

Don't Know A Good Thing

The Asham Award Short-Story Collection

Edited by Kate Pullinger

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Extract

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THE ASHAM AWARD 2005

First prize *The Wing* by Annie Kirby

Second prize *Hwang* by Carys Davies

Third prize *Holding the Baby* by Francesca Kay

Winner of the Asham Bursary, sponsored by the Arts Council of England: Lianne Kolirin for *Elvis Has Entered the Building*

The Asham Literary Endowment Trust wishes to thank the judges of this year's Asham Award:

Lynne Truss, Louise Doughty and Chris Meade

and the commissioned writers who have contributed to this collection:

Trezza Azzopardi, Louise Doughty, Helen Dunmore, Helen Simpson, Lynne Truss and Marina Warner.

CAROLE BUCHAN

Foreword

IT was ten years ago that the first Asham Award for new women writers was launched in Sussex. Named after the house where Virginia Woolf once lived, the award was set up to provide a vehicle for the new writers of tomorrow.

Few could have guessed then that within a decade the Asham Literary Endowment Trust, which administers the award, would be in the forefront of the successful campaign to raise the status of the short story in contemporary literature and to give fiction a fresh new look. These days mainstream publishers are producing anthologies of short fiction by both new and established writers. The work of many of the great short story writers of the past is being re-examined and re-evaluated and the genre is no longer seen merely as the answer to the pressures of twenty-first century living, but is valued as an art form in its own right.

Alongside this commitment to the short story is the Asham Trust's commitment to the writers themselves, both new and established. The past ten years of the Asham Award have seen some of the most exciting and innovative new fiction from women across the British Isles. Many have gone on to carve out new careers as writers, journalists and critics. Erica Wagner, for example, was one of the winners of the first award with her story *Pyramid*. She was already literary editor of *The Times*, but has since published a range

of fiction and biography and has judged some of the foremost literary prizes, including the Man Booker, Whitbread, Forward and Orange.

Linda Leatherbarrow's story *Lost Boys* was published by Serpent's Tail in the third anthology. She has won a number of literary prizes, and recently had a collection of short stories – *Essential Kit* – published by the Maia Press. In addition, her inspirational teaching on the creative writing MA at Middlesex University has produced a number of Asham prizewinners, including Victoria Briggs, who won first prize in 2003, was signed up by an agent and is now working part time in order to concentrate on her writing. Other successful students include Hilary Plews (who won third prize in 2003), Lianne Kolirin (who won this year's Asham Bursary) and Jessica Bowman, author of the title story in this collection.

Ann Jolly won first prize in 2000 with her story *Girls in their Loveliness*. Since then she has been Writer in Residence at Dartmoor Prison and has produced a book and CD of the prisoners' work and has helped them to start their own magazine.

Rachael McGill has developed a career in the theatre. A winner in 2003, her plays deal with social issues such as new variant CJD and race politics in London. But her first love will always be prose writing. Awards like Asham, she says, are not only important for the encouragement they give writers, but also for valuing the form of the short story.

The winner of this year's first prize – Annie Kirby – is trying to put together a collection of short stories. She is also working on a novel, called *Blood Hands Moon Snow*, which she describes as 'a big melodramatic generation-spanning story of selkies, Gothic novelists and transvestite fishermen!'.

The Asham Trust has a policy of linking new and established writers through its anthology, its mentoring schemes with young people and its workshop programme. We are immensely grateful to those writers who have supported our work over the years and who have generously given their time to those setting out on their careers. Special thanks should go to our editor Kate Pullinger and to Lynne Truss, Louise Doughty and Helen Dunmore – each of whom has been involved with Asham from the beginning. Our thanks also to *Serpent’s Tail*, who supported us when we were a totally unknown organisation, and to Bloomsbury, who have successfully taken the Asham Award into the next decade.

As Stephen Vincent Benet said, ‘A short story is something that can be read in an hour and remembered for a lifetime.’ We hope you will find stories in this collection which will do just that.

Carole Buchan,
Administrator, Asham Literary Endowment Trust,
Lewes, East Sussex.

- *If you love short stories, look out for the short-story festival – Small Wonder – organised jointly by the Asham and Charleston Trusts to be held at Charleston, near Lewes, in September 2006.*
- *For more information visit www.ashamaward.com or www.charleston.org.uk from July 2006.*

JESSICA BOWMAN

Don't Know A Good Thing

‘**Y**OU SEE, Patricia,’ her mother had said. ‘See the rows all lined up like that? Nice and neat. Don’t you let a seed get out of line, now. Keep them straight. See how nice it looks? Perfect. Long as you take care of them weeds, you won’t have no problems.’

