dresses. Another one tells her if the war ever ends he's going to come back and marry her.

'I'll never marry anyone,' Suzanne says. 'No man is big enough for my arms.'

I had very hard working parents. My father had a painting/construction business that at its height employed forty men. My mother had a nursery school in our house. She took all children. She did not close the door to any child. There were normal, autistic, blind and crippled children. There was nowhere for these disabled children to go. My mother was a real radical. During the Vietnam War she took in American draft dodgers. I was too young to know what this meant. These hippies with long hair and beards would just appear at the dinner table. During those Vietnam years my mother must have taken care of forty of these young men. My father was against this and I heard them fighting over it. My father thought they were cowards. My mother thought they were pacifists and she thought that they were too young. My mother became known in the underground of draft dodgers and boys from all over America came, knowing they would get food and a roof over their heads. They would sleep on the living room floor.

My father was intelligent and hard working. He taught himself everything. He drove a big Cadillac so that we would be like the children of the doctors and lawyers. However, he was domineering and violent. He believed that we would respect him if we feared him. We feared him.

ONLY ONE CHROMOSOME IS MISSING

Suzanne walks down the steps from her bedroom. In the hall her mother is feeding a child who is tied with a rope to a chair. The little boy is tied up so he will not mutilate himself. He scratches his face until it bleeds. The doorbell rings and two more children with Down's Syndrome arrive. This is Suzanne's mother's latest business venture. There are no facilities for abnormal children in Orangeville.

Suzanne thinks, 'These are the children that need to go to the doll hospital.'

For three years the house shelters three or four of these children a day. Their hands get washed, their backs get rubbed, they break things they find. But this house doesn't shelter black and blue children.

The black and blue children are thinking about running away. They think, 'We don't fit in this house.'

Suzanne loves one of the kids called Sammy. Sammy is a six year old Black girl. Suzanne knows only one chromosome is missing in her beautiful little face. Suzanne braids Sammy's hair and buys her candy.

Suzanne makes her dresses that she copies out of *Vogue* magazine and she teaches Sammy to count to five.

One day Suzanne and Sammy are sitting in the garden when Suzanne's mother comes outside, 'Now you girls be careful, you're going to turn your skin too dark,' she says.

Once she gave Suzanne a whole case of bleaching skin cream. 'If you think about it hard enough,' Suzanne's mother says, 'you can change the way you look.'

'If you think about it hard enough,' Suzanne tells Sammy, 'you can make that chromosome grow in you.' Sammy looks straight at the sun. She can do that and not even squint or blink.

THE MAGIC HORSETAIL

Suzanne's mother has a magic horsetail. Out of a short, carved, ivory stick hangs a white horse's tail. It was given to her by her great aunt for luck when she was little, growing up in England. She took it with her to Beirut where she was a British naval officer. It was here that she met Suzanne's father. Together they moved to Canada as Palestinian refugees. The horsetail has always been with her.

Suzanne braids the horsetail, shakes it around. 'Make lots of wishes with it, Suzy,' Suzanne's mother says.

'Did you make wishes with it?' Suzanne asks.

'Oh, millions and millions. But I don't believe in making wishes.'

Suzanne's mother always tells lies. She says she saw a woman in Beirut who had transparent skin. She says there are forty-two ways to cut an apple. She says she's seen the vaults with the gold reserves of England. She says the Earth has two moons. She says she has eaten sheep eyes, ant larvae and raw eggs because she was working as a spy.

She tells Suzanne, 'you have your father's barbaric blood. You are genetically more Arab than your brothers and sisters. You will always have problems with hysteria, rage and jealousy.'

Every time Suzanne thinks about her mother's sulfur-blue eyes it rains.

SKELETON

Suzanne has always made a wish to herself. But it is not really a wish because it is going to happen no matter what. She's going to leave. She's known this ever since she could look in the mirror at her face.

When she was six, she walked alone around the block for the first time and it felt good. After that, she did it everyday always walking a little bit farther. In the winter, she'd walk and walk around the house looking for cobwebs, which she would eat to make her strong.

Suzanne knows her skeleton. She knows where every bone is and which one hurts most. She knows the bruise from falling on ice is different from a bruise from a belt. She has studied the length of her tibia and the width of her femur. The pull of hair from the nape of the neck is different from the pull of hair from the forehead. She has learned the swivel and turn from a hand that can cover her whole face.

At night Suzanne lies in her bed listening to her father play trick-track with his friends who have also come to Canada as Palestinian refugees. Sometimes, she sneaks down, watches them and her father pulls her out of the shadows.

He strokes her hair and gives her a taste of beer with his finger.

Sometimes I would jump on his back to stop him and I would get thrown across the room. Once when I was five he threw me down the stairs and I hit my head on a heater. I still have the scar on my forehead. He often threw us across the room and we would hit furniture or walls. He would also pick up furniture and throw it at us or break it.

What Furniture Feels Like

A chair feels like a slap.

A table feels like a kick.

A lamp feels like a punch.

A door feels like a shove, but it can be opened.