



TLC SHOWCASE

LUCY WELDON

Introduction to the manuscript	2
Extract from <i>Ultramarine</i>	3
About the Writer	7

Introduction to *Ultramarine*

“It is rare that a story collection weaves its threads through so many varied corners of the world and leaves the reader with an overarching sense of the vulnerability of humanity in all its mutable forms.” Lorian Hemingway, critically acclaimed author.

It was a long circuitous road from being a nonfiction writer to writing fiction and short stories. In 2016, I did an online short story course with the Professional Writing Academy where I read a lot of short stories and unpacked them, learning how they might have been written. I was hooked. Little did I know, the degree of difficulty in writing a short story. But the course helped me appreciate how clever, powerful and diverse short stories are.

Despite the challenge of brevity, I found writing short stories incredibly freeing. I started playing with my writing – changing the point of view, writing something thrillerish, mysterious, lyrical and then funny. And I found my writing voice. Toni Morrison once said, to write the stories that you want to read. And I think I have in *Ultramarine*.

When I had a draft collection, I was recommended TLC as a next step. In October 2020, I opted to have a manuscript review with Alan Mahar (who later endorsed my book). It was revelatory to have an independent expert view to assess the merits of individual stories and the collection.

As a result, I discarded some stories; re-wrote a number (Ernest Hemingway said, writing is re-writing. So true). And then wrote some new ones with a much clearer sense of what was required of me as a writer and my writer’s voice. The input from Alan Mahar gave me confidence, clarity and a higher standard to aim for. His comments were not sugar coated. But I worked hard and knew the only thing I could control was the quality of *Ultramarine*.

From 2021, my writing was short- and longlisted in well-known writing competitions including the Lorian Hemingway Short Story Award. This year, Lorian wrote the foreword to *Ultramarine* which was published in May 2023.

From the English countryside to the Mediterranean to the buzz and hustle of Jakarta, *Ultramarine* consists of eleven stories set in a distinctive city, culture or country. Each story gives a unique glimpse into lives challenged by some of today’s defining topics from migration to climate change, to acts of terrorism and above all, the intricacies of human connection.

Extract from *'A Thousand Paper Cranes'* from *Ultramarine* by Lucy Weldon

The Lazy Susan is turning. Aneka watches. Guests' fingertips spin it clockwise then anticlockwise, slowly, politely, waiting for each serving spoon to be placed back. The chicken satay Madura on thin bamboo skewers shines with caramelised palm sugar. The white rice waits like perfectly wrapped parcels. The aromas of garlic, galangal and chilli from the beef rendang hover. Candles on the round teak table flicker under the cool of the air conditioning.

It's yet another dinner party in Jakarta, Aneka thinks. There's been no let up. Tonight, she's been caught by the invisible tripwire of grief. She's on the outside looking in. That's what grief does, it turns you inside out. It pushes and pulls you. Aneka scans the guests. She counts. Eight is the perfect number. Snippets of lively conversation reach her. The dinner party is going well.

Across the table is Alexander. Their age difference has crept up on them. Life has crept up on them. Who is he? She's been wondering that for a while now. Who are they? Once a couple, now strangers. It has nothing to do with her mother's death. Grief's making things clearer. Not cloudier. She's sure of that.

Everyone laughs at something Alexander says. Something about the rain that will come soon. Typical. It's always Alexander in the spotlight. Always right, always master and commander. But not of her. She still feels marooned after her mother's unexpected death three months ago. It's not about moving on. She keeps telling him that. And he keeps giving her books, sending her links to articles on grief. Podcasts!

The Lazy Susan has stopped. Alexander moves it with short staccato movements to get her attention. It's a hint. No, an instruction. Eat! Aneka refuses to meet his gaze. She's not hungry. All she wants is to curl up on the sofa with something comforting like soto ayam, chicken soup. She told him she's finding it hard to talk to new people at the moment. Don't sit me by anyone I don't know, she had said when he'd come home and told her about the dinner party. So many things she doesn't want to get into like how are you enjoying Jakarta, Aneka? A bit different from your last posting in Brussels! Alexander thinks it will be good for her to meet new people. If only he knew what was good for me.

She turns and looks at her neighbour. He's someone Alexander has met through Lili. What's his name? Pedro? Pietro? No. It's a much older sounding name. Piotr. That's it. Alexander introduced him when he arrived. Across the table, Aneka sees Rania, her Egyptian friend, no longer fresh from the Arab Spring. Rania's stabbing the air with her fork, just above her plate filled with food. She's talking about the importance of educating women. A few of Rania's words drift across the table. Then the birth rate would drop. Look at Italy, for goodness' sake!

There's a thud. Otto has smacked his hand down to make a point to Lili. The silver cutlery jangles, forks jostling with knives. Aneka watches the beer as it moves up the side of Otto's glass. It happens in slow motion like a wave hitting a sea wall, like travelling liquid gold. She watches as it reaches the lip of the glass and then falls back. Otto's hand steadies it with an apologetic glance at the others. He can't keep off the topic of zoonotic diseases. It's his hobby horse. It's the discussion these days since the global pandemic.

