

Independent author

Emma Ashmere

Portrait or landscape

Biographical note:

Emma Ashmere's short stories have appeared in various publications including *Sleepers almanac*, *Etchings*, *Griffith review*, *Australian women's book review* and *The Age*. She has an MA in Creative Writing from The University of Adelaide, and a PhD in English from La Trobe University, Melbourne, investigating whiteness and the use of the historical record in fiction. She lives in northern New South Wales.

*a dove in its shape, anywhere
is free.*

Janet Frame

You don't paint, they said from beneath their stout straw hats with their milk-white calves and the sock-and-sandal surety of the British abroad. I tried to write them down and failed except for one fragment inspired by my employer Evelyn Millar, painting her pair of new white doves.

dawn breath cloud flight/ exit stars/ the pearl-sky night

I never showed anyone my poetry. Poetry was private, wasn't it?¹

I was paid to cook for one summer in France not to paint or write poetry about the pearliness of skies or doves, or my enigmatic employer, or the collection of houseguests who came to stay. The only brush I held was dipped in melted *beurre*, leaving small, dark curves of hair across expanses of pastry like a dozen surprised eyebrows.

(In a rare moment of personal admission, Evelyn Millar told me she'd painted the eyelashes and smiles onto china dolls in a North London factory to survive one 1950s winter. I was so poor, she said. I had only my boils to keep me warm.)

Evelyn? I now live with a painter who paints my skin.

But in that grey London autumn of 1989, I, Sera² Jean Gould (Australian, 23, of moderately heavy build, given to cloudbursts of eczema brought on by worry or overindulging in pilfered bottles of whisky or hot Silk Cut cigarettes) answered the following advertisement:

*Wanted! Cook live-in 6 mths
painting school Sth France.*

It was probably the first word which caught my eye.

I remember the day. I was lying on the floor of my north London squat.

I could do that, I said to whoever was lounging on a nearby mattress smoking hash.

I knew applying for jobs required navigating that treacherous territory between Fact & Fiction, Desire & Dread, Greed & Humility.

How best write about my own stupid self? I pondered.

Pretend you aren't writing about your own stupid self but about your best friend who you really want to get the job, said the surprisingly helpful mattress voice.

Version 1: Sera Jean Gould has cooked all her life apprenticing against her will in the oil-slick sherry-smelling kitchen of her meat-and-three-veg-Mills-and-Boons-reading-mother and blue-singlet-and-red-nosed-step-father then forcing an unlikely entry into the flamboyant poet and actor-frequenting paté/quiche/carrot and walnut cake cafés of the

1980s Athens of the South (otherwise known as Adelaide) before plotting her escape to the Centre of the World (London) including one ‘nadir moment’ working at the staff canteen of the BBC One under the (clearly false) impression she might mingle-with-the-TV-stars and be ‘discovered’ for her hitherto unsuspected script-writing talents but instead found herself ladling Oxo gravies over bullety peas and re-frying sausages and chips from 6am kipper-faced beneath a regulation white nylon net hat behind an Olympic-sized swimming pool *bain-marie* before being promoted to the position of Steaming Peas.

That’s one long sentence, said the voice from the mattress through the browning haze. What about breaking it up and putting it in the first person?

Version 2 then: My life has been a smorgasbord of culinary and literary joys. Punctuated by simple pleasures such as tea breaks at the pie restaurant where I recently worked. Down the dim fuggy confusion of Brighton laneways. Smoking as many Silk Cuts as possible in half an hour. Sprawled between the cornucopias of overflowing restaurant rubbish bins. Where I learnt that ordinary tea breaks can become extraordinary. When reading (a very long-term library loan of) Sylvia Plath. Even though my short, strong body was eternally marinated by oil and mutton fat. And my peasant-stock fingers were forever cut. And pyrographed. My spine was continually bent from carrying great pots of red pyramids of raw beef. Not to mention my new NHS gold-rimmed glasses permanently smeared in whatever stale cheap cooking oil the restaurant persisted with (and rarely changed). I was still able to gaze up from my dog-eared book pondering the great nebulae of Word, Rhythm, Myth & Death. Beneath the frigid blur of Sussex stars and.

A lengthy silence from the brown mattress.

Then: I’m not sure about beginning and ending sentences with with, so, but, and and. Are you really going to persist with this footnote thing?³

My squat-mates were hungry and angry with me. Whenever I was slogging my guts out in some greasy-spoon dive, I became their best-friend-walking-doggy-bag. But I’d just skated out of the kitchens of a Spanish Bar in Islington after refusing to slosh Blue Nun over two week-old potatoes to disguise and/or enhance the smell, throwing in my stiff apron one final time, stamping past the mini-cabs outside Hammersmith station at two in the morning past the chorus of shouts, you get kill lady if you walk home alone.