Trish had lived in Nupiak all her life. The small cabin with the added-on indoor toilet and lean-to firewood shed had been her childhood home – passed on from her grandmother, her mother, and when both were dead, to her. She was a quiet child, the only one left after the harsh winter of ’76, when her older brother had succumbed to the flu in a frigid, blizzarding April. Trish had just turned ten. She stayed close to her mother ever since. When she was a little girl, the wind used to freeze her wet hair into black icicles if she went outside to help her mother in the garden after a bath. The year of the blizzard she had to break it off and wear it short because it was so cold; after that, she always dried it all the way through.

‘Look at that,’ her mother would sniff, wiping a strand of coarse black hair from her forehead. ‘Just filth, that is.’ Trish looked over at her neighbour’s lot behind the house. The Shaws lived about a hundred yards away, but she could see their ramshackle place clearly in the early morning light. The garden was a mess – choked with fireweed and thick,

foul-smelling clumps of red forest berries that were slowly overtaking the chain link; a rusted Chevrolet propped on cement blocks with a sagging roof collecting rainwater and melted snow.

‘Filth,’ her mother would shake her head and sniff again. ‘All that space out here, all that land. Just don’t know a good thing when they got it, them Shaws.’

After her mother died, Trish hosed the garden down one night and left it to freeze. The next day she broke off all the frigid stems above ground and let the cold earth alone until spring, when she tilled the ground and planted a garden of her very own to see if she could do it.

Trish first met Adlet during a blizzard. There was only the one bar in Nupiak, where all the men passed the time when they came through the village on floatplanes or fishing boats. She had come to deliver leeks to Sila when it struck, and they’d been holed up for five hours until the ploughs made it through and the wind died down.

Adlet had stopped for a drink with his fishing buddies after they’d flown in from Homer for the weekend. He ran a small shuttling service between villages. Sila introduced Trish and said, ‘This lady here’s the best damn green thumb this side of the Mother Nature, gentleman.’ Trish blushed and the men laughed. Adlet, though, looked at her, cocking his head, and asked if she’d ever grown delphiniums. Trish nodded, secretly pleased. Delphiniums were her favourite.

‘My mother grew delphiniums in Nome,’ he said. ‘I was always amazed they came back every year like that.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Sila, ‘you want to last a winter in the bush, you hang around Trish. She can make anything grow out here.’

* * *

Trish was pretty enough, with dark eyes like almonds, a pleasant roundish face, and long, inky black hair. Though Adlet wasn't the first man ever to buy her a drink, he was the first to see her stick around long enough to finish it. When the storm died down and she said she had to get back to work on thawing and repairing her garden, Adlet offered to help. He was the first man Trish allowed to do so.

Trish and Adlet never got married. Still, they were together for five years. During that time they ended up with a son called Matek. Trish remembered feeling guilty when Matek was born as she realized he looked nothing like his father. Feeling guilty because she was glad for that. Because it had come from her, she had *grown* it, and naturally, it belonged to no one else.

Adlet left when Matek was four. Trish imagined he would have left before that if the winters hadn't been so bad he wasn't able to risk the journey through Kodiak; or if he'd found another job or woman to take him in.

But before that, when he'd been younger and more naïve and full of beer, Adlet had imagined he might be able to stay in this village with this quiet, almond-eyed woman and her fantastic garden, and he'd bought her a clay pot of delphiniums in the hopes she'd agree.

Adlet wasn't much of a father anyway. He might have been if given a chance, if given a different place to do it in, but Trish was jealous and never let Matek out of her sight for a minute. Too many gardeners, after all, trod too much soil.

'Kid's gonna have problems if you don't cut the damn umbilical cord,' Adlet would say. 'Might as well still be in your friggin' belly.'

And also, Trish never wanted to leave her garden, never

wanted to leave the house, much less the village. She had never been anywhere else.

One night, when Matek was three, Trish left him home with a sitter and let Adlet take her to the bar for a few drinks. But after too many tequila shots – ‘Cheers to fuckin’ firewater!’ he would scream – Adlet made her stand on the countertop lined with glasses and dried, sticky beer. He poured whisky around her feet and lit it with his lighter while Mac, Sila’s brother, killed the lights. Trish watched the blue fire lick the wood and felt the heat on her woollen socks. She listened as they laughed and gasped and thought she would explode from holding down the screaming anger in her throat.

