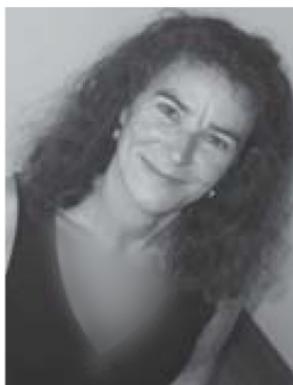




[CAMERA OBSCURA]

KATHRYN LOMER



Kathryn Lomer was born in north-west Tasmania and lives in Hobart. Her novel for young adults, *The Spare Room*, became a Children's Book Council Notable Book for Older Readers 2005 and was also shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, the *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year Awards and the Children's Peace Literature Awards 2005. Her most recent collection of poems, *Two Kinds of Silence*, was published in 2007. Her first collection of poetry, *Extraction of Arrows*, won the Anne Elder Award and was shortlisted in the John Bray Award for Poetry and the *Age* Book of the Year Awards. Her poems have also been awarded the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize in 2000 and the Gwen Harwood Poetry Prize in 2003.

ALSO BY KATHRYN LOMER

FICTION

The God in the Ink

YOUNG ADULT

The Spare Room

POETRY

Two Kinds of Silence

Extraction of Arrows

[CAMERA OBSCURA]
KATHRYN LOMER

UQP

First published 2008 by University of Queensland Press
PO Box 6042, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia

www.uqp.uq.edu.au

© Kathryn Lomer 2008

This book is copyright. Except for private study, research, criticism or reviews, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Typeset in 12/17 pt Granjon by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



This project has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

National Library of Australia

Lomer, Kathryn, 1958- .
Camera obscura.

ISBN 978 0 7022 3597 9

ISBN 978 0 7022 4048 5

I. Title.

A823.4

For Louise and Adrienne

Contents

Camera obscura	1
Blood harvest	16
Sojourn	28
Kafka's house	39
How much sugar?	49
On hold	63
Pram rage	85
Adult education	102
Losing faith	115
Surprise, surprise	128
Ceiling of an umbrella shop	135
Emerald Princess	149
Ice	169
Santa's little helper	179
Class of '73	195
Poem of the sea	207
Here be dragons	222
Acknowledgments	235
The stories	237

Camera obscura

How does light look when left entirely to itself?

If you look into an empty box full of light and the light is not reflected on surfaces, you will see blackness. Only when there is an object for the light to fall upon can we see the presence of light.

Do you have any rooms? *Ci sono camere libere?*

The woman looks up from where she is wiping down tables on the terrace of the pensione. She is in shadow. A thick, green vine covers latticed timber, letting only speckles of light through here and there. Bunches of grapes hang thickly, bursting.

I step out of the brilliant sunlight into shade. The cool of the shadowed air is a relief on my skin.

She looks me up and down surreptitiously, winding a loose strand of blond hair into position behind her head. Perhaps her hair is in a bun or a French twist of some kind. I know after seeing just this one gesture,

that it is habitual. It is a graceful movement.

Yes, we have some rooms. But perhaps not as cheap as you are after.

She has taken in my backpack, my travel-weary jeans, my unruly hair.

I do not want the cheapest room on the island, I say. What I'm after is a beautiful room with a desk. And a reasonable price.

The woman laughs at this and says that I will not know if it is a reasonable price unless I see the room and decide whether it is beautiful or not.

She gestures for me to take off my pack and follow her.

The Pensione Ulysses is cool. The floors are terrazzo, liver pink with inlaid flecks of colour. I want to lie down on the smooth surface, as if in a river, and let the coolness flow over me, washing away the dust, the heat, the tiredness. The sadness.

She says over her shoulder, I think I have just the room for you. She pushes open a door and I see a desk below a window with dark green shutters angled out towards each other, creating lines and triangles of light. The bed has an iron frame and a cobalt blue cover. There is a big armchair.

The woman says a price – much cheaper than rooms nearer the beach – and raises her eyebrows. I nod.

My name's Carita, she says.

Karen.

I unpack my camera bag carefully and lay out all the lenses on the desk. I put my clothes in the cupboard and my backpack under the bed. I feel at home. I take out my diary, my hairbrush, my photo of Ralph, his photo of the aurora australis.