Yes, I conceded, I probably would get killed. But more likely from eating mouldy potatoes sweated with old Blue Nun. I shook my ruddy fist at Hammersmith shouting, *and I eat men like air!*⁴

I re-read the advertisement that was going to lead me onwards out of grubby squats, grimy restaurants and bouts of petty crime to an honest land of Art & Poetry.

Wanted! Then a phone number. No need for a written application after all. I rummaged in somebody’s pocket for a few quid and went out for the long and frequently fruitless forage for a functioning phone box.

So there I was, phoning this number in the ad, hastily describing myself as some reconstitution of Version 1 & Version 2⁵ which must have worked because I was thence instructed by a rather lofty voice to proceed to Victoria Station for an interview in exactly one week's time with the Artist Herself, Evelyn Millar.

I spent *days* preparing for that interview. I hacked a path through the mountain peaks of broken wall tiles and ran a deep, hot, stuttering bath. I applied my fold away travel-scissors to the stringier aspects of my hair. Someone got off the mattress and accompanied me to the National Gallery to look at Real Art, then back to our High Street for an interview-inspired shoplifting expedition. Afterwards we smoked a little Lebanese black and floated about the headstones of the Highgate Cemetery pretending we were starring in music videos, flapping the wings of our new black full-length coats beneath the delicate tracery of autumn trees.

Next day I evaded my fare early to Victoria Station. The rendezvous was set to take place in the station tearooms which looked very 1940s below a sombre-faced clock, like a scene from *Mrs Minerva* or *Waterloo Bridge*.

Then like somebody out of *The French connection*, I planted myself behind a pole on watch for my prospective employer who'd apparently distinguish herself by wearing an orange flowered hat amid the sea of London commuter grey and black.

Voilà. The hat had landed. A persimmon-coloured flower advanced through the pitching swell. Two women. Tall. One with swinging amber beads. Both looked English establishment. But arty. Well-read. Interesting. Catalysts for the aspiring poet.

The younger woman was Evelyn Millar's daughter. She was possibly my age, but wealth has a habit of slowing the years. They ordered tea and looked at me. At my workhorse hands and stubby nails. At the way I stirred my milk deeply and quietly in perhaps an unAustralian way. They looked at the wine-stained menus I'd collected from various bistros where I may (or may not) have worked. I dabbed frugal amounts of jam and cream onto a scone, resisting the urge to slip any cutlery or scones up my sleeve for Later On.⁶

May 1989. I slam the squat door one last time. In my pocket, a one-way train ticket to France to live in at Evelyn Millar's summer painting school for a whole six months. As promised to every pre-paid British tourist, I'll be dazzled by hefty doses of heat and light. And yes, for that first blinding moment when I tripped down the steps of the overnight train and lunged into the embrace of the smell of forgotten summers, of lost antipodean FREEDOM & ESCAPE, redolent of my beach-dwelling, UDL-swilling, skin-cancerous youth, I felt like Dorothy waking up in technicolour.

Vermillion roses sang out from the beds. A railway man in a blue cap tended pots of pink petunias while discussing the placement of Monet's water lilies with Evelyn who was waving from her Renault.

She frowned at me, at my London-grey skin, my traveller's hair and narrowed girth. I attempted to dispel her disapproval by suggesting I'd staggered out of a Picasso painting.

As we threaded through the one-church villages past the *Tabacs* and *Patisseries*, through the amputated trees and the nodding sunflowered fields, she advised I tell any locals I was *Anglaise*. When my (non-working) tourist visa ran out I would drive her low-slung Renault through tooth-shaped alps and blood-splotched poppy fields in the general direction of the Franco-Spanish border and when the air had become tangerine and my visa had been stamped, I'd turn the car around and drive straight back. We agreed this was not dishonesty *per se*. It was more of your illegal immigrant ingenuity.

I slept in the main house that night. It was like entering an ark. A cathedral. A crumbling rambling soft-stoned palace with twinkling windows and laughing doors. I remember looking up at the stars of light dripping down through the gaps between the terracotta tiles and

when I woke/ the marigold

A typical day began quietly. Except for one morning when a bell rang twice in the village church. I looked out at the belfry not knowing three bells rang for the death of woman, two for a man. Bells? Churches? No time then to think of Gender & Death. There was breakfast to prepare for a dozen or so painting guests who were usually English although two Germans and one baffled Frenchman briefly appeared and were never seen again.

Breakfast consisted of stale but prettily sculpted bread sprinkled with water and lightly reheated. Black coffee waited to be poured into white handle-less bowls. There were ample still life platters of attractive fruit and *pattes* of goat cheese. Behind the door marked *Private!*, I washed dishes in an antique porcelain sink. When the guests had abandoned their cutlery and table napkins, Evelyn appeared in red straw hat with easel and directed her students to various vantage points about the garden. This signalled my moment to run and scour the bathrooms of any hairs, odours or unsightly stains. Then it was time to make preparations for morning tea and lunch. Followed by afternoon tea and dinner. Followed by supper. (Always followed by washing up.) Followed by plodding back to my own simple quarters across the walled garden to be lulled to sleep by the stars of light sliding down through the gaps in the roof tiles.

