

TLC Showcase

KATE LOCKWOOD JEFFORD

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Introduction to *Picasso's Face*

On a 'hot as hell' day in a Spanish city, a woman wonders if it was a good idea to take the baby to the beach. When placed in foster care, a fifteen-year-old boy takes up the ancient art of sword swallowing. A bereaved mother rises at daybreak to sculpt pieces of frozen snow. A psychiatrist gets into bed with her sister.

The characters in the thirteen stories of my debut collection are united by experiences of loss – real or imagined – in a society fractured by austerity and starved of compassion. Grief they can't face or find words for is expressed in addiction, abduction, stalking, obsession and psychosis.

The title story, "Picasso's Face," described by the judges as "a beautifully sustained study of character and place, elegantly shaped" won the 2020 VS Pritchett Prize. Like Picasso's faces – an ear where we expect an eye, two noses instead of one – the stories in the collection explore subtext, and how innovations in structure can offer fresh ways of looking.

My writing concerns attachment and loss in the context of family, work and class. The idea for a story is usually an encounter in day-to-day life when an image, a scene, a soundbite captures my imagination and sets off associations, memories, dreams, fantasies. "Picasso's Face" started from witnessing a scene while walking in Valencia: a woman stuck her child down on a busy pavement and walked off. The little boy's face reminded me of a photograph of Picasso I'd seen in an exhibition earlier: its expression both adult and baby-like. My fantasies about this scene, mingled with a conversation about marriage post-Franco, and a newspaper report of a woman found dead in odd circumstances – her age the only detail – seeded the story. A dark, surreal narrative emerged, inviting readers to interpret it – including the 'baby' – for themselves.

A TLC workshop on Arts Council Funding inspired me to apply – successfully – for a DYCP grant to fund mentoring through TLC's scheme. Working with mentor Megan Bradbury's detailed, thoughtful feedback, tailored to my needs – both written and in zoom meetings – and always offered with warmth, humour and excellent

book recommendations, has helped me push my prose further and develop a solid writing – and reading – practice. I will complete this collection in early 2022 ready for seeking representation and publication.

For this showcase I've chosen an excerpt from the beginning of the title story.

Extract from *Picasso's Face* by Kate Lockwood Jefford

It didn't cry or make much of any sort of fuss all day, which was amazing really, considering.

After picking the baby up, I'd dawdled at the fag-end of a flea market behind the brand-new football stadium which loomed, vast and shiny as a spaceship, above the tangled heaps of clothes, sad shoes, scuffed plates and naked Barbies on their backs, arms and legs stuck out like marching zombies.

There was nothing there for a baby.

It was probably a mistake to take the baby to the beach, but there was a tram coming and the stop was right there. A man of fiftyish with slicked-back hair sat waiting with a pony-tailed pre-pubescent girl. Father and daughter, I presumed. Probably a second marriage for him. A woman in a bar had been telling Roberto and me how the national divorce rate for middle-aged couples had spiked after 1976. Most of the men remarried younger women who went for them because they were solvent, but the women, well, she said, the women were gagging to get on their glad rags and go. Out to work, to college. To restaurants and bars. They wanted sex, yes, but husbands? No.

Roberto said it made marriage sound cold, unromantic.

The tram was crowded, surprisingly so. No seats, not even for a woman with a baby. I squeezed the baby tight to my chest. It was so peaceful. Not a peep. I'd wrapped it in one of the polyester scarves I'd bought to hang across the bare windows of our rental apartment. I don't like people looking in. Roberto's face was pinched in disapproval, but he didn't know what I did when he was out.

Roberto was right about some things. But he was wrong about me and motherhood.

It suited me to death.

Roberto absolutely should've listened. But he was so insistent about saving the planet, going on and on about too many mouths to feed and carbon footprints. In the end I stopped bringing it up. Decided to do it my own way.

At the beach the sun was high and fierce and hot as hell and there was no shade to speak of. Too close to the middle of the day. The shadows were short. Me and the baby looked like a squat two-headed monster. The promenade was sunstroke-bright, and still no shade. Nada. Not from the skinny giraffe-high palm trees or the row of huts selling sunglasses, espadrilles, beach mats. The baby was far too young for any of that.

The scarf worked well as a baby-sling and I made sure all its soft as a petal skin was covered. Sleepy it was by then. Slow blinking dazed eyes. It hadn't come with a pram or a pushchair but weighed no more than the five kilo dumbbells I'd been using to build upper arm strength. Roberto was never a big man, but he was solid. I knew he'd be no feather to shift when the time came.

The smell of sulphur from sea-sludge and rotting fish got up my nose, mingling with aromas of chicken and garlic and oil from the string of restaurants advertising paella and aircon. Air-conditioning dries me out, gives me eczema and cold sores. God knows it couldn't be good for a baby.

I took a tram back to the city with a notion of finding a shady spot for an ice cream. I had a park in mind, the green patch north of the riverbed on my map.

When the tram stopped for lights at an intersection, I watched two young women in Lycra shorts perform a swift acrobatics act with a hoop, then whiz along the line of cars collecting tips from drivers slumped in their seats, a row of elbows resting on open windows.

I used to be amazingly slim and supple. People would come up to me and ask if I was a model, or a dancer.

There were a lot of teenagers on the tram, all bare limbs, tanned and tattooed. Little birds and angels on shoulder blades. Some of them were singing Spanish pop songs.

