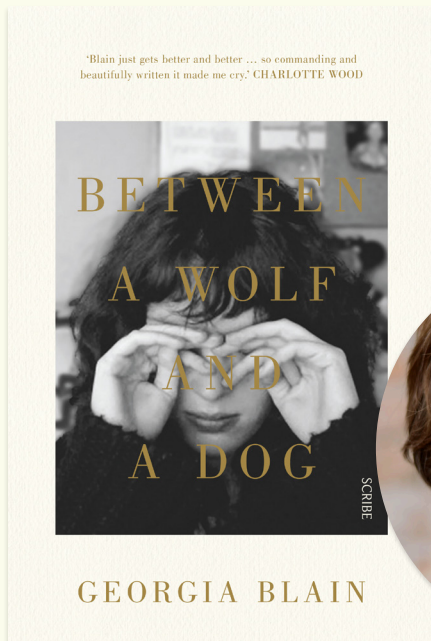




2017 STELLA PRIZE SHORTLIST

Sampler



Georgia Blain
BETWEEN A WOLF AND A DOG

THIS IS THE DREAM: Lawrence is alone. It is not quite dark, between a wolf and a dog; a mauve light is deepening like a bruise, the cold breath of the wind a low moan in his ear.

He stands on what feels to be the highest point in a landscape that he knows to be desolate and barren, although it is too dark for him to see. Hills roll away, dry grasses beaten low by the weather; pocked boulders, dappled with creeping lichen, appear to tumble, heavy, down a steep slope.

Is it breathing he hears? Or just the night sigh?

Fear tickles the back of his neck, the hairs on his wrists bristle, his eyes widen, and the darkness is thickening.

He should not be here.

There must be somewhere he can go, a light in the distance.

Perhaps if he calls out ... and he opens his mouth, but his throat tightens.

It is like an elastic band pulling in, a peg clip on his vocal cords.

He tries to speak, but his mouth is drying, the palate hard like bone, the trachea clenching, and he cannot utter a sound.

In his dream, he panics, and he tries to wake himself, aware at some level that this is only a dream, but he can't rise from the depths; there is a weight keeping him down, the pressure — like an ocean — above him. He needs to breathe.

Calm, he tells himself. It will be all right. *Calm*. And so the clamp loosens, his mouth opening, his throat a little less clenched as he finally speaks. 'Hello.'

Unable to utter more than that, a single word whispered in all that emptiness, as around him the wind builds, and he feels the cold, sour breath of night, and the rain like sharp pins slashing the clamminess of his skin.

Sitting up in the darkness, Lawrence lets his eyes adjust. He has left the window open, and it is raining, damp and miserable, seeping down from the sill onto his bed. He reaches over to close it, the swollen wood bringing the sash to a standstill, so he has to jiggle the frame, slot it into a new groove before it will slide all the way down.

He hates that dream. It leaves a rusted aftertaste, ferrous flakes in his mouth, and a panic like poison — the hollowness of sadness and despair

coursing through him as he lies back down in the bed. He hasn't looked at the clock — years of insomnia have taught him the foolishness of doing so — but the sound of the first suburban trains lets him know that he is at least on the right side of the darkest hour for those who don't sleep. Outside the rain continues, softer now that the window is shut, and he closes his eyes, hoping he at least will find a sense of calm before morning comes, although he knows that this is unlikely. He has had that dream before, and it always leaves him, mind awake, trying to rid himself of the last vestiges of that man: a man alone, exposed, and afraid; a man he knows more intimately than he would like.

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT it continues to rain; heavy, relentless, 'malevolent' a client had called it yesterday, and Ester had looked at him across the space of her consulting room and smiled. 'That's a strong word to choose,' she'd commented.

She wakes at four to a brief pause in the downpour, a stillness that descends over her house, and she sits up, her feet on the cold, bare boards, reluctant to leave the warmth of her bed, but also disturbed by the quiet. Outside, a car turns off the street, the hiss of its tyres on the wet road soft in the silence. The branches of the she-oak scrape on the roof, a familiar groan of bark on tin, and then the rain begins again, not gently but with full force, torrential sheets of water running down the windows, pouring out of the downpipes and into the streets, rising and falling with each obstacle in their path, gushing up around the wheels of parked cars, bubbling over the rubbish blocking the drains, scooping up the soil and mud and leaves and sticks and plastic, all in a rush, until they are dumped against the next obstacle, the flow continuing, unstoppable, on and on to the lowest point.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, Ester listens.