In postcards I wrote, *I'm cooking on the edge of other people's lives!!*

In my diary I wrote, *every moment is a lesson.*

Did I write that? I can't remember. Memory is so slippery.

Look. I'm almost at the end of this and I haven't even mentioned my intense self-education via the attic full of Evelyn's books, half in English, half in French. Or the extraordinary textures achieved in her larger oils. Or the flotilla of enamel coffee pots setting sail across her *Citizen Kane* mantelpiece. Or how each room had at least three paintable corners featuring examples of Grace, Force & Beauty. Of being woken by the sound of a white cactus flower opening in the night outside my bedroom window. My bedroom being an old stone bakehouse with blackened stove and spider-thick flue. Or the

curvature of the flagstones made by centuries of long-dead passing feet. Or how I failed to make myself understood by the wide-skirted goat-girl with the line of blood clotting down the inside of her leg. There's no mention of assembling a kit bicycle in French and then riding it to explore the piss-smelling limestone caves All By Myself, which was Grand, Bold & Terrifying, especially when that man came out of the bushes and threw a fistful of Francs at me so I'd undress. And what about the marigold flower which greeted me that first glorious morning as I coughed up my London lungs in the bright morning air?

London life had pencilled me in/ to its leaden chest

The lone flower planted so goldly and independently by Evelyn on the windowsill. Or how in a frisson of surrealism, she painted the enormous marigold cramped inside a tiny room?⁷ Or the village lights strung through the branches of the linden trees for the *fête*. Or the too hot night when she and I swam in the absent English neighbours' pool, silent and drunk, only to wake the next morning to find some of the locals had thrown the contents of the communal *poubelles* (rubbish bins) into the pool, floating like some stinking *Raft of Medusa* to deter to more rich, real estate-hungry Britishers moving in.

And what about the glow-worm walk?

Look, Evelyn always said.

I follow the stripes of my employer's cardigan in the dark. I've been here long enough to know never to ask her anything about her life – but just to be – and look. Look at the way the air burns umberly to its inevitable cadmium red end as we stumble through the Prussian blue ditch. Look up at the Van Gogh satellites fizzing above. Then back at the benevolent farmhouse watching over us.

Look. Glow-worms, Evelyn says.

thousands/ millions/ infinities

We sit for a while inhaling the cool smell of vegetable damp but I'm still not very good at being – and looking. I am always storing things up so I can write about them later on. Suddenly I remember a story I'd read as a child about a family in China who were too poor for electricity so the children had to go out and collect glow-worms so they could read at night after working so hard in the rice paddies with their parents but suddenly there was no rice to eat but just when all seemed lost their dog came home with a few grains of rice hanging from his coat and they were able to re-invent themselves by planting and harvesting and reading again by glow-worm light.

Evelyn lights a cigarette.

She laughs one of her inscrutable dark-night laughs.

For a moment the flare of her match outstrips the surrounding worm-made illuminations.

Propaganda, she says.

(It should be noted this glow-worm walk occurred not long after the Tiannamen Square massacre of 1989, a scene repeated many times on French tv.) (The same year the French

commemorated two hundred years since the storming of the Bastille, inspiring armies of re-enacting sandalled men and bonneted women charging about as the *sans culottes* witnessed by myself beneath a dizzying hallucination of red white 'n blue fireworks from a Historical Bridge beside the World Famous Albi cathedral.) (World Famous for its frescoes of the many kinds of Bosch-like hells.) (And it should also be noted this was the year after the (so-called) Australian 'Bicentenary' when stickers declaring *white Australia has a black history* were first sighted by well-meaning but bone-ignorant white girls plastered onto the frames of all politically sound bicyclists.)⁸

In what we called the 'slow weeks' when no painting guests came, we ate fried eggs on toast and carried larger cartons of books down from the attic. I went from the familiar angst-ridden territory of *Bonjour tristesse* to the talking submarine of Joanna Russ to *The Women's room* to *Women on the edge of time*.⁹

Every morning the goat-girl passes by. We're about the same age but look at our lives! Poverty makes the habit of ageing us. There she goes, making clucking sounds as she walks her wiry charges up the same hill every morning, down at night, in her round-stomached skirt, her un-tended teeth threatening to fall brownly out.

On my second to last day, Evelyn was offered the pair of white doves.

You cannot refuse a pair of doves, she said.

Though others must have, I thought, even though I'd not yet found Janet Frame's take on the subject, 'Declining the offer of a pair of doves'.

