

Independent scholar

Sandra Arnold

Sunlight on the water

An excerpt from a novel in progress: *The Eshwell bridge witch project*

Abstract:

Sunlight on the water is an excerpt from a novel in progress: *The Eshwell bridge witch project*.

Biographical note:

Dr. Sandra Arnold lives in North Canterbury, New Zealand. She holds a MLitt and PhD in creative writing from Central Queensland University, Australia. Her non-fiction book, *Sing no sad songs*, on the subject of parental bereavement, was published by Canterbury University Press in 2011. Her short stories have been broadcast on Radio New Zealand and have appeared in anthologies and literary magazines in New Zealand and internationally. She was a founding editor of *Takahe* literary magazine. She is currently writing her third novel.

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Christchurch, April 2012. A red and gold morning in the container mall. Lazy clouds in a bright blue sky. Crowds of shoppers drifting in and out of the brightly painted containers or stopping for a coffee and something to eat at one of the container cafes.

A young woman begins singing on the pavement. The texture of her voice is dark coffee. She tells a woman in a red hat that she practises here every day and hopes for a professional singing career. Two blocks behind her the digger sinks its jaws into yet another high-rise building, its noisy crunching not quite loud enough to kill her song. A bent figure in a black cloak and tall pointy hat strolls past, pushing a bell on a cart. He is on his way to the cathedral to protest against its demolition. A group of people gather round him to sign his petition.

As the singer's song ends, her small audience claps its appreciation. People come forward and drop money in her hat. They talk to her and smile. An old woman reaches out and touches her arm. The woman in the red hat raises her hand in farewell and walks into the car park where the bakery used to be. Fourteen months ago a mother and daughter lay here, trapped under concrete slabs. The girl knows nothing of this, however, and waves back. But the woman is no longer there. A blackbird hits a plate glass window. A loud bang, then feathers fly, float and settle. The bird lies on the grass, one wing fluttering.

'Poor bird,' says a woman leaning over the balcony of the container cafe.

'Yeah! Poor little bugger!' says the man behind her. 'They're always doin' that. They try to fly into the light.'

Christchurch, February 22, 2011. A woman and her daughter stroll down Cashel Street towards the river holding the sandwiches they've just bought from the bakery, past the lunchtime crowds laughing and chattering around the little tables outside the cafes, past the shoppers, stopping for a moment to listen to a young man playing a violin, past the boutiques advertising 20% off. The woman hears someone say, 'Could you ever wish for a sky bluer than this?' She smiles, and turns her attention back to her daughter who is enthusing about the great new job she's just landed in Sydney, a job she's wanted for months and for which she has attended endless management courses and countless interviews. She's flying back there today and the woman feels the familiar tug of impending separation deep in her belly. It began with the first day of school and Charlie waving goodbye as she skipped away with the teacher. Charlie waving goodbye the first time she rode her bike on her own. Charlie driving to university in a different city. Charlie waving goodbye at the airport for two years of travel around Europe. Then six months climbing in Nepal. Then a year's volunteering in South America. Then India. Then South Africa. Then China. The mother wonders if she'll ever get used to it. Not that she wants to keep Charlie bound to her side. Not that she doesn't believe in her daughter's ability to deal with any situation she finds herself in. But the anxiety following separation never lessens. It manifests in dreams of Charlie skipping and dancing through jungles, oblivious to the pythons and crocodiles and poisonous spiders hiding in the tangled undergrowth. In her waking moments she is plagued by the same questions: is Charlie safe? Is she eating properly? Is she warm enough? Does she have enough money? Is she happy? Is she

trusting the wrong people? At least now the job is in Australia. At least now Charlie has Theo in her life. Early days still, but at least this one looks promising. And she'll see Charlie again in less than three months. At least she doesn't have to live through the years of separation her own mother had to on the other side of the world. She focuses on her pride and astonishment at what her daughter has achieved; the kind of person she has grown into. She watches her toss her long auburn hair over her shoulders and smiles at the exasperated tone in her voice. 'I tell you what, though Mum, those women! I'm going to need all the diplomacy I can muster with that lot. Four of them are just waiting to retire anyway, so no they don't want to learn new technology thank you very much. Have you heard the expression a mouth like a cat's bum?'

The mother laughs and pulls the brim of her red sunhat further down her forehead.

'Well, I was confronted with three cats' bums when I mentioned the words 'data entry training' and...'