As a child, rain had made her anxious. She remembers nights by the river, the room where they slept leaking like a sieve. Whenever it rained, Maurie would put all the pots and pans across the floors, rolled towels under windows and doors, the constant drip, drip, drip of water on metal keeping her awake, along with her worry that the pots would fill and overflow, or the towels would fail to stem the leak between sill and frame, and

everything would just float away.

Rain still makes her unsettled.

In the darkness of the corridor, the dog lies pressed against her door. He began sleeping there shortly after she moved to this house, disturbed by the change and wanting to be as close to her as possible. She lifts his body with her foot, the warmth of his coat soft against the cold of her skin, and he jumps, nails scratching on the bare boards, only to stand just in front of her so that she walks into him again, blind in the dark.

'Otto.' She doesn't want to wake the girls. Clicking her fingers and pointing towards the kitchen, she tries to direct him to where his mat is, never used, but he ignores her.

'Move.' She knees him again, and he shifts slightly before sighing heavily and slumping to the ground once more, eyes open and glittering white-blue in the darkness, making sure she doesn't leave his sight.

The door to the girls' room always creaks when she opens it. She turns the handle slowly, attuned to the shift, and when that doesn't work, she twists it as quickly as she can. It doesn't really matter. Once they are asleep, they don't wake.

The streetlight shines in through a chink in the blind. Lara hated this when they first moved here. She couldn't go to sleep with any light on, insisting that the room was totally dark.

'I can't fix it,' Ester had told her. 'The light is there and I can't make it go away.'

She remembers. She had sat on the edge of Lara's bed and she had wept. In all the preceding months, she had gone into the bathroom to cry, or into her bedroom, once even hiding in the pantry cupboard, while they ran around the house calling for her, over and over again. But that night, she had just given in.

'You're going to have to live with it,' she'd said.

Lara hadn't uttered a word, not calling out as she usually did, not getting up and rubbing her eyes as she complained she couldn't sleep. She had stayed where she was. And she had never mentioned the light again.

Standing at the entrance to their room, Ester sees the slope and curve of their bodies, the slow rise of their chests, the golden tangle of their hair, the loose abandonment of a limb, the soft pad of Catherine's heel, and the

smooth muscle of Lara's calf. They always end up in the same bed, curled into each other; two beautiful bodies, alike to everyone but their family.

They are hers, and they are not hers. They are growing to become unique, distinct beings who will lead lives of their own in places of their own.

She loves them.

And the warmth of that is a blessing in the night, at an hour when no one should be awake. Ester breathes it in, a great draught of it, full and rich, while outside the rain continues unceasing: silver sheets sluicing down, the trees and shrubs soaking and bedraggled, the earth sodden, puddles overflowing, torrents coursing onwards, as the darkness slowly softens with the dawn.

Ester's appointment diary is open.

9.30am: Louisa

11.00am: The Harcourts

1.00pm: Daniel and Sarah

2.15pm: Chris

4.00pm: Hannah

In her head she sees the structure of her day: post-natal depression, school aversion, relationship crisis, death, and loneliness. Lawrence used to call her diary 'The Happiness Book'.

'Ho-ho,' she'd respond. 'What a wit.'

But she hadn't been averse to teasing him about his own work. Lawrence conducted polls and surveys. *He measures dissatisfaction*, she would say when people asked her what he did. A state he was fond of indulging in himself.

She closes the diary. When the girls are with Lawrence, the client hours can continue well into the evening — but not tonight. Tonight, she is finishing early. And this morning, she is up before they are awake, her yoga mat laid out in the lounge room. It is only just light, and the rain is continuing, no longer torrential, just steady, plastering wet leaves against the cold glass — crimson, brown, and green.

Each time she tries to go into dog pose, Otto licks her face. She puts him out in the hall and he whines, scratching against the wood, the noise harsh and insistent.