Alexander says something about hoping that Otto has stamina. It'll be a long race. The fine balance between economic growth and the protection of the natural world. Ah, the pragmatic Alexander. Aneka glances at her husband. He's chatting to Lili. At home, in the security of his own house, away from the demands of diplomatic work, he can say exactly, almost exactly, what he likes. Lucky him, Aneka thinks. If she says what she's really thinking, she might bring the dinner party shebang to an embarrassing end. She checks herself. Shifts her position in her chair, trying to shake off these thoughts.

Beside her, Andres is half out of his seat. He reminds her of Hugo, her younger brother, when he was a small boy and had a bug in a matchbox. Look at me! Look at me! Andres has the attention of the whole table.

'Did anyone know that there have been four earthquakes this month? Four, here in Jakarta! Did anyone notice?' he says.

Everyone shrugs. No one's noticed or even felt the tremors. Like most people living with the constant threat of natural disaster, they're a mixture of fatalism, optimism and naivety. In other words, they carry on as normal.

'When my time's up, it's up!' Lili says.

Everyone agrees with Lili, but Aneka doesn't. She notices the tremors. They usually come in the middle of the night from somewhere deep down in the Earth's crust. Somehow, they reach her. She's never mentioned this to Alexander. He's always been too busy, caught up in the latest diplomatic crisis. But the tremors find her, lying in her

bed when she can't sleep. And sleep has eluded her these past months. There are times when she doesn't feel sane. In the dark, it's worse.

'And what if Gunung Tambora does its thing again? The biggest volcanic eruption in history. We're sitting on the Ring of Fire. Here in this dining room. It's a time bomb ticking away,' Andres says, enacting the explosion with arms flaying in the air.

At the mention of volcanoes, Aneka pictures the view outside the aeroplane window when she flies over Java. It's a dreamy fairy-tale illustration with perfect conical volcanic tops that poke through white cotton-wool clouds, vents that release twirling and trailing plumes of smoke. Is the smoke a signal, a message about our world, in a mysterious unspoken language?

Aneka notices Mitsuko and Piotr are having their own conversation. She sits back and listens in. She picks up the threads. Mitsuko is talking about fundamentalist Islam and whether it's a brake on progress, whatever that means. Mitsuko puts air quotes around those last few words. Piotr is folding a piece of paper in front of him. Aneka watches his hands and fingers as they neatly make creases. She wonders what he's making. It's been a long time since she's done origami. It was a childhood favourite. He folds the paper, each corner meeting at the centre of the square.

'But what about in Japan? Why does your country only allow male heirs to accede to the Chrysanthemum throne?' Piotr says. 'Isn't that a brake on progress?'

Piotr puts the last three words in air quotes. He's grinning. Aneka smiles. She likes his playful way. He obviously isn't a fan of air quotes and knows that an argument is rarely binary. Piotr turns the paper over and repeats the folds, taking the corners again back to the centre.

Ah, says Aneka to herself. She knows what he's making. Her mother taught it to her. She remembers its Dutch name, zoutvaatje. Salt cellar is the translation in English. Piotr finishes and takes out a pen. He covers what he's writing with his left arm, blocking Aneka's view. She can only see the top of his pen moving. Mitsuko tells him the latest on the Japanese royal family and how there's no sign of modernisation.

Piotr clicks his pen closed, picks up the origami game and slips his thumbs and index fingers into the corner pockets. He says something to Mitsuko and slowly turns his body to face Aneka.

'Would you like your fortune told?'

Ah, the fortune telling game, Aneka says to herself. That's its other name in English.

Piotr asks the question again. She shakes her head.

'I'm sure Mitsuko wants to play,' she says.

'But I want to tell your fortune, Annie,' Piotr says.

Annie? He's changed her name already! Her mother always called her Annie. There's a split second when Anneka feels tempted but she shakes her head again. Piotr glances at her. He puts the fortune telling game on the table. He places his finger to his lips. There's a dance of lights in his pale blue eyes, more than the normal catchlights. A conspiracy is building between them that only they are part of. She can feel it. He takes another piece of paper. He starts to make folds.

Piotr has drawn her into the evening. It's as if he's dropped down a thick sturdy rope and is pulling her out of a dark hole. He nudges her with his elbow. Accidentally but gently. It's the slightest of touches. She's raw. She can feel his skin through the layers of her skin, right down to the bone. She slides the fortune telling game into her pocket. Piotr's arm is alongside hers on the table. There's a wafer-thin gap between them. She feels warmth radiating from his arm, through his shirt. Everything she hears and feels has been amplified. It's what life is like these days.

About the Writer

LUCY WELDON's fiction is inspired by her many years living and working in different countries across Europe and Asia as well as Australia. From migration to climate change to political unrest and the intricacies of human relationships, she writes about some of the 21st century's defining topics in her debut short story collection, *Ultramarine*.

Born in Hong Kong, Lucy went on to obtain a BA Hons degree in Spanish and a Masters in Responsible Business Practice and Sustainability.

She is a published nonfiction author and has worked as an international freelance journalist.

A number of Lucy's short stories have been [short- and longlisted in writing competitions](#) around the world including the Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition, the Bridport Short Story Prize, the Aurora Prize for Short Fiction and the Cinnamon Press Literature Award.

Ultramarine is Lucy's debut short story collection.

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