Trish never left Matek home again. She was so quiet sometimes people thought she was slow, but her right hook sure wasn’t. Adlet sported a black eye and a swollen jaw for a week afterward. Everyone thought it was a bar fight; no one asked. And no one imagined. Because the thought of Trish being angry, much less violent was, well . . . messy. Trish and messy didn’t go together.

And in a way, it was true. Trish liked to keep her borders tidy. She wasn’t mean, just neat.

‘Keep your garden under control,’ her mother had said, ‘and you’ll find everything else takes care of itself. Having a garden in this godforsaken place sure is something to be proud of. Can’t let it dry up once you’ve started, can’t let it die or it’s on your hands.’

In her garden, Trish often sang and smiled to herself, appraising her frosted green cabbage stalks, her dark, wide rhubarb leaves. She *was* proud of what she’d accomplished. People came to buy her vegetables, to cut her flowers. She carted her pots and baskets of plants to festivals or funerals

for a moderate fee, and was pleased when complimented. She blushed easily, and mumbled shyly, but she was still pleased. She supposed it wasn't all that much in life, really, just to have a little garden in the back of her little house. And some small part inside felt that it was a great thing because she had done it all by herself. It was *hers*.

And it was enough – with Matek, that is. Because *he* was hers too.

Matek never took to gardening. She guessed he had gotten his father's thumbs after all. It was better than having his nose, or Adlet's eyes looking at her every day, wasn't it? And in truth, Trish liked having her garden to herself. Matek was another growing thing she could nurture, take care of. Another needy life in the freezing winter and pouring summer. She loved him more for being *part* of her garden than being able to take part in it.

Her grandmother taught her how to keep the herbs safe from frostbite when the temperature dropped by using plastic and fishing line. Her mother had lectured her on the necessity of keeping the plants free of weeds that would take the scanty soil, suck up the slowly-thawing nutrients. And when she learned, she grew too, seeing the stalks rise from the ground from her ministrations. *Growing* was in her blood. Having a son was an extension of that, surely – but Matek, he was unlike any seed she'd seen before. As he rose from the ground he grew less interested in her and more interested in basketball, in going to hang out in the parking lot of the grocery store with his friends, in watching television.

Still, they were close. Trish lived for her son. She didn't like to think much of Adlet, of that time in her life – it made her angry and things broke in her fisted hands before she

could stop them, she hated losing control, things happening without reason, breaching the trimmed borders of her world. But it had brought Matek to her, and that was a blessing. She shared everything with him. They were friends, soul mates, she liked to think – there was nothing Matek could not tell her. As the years passed Trish became even quieter and nearly stopped talking to people altogether as she worked ceaselessly on her garden. Except for Matek, she spoke only to her plants.

But as he grew, Matek started to change. Trish remembered how he loved eating the raw rhubarb stalks after she cut and rinsed them, right off the stem. How they'd laugh as he'd pucker his mouth and squirm at the sourness, but keep right on chomping anyway. Suddenly he didn't like rhubarb anymore. Not even in her pies.

And one day he came home from school and found the glossy brochures confusingly addressed to him. The mail was never for Matek, only Trish's name appeared on the magazines, bills or the few personal letters she received. Trish briefly wondered if she would have hidden them if she'd known what they were.

'What do you want for dinner?' Trish asked.

'I dunno, whatever,' Matek said.

'How was school?'

'Okay,' he said. 'Did you look at these? The one in Idaho looks pretty cool.'

'What?' she said. 'The brochures? What are they for?'

'College, Mom. After high school? You know, my education?'

'College?' Trish said softly, standing by the stove as if she'd never heard the word before.

'Yeah, I want to go to college in the States,' he said. 'The

lower forty-eight.’ He waited. ‘It’s a dead end here, Mom. I’ve got to get out.’ Trish nodded, silent. ‘Aw, don’t start crying, Mom. God, come on. You’ve got to stop doing this. I can’t live with you for ever. You’ve got to get a life.’

But she *had* a life, Trish thought. Life *in* life. She had life everywhere around her – she made it. She grew it. How could he not see that? If only she could convince him, she thought. Like that lilac bush that didn’t want to grow up along the wooden gate, it only needed a little encouragement, a little wire run along the stem. If only he would listen to her, she would give him such good soil; she would water him for the rest of his life.

Saturday morning Matek wasn’t home and she left for the bar with the leeks for Sila.

‘So, Matek and the Walker girl, is it?’ Sila winked at her across the mahogany, reaching for the cardboard box Trish was holding.

‘Walker girl?’

‘Yeah, heard they were quite the item lately, have you met her?’

Trish shook her head. Matek told her a few days ago that the Walker girl had been missing school for almost a month. Matek had shrugged and finished his potatoes and said the rumour was she was pregnant. He had said it as if it were a joke. As if it were funny.