The two women stumble against each other. The street wobbles as though seen through a heat haze. The earth roars and cracks. Glass shatters and scatters like hail. Buildings implode. The sky splits and spits dust on the fleeing people. The road to the river, lit with sunlight two minutes before, is a chaos of crumbled concrete. The woman clutches her daughter as they watch a man with a screaming baby on his shoulder leaping over piles of bricks. Another man is lifting and tossing blocks of concrete as though they are pieces of polystyrene. Beneath the blocks two legs stick out at strange angles. A blue shoe with a broken heel lies by one of the feet.

'Mum ... we ... have ... to ... move!' The woman's daughter squeezes out the words.

The earth rolls beneath their feet. A wall explodes. A roof collapses and crashes through a floor. Terrified cries erupt from people trying to dodge falling masonry. The two women are hurled to the ground. They are pinned tight. They are trying to breathe. Voices ... Sirens ... Darkness ... Drifting ... Drifting.

She is in a waiting room full of dazed people, young people, old people, all with grey, dust-covered faces. Every couple of minutes one of the two glass-panelled doors opens and a nurse beckons someone to follow her. Those still waiting sit still and silent. The woman looks at each of them and remembers a pair of blue shoes and mouths like cats' bums. She knows this juxtaposition of images makes no sense, but she can't see round or behind them. A man in a white coat emerges from one of the doors and signals to her to come in. She follows him into a small white room with a wooden table and two chairs. Behind the chairs there is a filing cabinet with a little tray on top containing two white mugs, a white sugar bowl and milk jug and a white teapot. There is no window and no other furnishings, no pictures on the white-painted walls. The man points to one of the chairs and asks her to sit down. He pours some tea into each of the two cups and indicates the milk and sugar with a raise of his eyebrows. She shakes her head and he hands her a cup of steaming liquid. As she drinks he sits down on the chair opposite, takes a sip of his own tea and opens a file on the table. He has a kind face with a lined forehead above thick dark-rimmed

glasses, and a flop of sandy hair falling into pale blue eyes. He takes a pen out of his white overall pocket and she notices a wedding band on the third finger of his left hand. He asks her name.

She thinks for a minute or two and says, 'Lily. Yes. It's Lily. Lily Thirkle.'

He nods and writes her name in the file. 'I'm Dr McIlrae,' he says. 'Call me Angus,' and he asks how she is feeling.

Sore, she tells him. Very sore. Everywhere. Especially across her shoulders. And her head. The fog in her head clears a little and she remembers her daughter tossing back her hair. Remembers the sunlight catching on shiny red curls. Remembers her grandmother saying, 'No one in the family inherited my beautiful auburn hair.' But that was before Charlie was born. Where's Charlie now? Charlie has to catch a plane back to Australia. Something to do with cats' bums.

Angus McIlrae looks at her over the top of his glasses. 'Tell me what you remember, Lily,' he says.

She thinks for a long time. Dr McIlrae waits patiently, not speaking.

Well ... she was going somewhere with Charlie. They were talking about data entry and cats' bums. There was music and laughter and smells of coffee and chocolate and cinnamon. The river sparkling in front of them. Sunlight on water. Dappled light on the surface of the water. Something happened. She frowns. Something.

'Think of your memories as pictures on a screen,' Dr McIlrae encourages. 'You can step into the screen, or out of it, at any time or place. Start wherever you like. The images don't have to be in chronological order.' He takes another sip of his tea, settles back in his chair and waits, with both hands around his cup. He looks at her through pale spirals of steam.

So she thinks about the river and sunlight on the water. The changing colours and patterns on the water as the light shifted and danced. And she remembers a pattern she saw more than half a century ago. A pattern made by coloured inks released from a rubber dropper onto a glass tank full of water. Her own ten-year-old face with its mouth an oval of surprise as the spirals of colour blended and separated and merged again. The slow dance in the water before rising to the surface. Other faces. Excited young faces peering into the tank. And three other faces a little further back, one pasty and watchful beneath a thatch of grimy ginger hair; the other apple-cheeked beneath shiny black ringlets tied up with bright blue ribbon edged with lace; the third with a head full of tight black spirals escaping from rows of hairclips, and skin like milk chocolate. Further back still, like a faded photo on the wall, a tall woman constructed of angles and corners, tired eyes and a turned-down mouth painted red.