She hates it when the girls go to Lawrence, but where the girls go, Otto goes, and the break from him is always welcome. Breathing in, she tries once again, the stretch easier this time, the knot in her back unfolding as she lowers her hands to the floor, ignoring the dog as she exhales and inhales, slowly, deeply.

Her phone chimes. The text message on the screen is from her mother: *Cold Men*. She can only assume this means 'Call me', as this is what Hilary usually wants, but as she never wears her glasses, and her phone has an old form of predictive text that she uses in an unpredictable way, the words that she sends usually bear no relation to what she means.

'Why don't you just call me?' Ester asks.

'Because I didn't know if you were up yet,' Hilary replies.

Hilary sleeps badly, although she has always ignored any suggestions Ester gives to try and help, telling her daughter that insomnia gives her more time to work. Ester knows she frequently gets up before dawn and goes to the studio Maurie built for her — a room that leaks a lot less than the river house, his first project all those years ago. She sits at a desk in the corner, computer screens in front of her, the surrounding walls covered in images: cards, letters, scraps from newspapers, old family photographs, a piece of flimsy fabric, shiny wrappings from Easter eggs, ribbons, drawings from Catherine and Lara, and there in the centre of it all, Maurie's horse: beautiful, wild, the charcoal lines black and sure, the strange mixture of panic and pride in its eye enough to stop everyone who entered Hilary's room.

'It's his portrait of me,' Hilary would always say.

She tells Ester her film is ready, and will have its first screening at the Pompidou Centre in a month.

'I want to show you before I send it off,' she says. 'And they've sent the program notes for my approval, but I can't understand a word of them.'

Ester and Lawrence had lived in France until just after the girls turned one, and although her French is rusty, she has enough to get the gist. 'I can't today,' she says. 'Tomorrow?'

Hilary wants to know if tonight is possible.

'I'm going out,' Ester tells her. 'I promise I'll come tomorrow.'

She doesn't want to say anymore, to tell Hilary anything about her

plans for the evening. It is too fragile, and she needs to keep it close for the present.

But Hilary rarely gives in. 'It will only take an hour.'

Ester is silent for a moment. She sighs, relenting with reluctance. She will come after work. 'But I can't stay.'

Outside, the streetlights have turned off and the first watery wash of morning colours the sodden sky. The rain continues. Across the road, Ester can see her neighbour getting into his car. He sits with the door open, trying to close his umbrella, the drops soaking into his suit and splashing onto his shoes, and she watches as he shakes the now closed umbrella into the gutter.

Catherine and Lara are awake. Their room is still dark, and Ester pulls up the blind. The grevillea presses against the window, coconut-ice flowers and fine feathery leaves.

'Up,' she tells them.

Catherine ignores her, continuing to whisper to Lara. She is using the language she and Lara shared for the first four years of their lives, a secret language that neither she nor Lawrence could ever understand. He used to worry about it, to try and get them to use English only; Ester was always less concerned. 'They'll drop it in their own time,' she would say, which they had, although they still occasionally liked to revert.

'We don't want to go to school,' Catherine tells her. 'It's too wet.'

'And we don't want to go to Dad's,' Lara adds.

'We just want to stay here. In bed.' It's Catherine's turn now.

She smiles at them, and pulls back the blanket.

'Please,' Lara persists.

Catherine whispers something in her ear, giggling as she does. Lara replies in their language.

'Enough,' Ester tells them. She had made the mistake of succumbing to this request in the early days of the separation, and they still try, prying for the chink.

'I'm being bullied,' Lara tells her.

Ester laughs. 'You are not.'

'We don't like Dad.'

'That's not true either.' She resorts to a bribe. 'Hot chocolate if you're

up by the time I count to twenty.'