September 16th

I have found a beautiful room with a desk. It is a five minute walk to the beach and a forty minute bus ride to Nuoro, the village where Grazia Deledda was born. I am so tired from the trip and from speaking Italian that I will have to sleep.

When I close my eyes in the big iron bed the pattern of light from the shutters remains on my retina. I think about getting up to close them completely but the thought drops into the darkness of sleep.

The courtyard terrace is transformed when I come downstairs. Fairy lights are strung among the vines and a candle burns steadily on each table. There are six tables but only three are occupied. Two are piled with plates of food and wine bottles, and flanked by young Italians

looking assured, brown and beautiful. Their voices rise in friendly altercation and laughter. At the third table Carita is sitting with a man wearing impeccable summer clothes. His face looks as if some sculptor has scraped away too much clay trying to give definition to the cheekbones. There are sharp shadows on either side of his face. Carita looks up and sees me hesitating in the dark oblong of the doorway. She beckons.

Karen, I would like you to meet Don. Why don't you join us? That's much better than sitting alone, isn't it?

By all means, do join us, says Don in a smooth English voice. His eyes are gentle and I can see fairy lights reflected in the pupils.

For fifteen hundred years after Plato, it was thought that a gentle fire glowed out of our eyes, illuminating what we saw, creating vision.

Carita has gone into the kitchen where somebody – a man – is singing an altogether different song from the one coming from speakers in the courtyard. The recorded song is a syrupy Italian melody. The one in the kitchen sounds like Greek – something discordant and Middle Eastern about it.

I look at Don and we smile about this cacophony as he pours wine into my glass.

That's Antonio, he says. Carita's husband. He's the chef.

Is he Greek? Antonio sounds Italian.

To his eternal sorrow, no, he is not Greek. But he pretends. He sings Greek songs, quotes Greek poetry and philosophy, cooks Greek food when he gets the chance and always, always, uses Greek olive oil in the kitchen. He says it is imbued with all the wisdom and energy of the Greek culture, that the olives are grown on land watered by the tears of wise men. He is rhapsodic about Greece.

They say the quality of the light in Greece is like nowhere else.

They do, indeed, say that.

How much light is there?

Carita brings plates of food to the table. Grilled octopus, Greek salad. She shrugs her shoulders. I must indulge him, she says. This is what he wants to cook, he says, to put himself in a good mood after all that pasta. So, please eat with us, Karen. Tomorrow will be time enough to choose your own.

Antonio joins us, taking off his apron with a sweeping gesture and tossing it on the concrete of the terrace. He looks about sixty, full of energy; his skin is the colour of the brine from black olives. He serves out the octopus. Carita gets up to collect dishes from one of the other tables and to bring coffee for the guests.

Antonio says, So, you are the photographer?

I must have looked startled.

Carita went up to your room to ask if you wanted dinner and she assumed you must be sleeping. She pushed your door open a little bit to check and saw your camera gear on the desk. Is that your job or just a hobby?

It is my passion.

It's my job. Mostly.

And what will you photograph here in Sardinia, may I ask? The bare rocks, the dust?

I'm here to take photographs for a book about Grazia Deledda. A new biography.

Ah. Grazia Deledda. Yes, Sardinia's famous daughter, says Antonio. Our Nobel prize winner. There is a festival, you know. In her honour. But you have missed it. A pity.

I didn't want photographs of the festival. I want photographs of the places that inspired her. *And the light.*

Antonio and Don nod.

Antonio says, What about a photograph of my wife? She is beautiful, no? She still inspires me after all these years.

We all look to where Carita is laughing at one of the tables. It is true. She is beautiful.

She is not Italian, I say.

Oh my goodness, no, says Antonio. She is my northern goddess. A Finnish Swede to be exact. She comes from a place where in summer light lasts for twenty-four hours. But we met in Greece. Only good things come from that country. When I met her she was as green and fresh as the purest virgin olive oil. She lit a fire in my heart. It is still burning. He turns to Don suddenly. Ah, my friend, I am sorry, he says putting his hand on Don's shoulder. Let's have more wine.

September 17th

I discovered tonight that Don flew here in his own plane. He does this twice every year, once in April and once in September. He is retired, widowed. Such words these are; they only describe what he isn't. Much harder to say what he is. Sad, perhaps. Certainly, sad.

