



NEVER GOOD AT MATHS

KATE MAXWELL

Interactive Press

Never Good At Maths

Kate Maxwell is a Sydney-based writer who has been published and awarded in Australian and International literary magazines for many years. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in journals such as *fourW*, *Hecate*, *Linq*, *Swyntax*, *Verandah*, *Cordite*, *Meniscus*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *Blood and Bourbon*.

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To Doreen, who believed I could.

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Crossing Borders

Past Dead Man's Hill
we follow a petrol tanker
into flat brown and grey
where power lines
stretch like spider silk
across this never end.

Caught in the driver's window
white muscular clouds
paint a silver-edged halo
about your nose and jaw.
Right now, I'd drive with you
into forever.

360 degrees of sky
and the sun blazing
like the blinding eye of God;
too bright
too beautiful
too painful to meet.

Over ragged scrub
prey birds glide
scouring the map of earth
for hidden life.
We stop by the skeleton
of an old stone house

where I stand lookout
for snakes
watch fence wire shake
as you wade into
dung-coloured grass
to get a better photo.

Back in the car, with nothing
to say, we flow through
an un-peopled panorama
still and unswerving as patience.
This blue-domed church
presses silence to the windscreen.

Succulence

Back to the caravan park on the highway
we trudged, with its black garbage bags
mangy cat and old tin nags
chained to cement blocks
row after row
and walked into the shabby office
you, with shaking smile, bleeding
lipstick to plead, *A few more weeks? No more
trouble*, and promises to keep up with the rent.

I lied a little, lending respectability to appease
the weary woman who held the keys
and every stinking minute stifled sobs
for what we must accept for you:
this metal-box of surrender
where you'll lie and swelter
clutching silence, growing stomach
while waiting for his visit

or maybe you'll heave yourself
up to the station to meet him
when his mum has finished dinner.
He gets the shits 'cause I get so tired
you say, adding a little more guilt
to your colourful pots of succulent pain.

Carrying your plastic bags into the van
I note your pallid skin in yellow light.
But you won't be told.
Nothing for me to offer but a little cash
unwanted advice and old pillows.
Your cloudy eyes meet mine with nothing
but his reflection and stoic grey
as you clench your lips and mumble
But I love him.

By the Side of the Road

When the sun sinks and the ridges
of our backs are getting cold
we find warmth by the sun-baked road;
little greys, roans and big reds
we all squat and sniff for fallen grain
where grass grows greener
tar stays warm and fences keep
the woollies and the fat beasts back.
The fumes of dusk tickle our nostrils
and growl to us, *come*.

When the roaring nears
we drop paws to the ground and roll aside
for those creatures are faster than emu
and deadly as old spear.
Sometimes white light fills our eyes
and we are stuck to the road
 bellies popped
 spilling colours and smells
 until

the black, sharp-beaked birds
or men with shovels and swearing
make us disappear.
Still we see ourselves
in yellow diamond signs
by the side of the road
and know we are welcome.

Rooted

The stump grinder came today
to expunge the old tree
with a huge iron-wheeled monster
that only just made it
through the narrow back lane
(the old dunny run)
then he grinned at me
with even white teeth, shocking
his dusty tanned face
into happy creases.
His metallic brute growled
spat chips and spluttered
into jasmine-scented summer air.

Ear-muffled and leathery
swaying lean hips in time
with the hungry beast that gnashed
and gnawed the grey stump
into shreds (once a seed, a sapling
a tree, who knows how tall?)
he shrouded the courtyard
with a sad, malty ash
that tickled sinuses and
settled on still damp sheets
while I sat pondering
his triumphant cry,
now she's rooted!

Never Good at Maths

In your algebraic mind
my little looks or tilted chin
are recognised and given symbols;
that colour in my sigh
the warmth of a whisper
on your cheek
and patterns in my palms
that pulse upon your chest
in coded script.
You've kissed these hands
in shortened breath
and called them, *God*.
Noting acquiescence
and frequency of smiles
you've formulated a system
of relationships, measured
the angle of an eyebrow
length of silences
or heaviness of your name
dropped from a mouth
explored and classified
as positive or negative.
Cupped into the flesh
of your sleep
I've watched numbers
change on the bedside table
a kaleidoscope of you
tangling through thoughts
as minutes slowly drip
into long nights.

You're content with tested
calculations, yet
I've noted fear and confusion
in the furrows of your brow
the grey flecks of your eyes
when equations crumble.

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