They like school. This occasional reluctance to go is something new. She wonders whether they do this with Lawrence as well. She knows Lara was recently in trouble for setting off the fire alarm, with Catherine initially taking the blame. It was Lawrence who had dealt with that one, although the school informed her as well. She also knows they don't like their teacher this year. She is one of the old ones; a woman who has been there for years and only shows enthusiasm for the classroom footy-tipping competition and describing re-runs of *Judge Judy* episodes to the wide-eyed seven-year-olds who love the shameless airing of conflict. If the homework they bring back is any indication, the actual schoolwork is boring and repetitive, so much so that she offered to write them both a note to say she didn't want them doing it. Lara leapt at the chance, but Catherine was more nervous. 'She ignores those notes,' she said. 'She still shouts at the kids who don't do the work.'

She imagines asking Lawrence how they are with him, whether he too has noticed a slight shift in their attitude to school, whether he thinks it is a matter that should concern them.

In her sessions with Victoria, she is working on her communication with Lawrence — on her forgiveness, really. Because that's what it all comes down to, always. Can you forgive?

'You *have* to forgive,' Hilary would urge her, too often and too soon. 'We all have to forgive.'

As children, Ester and April rarely fought, but when they did, Maurie would make them apologise to each other. He hated conflict around him, although he was never averse to arguing his own point, loudly and frequently. She remembers the time she ruined April's new shorts, wearing them into the river and tearing them on an overhanging bough that she used to haul herself out. They were flared blue gingham, April's pride and joy, and Ester had been jealous because April looked so pretty in them. Despite being two years older, April was the same size as her, slender and delicate with long legs and thick golden hair. Looking down at the shorts, Ester knew she would be in trouble. She took them off and hid them under the verandah.

Denial was useless. When she was discovered, she didn't want to apol-

ogise. They always shared clothes, and what had happened had been an accident. She'd hung them on the bush so that they would dry out, she lied. They'd blown off.

April cut up her favourite T-shirt.

It took Maurie two days to get them to speak to each other without rancour. He refused to talk to them until they each apologised and forgave the other. Hating her father's disapproval, Ester gave in first. She remembers saying she was sorry, she really was, her words calm and clear as she genuinely tried to resolve the issue. And then April cried — she cried with shame at how badly she'd behaved, at how much she'd hated that this had come between them, at how much she loved Ester, she really did. Maurie cried, too. The house was awash with their tears, and if Ester felt that it was ridiculous, over-dramatic, too much — well, she kept this to herself, because this was how it always was with April.

Standing in the kitchen, she wonders how Maurie would deal with them now if he were still alive.

It is eight o'clock, and Lawrence will be here to get the girls in half an hour. Their bags are packed by the front door.

'Don't think I don't know what you're doing,' Ester says, taking the red hair-tie out of Catherine's hair and swapping it for the blue one in Lara's. She does this for the teachers, to help them distinguish between the two of them, but it is probably useless — they are likely to switch as soon as they are out of her sight.

'What are you going to do while we're at Dad's?' Lara asks.

Ester smiles. 'Sit up late, eat pizza, watch bad television.'

'Or go out with Steven?' There is muffled giggling, nervous glances, kicks under the table, and Ester looks from one to the other, momentarily silenced by their audacity.

They have been at her phone, checking the calendar she keeps separate to her work appointment book. She remembers putting his name in, fear making her fingers clumsy, just as her voice had felt unlike her own when he had called her, and she had answered, aware of who he was the moment she heard him speak, lowering her tone so that she didn't sound herself. She became sensible, serious,

dull.

She had met him at a family-mediation course. She had been late on the first day, taking the last seat at the table. He had spent most of the morning session surreptitiously sending and receiving texts. When they were paired for a role-playing exercise, he had no idea what they were meant to be doing.

'You're passive and I'm aggressive,' she told him.

'I'm Steven, actually,' and he held out his hand.

A woman called Heather was their mediator. She asked them both to give her a brief *précis* of why they were here, the nature of their conflict. She was nervous and shy, her voice almost too soft to hear.

'I don't know,' Steven said.

'We're negotiating a financial settlement,' Ester told him.

'Do we have much?'

She smiled. 'Aside from a house and pitiful savings, there's anger, hurt, and pride.'

His eyes were smoke, clouds, and soft winter sky. He looked embarrassed when his phone chimed again. 'It's work,' he explained. 'I'm so sorry. They're sacking someone I've been working with. It's messy.'