Others were speaking a language I didn't recognize, but every so often something English sounding came out. I'm sure someone said *breastfeeding*. You need breasts for that. I'd have to buy some formula soon and I was worried all the supermarkets would be closed, even though I'd checked online and found a *Mercadona* that should be open until nine-thirty. But you can't always trust the information on the Internet.

I pressed my lips to the baby's head, felt the firmness of its body, a warm, moist bundle sticking to me, dampening my shirt, its fingernails, so tiny, tiny, and precious like mother-of-pearl. If I didn't hop out quickly enough, they'd be jammed and blackened in the tram doors.

On my way to the park I passed a tennis club. The sound of rubber balls bouncing on a court, like popping your finger in your cheek.

I was never really a big fan of tennis. Not since Ilie Nastase, who turned out to be not a very nice man. Dark and good-looking though.

I always liked dark.

Roberto used to be dark, so I overlooked his disappointing height. Tall would have been good. Still, in the end I didn't need to worry about genes. He said nothing when I put the child safety gate on the stairs.

The park was quiet, eerily so. A man sat alone on a bench. I glimpsed a couple on bikes in the distance. It felt empty, exposed. I felt vulnerable. Who'd have thought I'd feel like that in a public park on a Sunday afternoon? Women are not really safe anywhere. Even women with babies. Especially women with babies. People can be very funny about babies.

I shifted the baby higher. Its sweet little head lolled on my shoulder. It had a fair amount of hair for a baby. Dark. It could even have been Roberto's child.

We strolled to the southern end of the park where there were trees, a kiosk, families sitting at tables, toddlers running about. Toddlers are too much for me, what with all their tears and teeth and sticky little hands tugging at your hem.

I prefer babies.

I fancied a tub of ice-cream but there were none at the kiosk, so I bought a white chocolate *Magnum*. The girl who served me was curt, actually quite surly. She must have disapproved of the baby, or the way I was carrying it.

I had to eat the *Magnum* standing in the only slither of shade I could find because all the seats were taken. You'd think someone would have moved for a woman with a baby, in such heat. Maybe no-one realised the peaceful, still bundle was a baby. I pulled the scarf across to reveal the top of its head, so they'd see.

I gave the baby a tiny, tiny taste, a blob of ice-cream on my little finger slipped into its purple hole of a mouth. There must be some milk in a *Magnum*. Its mouth felt cooler than I'd expected, but it hadn't cried or made much noise at all. No coos or ma-ma-ma. Just some hiccuppy sounds. It couldn't have been hungry. A strong pong like poo hit me suddenly. I sniffed it down there, but it wasn't the baby. It must've been manure or compost. My face felt flushed and my armpits sticky, rivulets of sweat ran from the base of my neck to pool in the hollow of my back. The front of me was soaked.

I emerged from the park next to a grand, domed building that turned out to be the Museo de Bellas Artes. It was free entry and they didn't mind the baby. The man on the desk touched its head, like the pope giving his blessing. I didn't appreciate him doing that to the baby. I didn't want it catching anything. I couldn't think of the Spanish to say all that, so I gave him a look I don't think he registered.

Inside was airy, almost chilly, a marble echo-chamber of footsteps and whispers, a faint smell of fresh paint. There was a small exhibition about Picasso, mainly photographs. Picasso's face. Round as a dinner plate, arch of white hair receding above a sheeny convex forehead, eyes like chocolate buttons. Letters to Jacqueline were displayed in a low glass case, hard to read with a baby. I didn't want to tip it. At the end some ceramics on plinths. That face again.

Roberto's face when it dawned. What I'd done. There doesn't have to be noise and mess. A man can fall asleep over his dinner. Good job I didn't have the baby with me

then. It wouldn't have been good for it. Babies are very sensitive.

I noticed the museum attendants had truncheons and handcuffs hanging from their belts. That couldn't be right.

Roberto was such a liar. He had it coming, he really did.

When I took maternity leave, nobody asked questions. They all clubbed together and got me a bouquet of flowers and a scented candle. The flowers were tricky to get home on public transport in rush hour.

They don't know you, do they? Roberto said, when he saw the gifts.

They do, I said. *It's you who doesn't.*

He should have heeded the warnings. They were written all over my face.

About the Writer

Kate Lockwood Jefford grew up obsessed by books and cartwheels in a working class family in South Wales. She trained as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist and worked in NHS and student mental health services alongside many jobs – from factories to pharmacies – while also writing and performing, including a stint as a stand-up comedian, before completing an MA in creative writing at Birkbeck in 2017. All of this finds its way into her fiction.



Her novella, *Dr Di*, was highly commended in the TLC/ Pen Factor competition, 2017. In 2020 she won the VS Pritchett prize for “Picasso’s Face” and 3rd place in the Brick Lane Bookshop prize for “Fix.” In 2021 she won the Bath Short Story Award for “In Bed With My Sister” and was shortlisted for the Rhys Davies Award, the Fish, Bristol, London Magazine, Cambridge and Aesthetica Creative Writing short story prizes.

Her work appears in Prospect Magazine, Mechanics Institute Review (MIR) online, the Royal Society of Literature Review and Aesthetica Creative Writing annual (both 2021), and many print anthologies. “A Cartwheel State of Mind” features in “100 Voices,” celebrating 100 years of women’s suffrage, originally an Apple podcast, to be published by Unbound in March 2022.

Currently living in London and Folkestone, she is completing her debut collection of stories with support from Arts Council England, the TLC mentoring scheme, her two wonderful writing workshops, and her first man, Adam.