*Thank you. Though I do not accept your doves
I think their twilight colour, their shape
stay forever with me;*¹⁰

On my last afternoon, I like to believe Evelyn invited me to return the following year. We'd built a little shelf along one of the shaded garden walls above the polyanthus and geraniums. We were drinking red wine. She was sitting painting her new doves as they moved about their dove-house, in and out, knowing exactly how to live their pearl-sky lives.

You don't paint, the next batch of painting guests would have said if I'd come back.

But you can't go back.

I didn't paint. I read and cooked. As I cooked, I tried to read the dubbed mouths of the tangerine faces of the American actors on *Days of our lives*. Or I looked down the valley, feeding on the ginger-coloured evening light, trying to save it up for Poetry Later On.

I'd like to say I didn't paint because I wrote.¹¹

I read not wrote. Why?

- 1) I hadn't yet discovered Lily Briscoe in *To the lighthouse* although I'd often heard Charles Tansy's voice. *Women can't paint. Can't write.*¹²
- 2) At that time, I still believed reading and writing occurred on parallel planes.
- 3) At the time, I still thought there was so much time.

I'm tired now. We're almost finished. I'll just look up your name, Evelyn. See if I can find an address for you on the net. Oh good. Look. Something about a London retrospective exhibition of your complete *oeuvre*...

– complete with birth – and death – dates –

– you've *died*?

She's died!

Perhaps I believed you still existed preserved in that amber summer of 1989, a summer introduced to me by the single marigold placed on my sill.

But look, Evelyn. I need to tell you you *rescued me* with your Art & Books. Even though I was *only so young* and you probably never thought of me.

I need to THANK YOU.

In writing.

I want to tell you I live with an artist who encouraged me to write and made me look. That when I hitchhiked out of your village in the south of France, I went 'home' to university and began to learn about the fertile and fluid interstices between reading, being, writing, looking, history, art, love, freedom, death and life.

Although it was too late, I even gave up the cigarettes.

Look. Another marigold southern hemisphere sunset. We sit by the window all saffroned up. My artist-lover smiles, admiring the two doves she's just tattooed onto my dying skin.

Endnotes

1. Woolf, Virginia 1993 *Orlando*, London: Virago Press Ltd, 213. *Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?*

2. My birth name was 'Sarah' but on leaving Australia and embarking on my REINVENTION I decided 'Sera' was more mysterious and poetic.
3. I didn't respond to the footnote challenge having not yet discovered the fertile and fluid interstices between history, memory, fact and fiction. See Byatt, A S 2001 *On histories and stories: selected essays*, London: Vintage, 103. A S Byatt acknowledges that 'publishers hate them' but she regards footnotes as a 'professional extension of a normal reading process, in history or fiction, making a fuller, more vivid, more hypothetical narrative precisely around what we are not told'. See also Winterson, Jeanette 1996 *Art objects: essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. 1995, London: Vintage, 165: '[I]f a finished piece of work is inadequate without copious footnotes from the author, then it is inadequate'. See also Hutcheon, Linda 2002 *The politics of postmodernism* 1989 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 80. Linda Hutcheon says 'paratextual conventions' such as footnotes can 'rupture' and 'expose the seams' of the text as 'deliberately awkward, as a means of directing our attention to the very processes by which we understand and interpret the past through its textual representations be it in history or fiction'. Footnotes can be found in Baron Bulwer Lytton's *Harold, last of the Saxons* (1848), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928).
4. Plath, Sylvia 2001 'Lady Lazarus', *Ariel*, Faber & Faber Ltd, 8.
5. See previous pages.
6. In fact, I would never steal or do anything knowingly dishonest again. Such was my resolve after winning the job that CHANGED MY LIFE.
7. After René Magritte's looming green apple in *La chambre d'écoute / The listening room* (1958) or the giant red rose in *Le tombeau de Lutteurs / The wrestlers' tomb* (1961).
8. I can hear the mattress voice querying my flagrant use of parentheses.
9. It would be another year until *Oranges are not the only fruit* REALLY CHANGED MY LIFE.
10. From 'Declining the offer of a pair of doves' in Frame, Janet 1992 *The pocket mirror*, London: The Women's Press Ltd, 99. See also the preceding lines: *would it not/ be wiser to have the reputation of a sea-gull/ and improve slowly?*
11. Evelyn had even lent me her typewriter set on a blue card table with a weak pelvic floor.
12. Woolf, Virginia 1970 *To the lighthouse* 1927, London: Penguin, 180-81. 'Can't paint, can't write, she murmured monotonously, anxiously considering what her plan of attack should be.' See also 181. 'Charles Tansey used to say that, she remembered, women can't paint, can't write. Coming up behind her he had stood close beside her, a thing she hated as she painted here on this very spot.'