He was a counsellor for executives, brought in by companies when they were concerned that their top-level staff were not performing to the best of their abilities. 'It can be a tricky line. The company pays my bill, but the person is my client.'

'Can we get back to the settlement?' Heather asked, sniffing anxiously as she saw the other groups well into the scenario.

In the break, he offered to make her a cup of tea.

'I don't drink it,' she told him.

'Well, there's a first,' he smiled. 'Someone else who doesn't like tea.'

'I try,' she said. 'But it's the tannin. Makes my tongue curl and my teeth feel like chalk.' She grimaced.

'Clearly, no one has ever made you the perfect cup.'

'They've given it a go,' she told him. 'But it's never changed my

mind.'

He asked her where she worked.

'At home,' she told him. 'I'm a counsellor. I specialise in family therapy.'

'Do you like it?'

'Sometimes. On the good days.' She smiled.

'Do you have a family of your own?'

She looked straight at him as she answered. 'Everyone does.'

He laughed, and for the first time she witnessed a flicker of nerves. 'That was a clumsy way of trying to find out if you're on your own.'

She was embarrassed. She remembers and blushes even now. *It is so hard to do this, she thinks. To laugh, and be light, and take those first steps.* It is a wonder anyone ever does it — that extraordinary, shimmering fragility so delicate and open. There, high above the city, standing next to an urn, a fake teak box filled with teabags, and, next to the box, carefully stacked white china cups, both of them surrounded by counsellors, she had felt it for an instant — the sparkling brightness of the moment — and it had made her look down at the carpet, his shoes, her boots, the stolid ordinariness of them not quite enough to ground her.

After the course, he suggested they have a drink.

'I only have an hour,' she told him.

The girls were with Hilary, and she called and asked her to feed them. She was running late, she said.

They went to a bar, all warm wood and dark corners, and full of people younger than them. He asked her what she would do if she could start again, 'if money and training were no option and you could do anything, anything at all.'

She considered the question for a moment.

'Maybe a gardener.' But she was lying really, and she confessed as much. 'I wouldn't want to do the actual work; I'd just like to plan it, and then look at it once it was done.'

He asked her about her family.

'My mother is a filmmaker,' she told him, 'and my father was a

painter.'

'Siblings?'

'A sister. She was a singer. She is a singer.'

She didn't want to talk about April, and she picked up the coaster, damp beneath her fingers, and then put it down again. 'What about you?'

'I like what I do,' he said. 'But if I could start again, maybe a surgeon. I spent six months in hospital. With a virus that went to my lungs and my kidneys. It was awful, but that whole world, the intensity of it, the drama, the fact that what you do matters,' he smiled. 'It was seductive. I could see why there are so many hospital soaps.'

She liked him. A half hour passed, and then she called Hilary. An hour later, she called again. When she finally left, she was slightly drunk, and the softness of his lips on her cheek as they kissed goodbye had lingered, warm.

It has been a year since she moved to this house, she thinks, two years since Lawrence sat in front of her and confessed. And despite being so tired of the taste of it, she has held his betrayal close.

She looks at the girls now; Lara is uncertain as to whether they have gone too far, Catherine is nervous for her sister.

'I *am* going out,' Ester tells them. She smiles at Lara. 'And what an extraordinary guess. I'm actually having dinner with someone called Steven. Clearly, you're both geniuses or clairvoyant.'

Lara giggles anxiously.

'Will it ever stop raining?' Ester asks them.

Opening the front door so that she can hear Lawrence when he arrives, she looks out across her street, the trees bent low in the downpour, the gutters awash with stormwater, the sky low and sullen overhead. She wonders whether clients will cancel. She wonders if Steven will cancel, and she feels the push and pull of both relief and disappointment at the thought.

And then Lawrence pulls up, his navy-blue station wagon idling out the front, the wipers going backwards and forwards, the headlights on, as he sounds the horn and she calls them — 'Quick, your father's here' — asking Catherine to get Otto on the lead, kissing them

and telling them she loves them. She buttons up their raincoats, not letting herself look towards the car until they are out the front door and running through the downpour to where he waits, back door just ajar so that they can get in straightaway.