On Narrowness

Also by Claire Crowther
Stretch of Closures
The Clockwork Gift

## Claire Crowther

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for Keith

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## The Alices

I said he was brillig and I meant it.
He stood in the hall of a friend's house offering extra as simply as a hostess carrying crockery, the only one of us
who has actually fought the jabberwock, whose face we see on News at Ten, whose name is called at tribunals, who defies James Naughtie on Today. He talked
about mome raths, saying hesitantly, 'If the raths don't outgrabe.'
I loathed seeing him like that, stooping below somebody's lintel, being slithy.
'It's not about gyring,' he snapped. But it was. Later he told me how after a tough meeting, in the distance he'd seen me climbing out of a car,
my flesh suggesting something else to save.
The houses our set restored fetch fortunes. Is that better behaviour? A brillig affair! So special a person to have taken to wabe.

I thought, they all do it, the toves. The tension, the criticism they get for neglecting their children, the fear of borogoves. We support them,
us Alices. But we're mome. 'To me you could never be mome,' he said 'whatever you decide,' as he left.

## Captured Women

And in that house there was a room That was hung with many drawings Of women with their mouths tight Shut, lips making a point: 'Why do you stand in front of us? Why stand there? Why not go?'

One dipped her curls forward Thoughtfully: 'Why don't you hang? When will you go?' Their hair, serious Expansion of each, upwards, sideways, A boundary against the questions: 'Why are we on the brink of you?'

The pencil asked what hair weighs
And drew it to cover the tucked-away
Technology of ear. Listen.
The captured women ask: ‘Why
Do we hang in front of you?
Why hang here? Why don't we go?'

The jib of them, their hissing sound
Like woodpeckers or worried finches
Considering a swing at the seeds
Before flight from the sparrowhawk:
'Why do we hang here while you stand?
Why don't we go? Why don't we go?'

# Coincidence of Bodies 

for Beatrice Tinsley, astronomer, 1941-81


#### Abstract

The heavier I was, the more I shaped space round me. Mass curves space. Come on eclipses, you never could have blocked me. I curved new space.


But my own flesh was moon. It eclipsed the larger body of sun in the coincidence of distance that makes them equal, that allows
measurement of the bend of stars. I was flesh. Had I been only that mass coordinating old allegories that must be Love
or Sensuality, I would have appealed for the fleshlessness I have now, I'd have begged not to be a monument of blood.

And if I'd survived till fallen flesh changed my shape so it wasn't hunted or held up, would I have resolved the paradox of flesh -
that I was made of more than I am?
Mars, you wore only a helmet half off to show us flesh is too frail for battle. My fabric now
is lighter than flesh, the blue of galaxies. I am what has been proved of the coincidence of bodies, given I'm not shortlived and can eclipse.

## Emotion at Work, 1970

The workers in Mental Health walked out behind their leader. Our new team presented the family as one big unhappy world of disciplines: geography, classics, psychology. That year, I was literature.

Outside our meeting, a manhole, cover removed; a fall like that hurts groin and hip. A weak floor gave way. My foot dangled into the room below. I fell running from a police dog once. My heart-
shaped zip pulls dangled from Suelia's ankles: my desert boots. Under her bed, piles of files. That was wrong. Being single, I took the small room and painted the walls red, red, red and yellow.

I left the office to section Joe the Axe, left Charlotte murmuring, 'Who was the woman in Steppenwolf:'
Left without saying goodbye to my senior. Her last words: 'I need to tell you I dislike you.'

## The Apology

Mosquitoes charged me with their sour sugar outside the vinegar house. Six years, ten years, sixty, it ferments from oak to juniper to chestnut to cherry and back to oak wood barrels, balsamic vinegar separating itself from a hundred year old mother sediment.

Breathe in through the unstoppered hole. Smell it changing. This is immortality but that sweet vinegar didn't comfort my ill friend. She hovered towards my slight sore throat. I shouldn't have let her low immunity near me.
My virus would order us differently,
her life for one ciao, and down she goes to that atomic level, eternal future, for which our short lengthening time ferments us. Next day I said to my body (my body thinks my voice is God): 'You handle poison too well.

Your itch denies my taste for eternity, it's anciently made.' Then my body said, 'I'm giving you time.' So I called to say sorry.

## Separation

> Snails might shout
> crawling from mint to balm 'I burn' or call from lovage and hosta

'I'm burning dry'
while my husband is falling asleep in the sun away by Muker Beck,
where oyster catchers
freeze on their nests and only water stays awake, irritably controlled, pushing
stones, stuck, stuck, stuck, stuck, till we both are woken by pain with its orange beak.

## Snail

Examine yourself, river.
Wind, you have collapsed from your adrenalin rush.
Sun, you've flooded the vertical, splashing reeds and palming
planes. Damaged oak, you have no heart or gut.
Your only organ, skin.
I cling to you tighter than a striped shell on a fennel stalk.

## TB Hospital, 1944

His nurse said: In the tar of the roof above your ward, lichen patterns have the look of Irish turfs after floods.

His chest inflated
like a pyramid, huge, with blank walls built by hand and unexplained vents.

Folding the corners of his sheets to envelopes, she described the Black and Tans, a haggard, the taste of soda bread.

A translator can add only humility to the original. She took away his dish of spit. She found herself robbed
during their marriage, like a tomb. Doesn't death grit the road with ice, she often said, yet the sun hauls up each crystal?

## Ad Astra

So strongwilled, the thumb of the sun on sea,
that its aquamarine flashes
like a poor contact. Eye-stinging flash, on off on.
Something dazzling has been wrong
with me:

I've climbed through life looking up.
These doors
grip the street's staircase as I do.
I'm shaded by further heights of terrace. Soft toys
lie on roof tiles below me -
old lures.

The village has seen collapse
in land-
slide and flood. Fishermen have drowned in the bay, and poets. They're cold metal, these rails, hardly warmed by the sweat of my hand.

Reaching the starry bushes, capers
springing from the ruined castle walls, softening them like figs ripen on local thorns, a rumpled packaging of
lost wars,
having picked off some small fruits I think
at last, 'Look down.' So does the sun: electromagnetic solar waves are startling sea waves to swink blank swink blank swink blank.