My intention has been to stop on the coast for a few days to rest and relax, spend time on the beach after a long southern winter, swim. Instead I find I stay at the pensione, reading or talking. Carita, Antonio, Don – together they have an unusual energy. There is something rare here.

Whoever is free sits with me. They seem happy to open up about themselves. Of course I miss my homeland, Carita says. Little things – the light over the lakes in

summer. Ice on the rivers. But I was an outsider anyway, a Finlander. My mother and father spoke Finnish, which is not related to other Scandinavian languages. We are all outsiders in one way or another, displaced, not belonging in the way we might want. So, in some sense it is easier to be an outsider here, openly, obviously.

Don tells me that his flying began in the RAF during the war. He was a bomb aimer, flying Lancasters over Germany, riding in cramped space at the bottom of the fuselage. Frostbite was common. Those bombs caused people to lose limbs long before they were ever dropped on the earth. A WRAF officer was sent to plan heating systems for the bombing hole and Don fell in love with her. Her name was Norah. She didn't notice him at the time but, among other things, Norah organised a dance. Don played the piano on the night and won her heart. Later she told him she couldn't help but notice him under the spotlight. He says there was no spotlight that night. Norah took him home to meet her mother even though her mother had said, Don't expect me to like him. What can be so special? Soon her mother was feeding him rationed bacon and mysteriously acquired eggs.

I became more afraid then, Don says, when I had Norah. Of course I didn't tell her that. And she never showed her anxiety. She told me, though, when the war was over,

that every time we took off on a raid into Germany, she went to the end of the runway in the dark, stood there and prayed. We were married for thirty years. I miss her. I miss her.

How does love look when left entirely to itself?

September 19th

Don has asked me to go up in his plane, fly over the island. I don't know if I can tell him that I'm afraid. He says we should go at dawn and see the sun come up, that it looks like it's coming to meet you.

During the war we flew without lights, and those on land were blacked out. We relied on our navigational instruments. But sometimes panic would settle on me there in the dark, in the noise and vibration, and I'd think, We are lost, we will always be lost.

September 20th

I still have not been to Nuoro. I didn't realise how much I needed this kind of space and rest. Since Ralph left I have worked and worked and I haven't let the hurt in. Or let it out.

Don must have guessed that I'm afraid. He does not insist, but the offer is still open.

Ra was the Egyptian sun-god. The sun was an eye. When it opened it was day; when it closed it was night.

He wrote to tell us, you know, two years ago when it happened. We were having lunch when the letter arrived. Antonio read it to me. It said, *My world has come to an end. How can I go on living? She was the light of my life.* We just looked at each other across the table. What can you say?

September 21st

We choose to share our lives, want to, madly, feel bereft if we do not. But how we set ourselves up. How we invite desolation. An end will come and not together unless you have the will to make it so. Oh, Ralph. You weren't mine in that way, not my husband, not my anything. You were my love.

I have been at the pensione for a week when, in the waters off Finland, a ferry hits an iceberg and capsizes. The ferry was taking a group of Finnish Swedes back to their homeland for a visit. The aurora borealis, the newspaper says, was magnificent that night and people would have been on deck watching it. They would have seen the iceberg. There were no survivors.

Carita wears black for three days. She tells me the Finnish name for the aurora. Fox fire. According to a Finnish legend, Repu is a fox and this is his tail swishing a fire, not of heat but of light.

In Tasmania I have seen the aurora three times. The first time was terrifying, not knowing what the veils of red and green light could be. Rays of white light looked like an image of God I was familiar with from my Catholic childhood. The child in me trembled; the grown-up looked in awe. I walked down my steep street to the beach at two in the morning. Other people were there, standing on the sand, heads tilted upwards. I asked what was happening. Is it the end of the world? I heard that child's voice ask. It's the Southern Lights, they said. A real good one.

I asked a colleague the next day if he'd seen the Southern Lights last night. What channel? he said.

Have you ever seen the Lights? wrote Ralph. Down here, it's really common. It displays for a lot of nights in a row.

There were many details we didn't know about each other, a lot of questions we never had time to ask.

The second time was on a bus going north from Hobart. The driver turned off the interior bus lights so the red