Trish was waiting for him when he came home.

‘That girl,’ she said, her eyes black. ‘Did you do that to her? Did you get her pregnant?’

‘Ha,’ he said. ‘Who told you? It wasn’t a big deal.’

Trish stared at him.

Matek glowered at her. 'Mom, don't start. You don't know anything about it.' He dropped his keys on the counter and opened the fridge.

'You're going to leave for college,' Trish said evenly. 'You're just going to leave her, alone with her baby?'

Matek stood up and took a swig of milk from the carton, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Come on Mom,' he said. 'We weren't together, not really. *It wasn't a big deal.* Why should I have to stay here to take care of it? She was probably going to stay here the rest of her life anyway.'

You will be here the rest of your life, you and your fucking garden. Adlet had said that to her before he left. *You and your goddamned garden and no one else.*

'I won't stay here,' Matek said. 'I can't. Not for anyone. I'll be starting a new life, I'll be leaving everything behind.'

Everything. Trish swallowed, her head pounded. She wondered, for the first time in years, if there was aspirin in the cupboard. *I'm not going to ruin my life for you.*

'But I don't understand,' she said softly. 'How can you do this to someone you love?'

Matek stopped drinking and looked at her, the carton sweating water beads down his hand. 'What are you talking about?' he said. 'I don't love *her.*'

That night she had a dream. She was in her garden, but it wasn't her garden. Trish stood, cold in her shift and thought how silly she was not to be wearing something more, like her garden clogs or her parka, but the night was warm and she realized it was summer and that was okay. She went to her tomato plants under the plastic wrap, wound around the thin wood rising from the soil and saw an ugly black tendril leaping up like sin, poking its way through the clear

barrier. *Weeds*. Trish gasped and yanked the plastic off, hurriedly snatching the weed from the ground and trying to cover the tomatoes back up before the night air got to them, but just as she threw the first weed to the ground, another snaked up at the end of the row, and another. Trish felt a low growl in her throat and she ran after them but they were too much for her. She turned and suddenly they were *everywhere* – growing, slithering, spreading like green-black sickness all through her garden and she ran and ran but knew she could never get them all before they overtook her beautiful yard. *Keep your garden under control!* So she went straight for the delphiniums – she could at least save those, and somehow that seemed right in her dream, so suddenly she was there, in front of the flowerbox and she screamed because it was too late and she knew what she'd known all along, that they'd always been weeds, *weeds!* – *how can you do that to someone you love?* – that her garden had always been a mass of dark green festering chaos and wildness and she had only been pretending it was beautiful, only pretending she had control of this wild earth and its demonic seed and she shrank back from the rising tendrils of her own nurture and screamed and screamed as the black garden seethed and boiled around her in the frozen wilderness.

Trish woke up, feverish and cloudy. She didn't remember her dream, exactly – she hardly remembered any dreams at all. Trish didn't usually care for dreams or things of a superstitious nature. Still, she felt uneasy and it wasn't until she went downstairs and saw the kitchen in a mess, crumbs all over the floor and empty beer cans lining the sink that something finally bent in the direction it had been leaning for so long.

Suddenly she knew what Matek had become. He came into the kitchen, his shoulders bowed, his step slow. She looked at him, his skin a greenish hue from drinking the night before. He stood by the fridge, taking gulp after gulp of orange juice from the plastic jug. She watched it run in sticky yellow lines down the sides of his chin and on to his shirt. He towered over the sink, over the delphinium potted there. She looked at him, at the flower, at his gangly, selfish smile. He turned to put the orange juice back in the fridge, and the sight of his dark, slender back struck Trish like a shovel in her gut. He was starting to look like Adlet. He was *growing up* into Adlet. Pretending to be hers, fooling her all along – she finally saw the truth, the ugly, black truth. And she knew what she had to do.

He turned and looked at her.

‘What?’ was the last thing Matek said.

The delphinium pot was heavy and Trish’s hook was fast. It only took a moment.

And then a moment to clean up the broken clay and dirt on the floor.

And then it was done.

A few months later she took more leeks to Sila at the bar.

‘Haven’t seen you for a while,’ she said. Trish shrugged. Sila was used to her shyness. ‘How’s Matek liking college? Bet he’s having the best time of his life,’ Sila said, taking the cardboard box from Trish’s hands. ‘Well, it’s no use being sad when they leave, you know that. He’s in a better place, ain’t he? It’s good for him.’

Trish nodded. *It’s good for him*, she thought. *For his own good.*

‘You told him about that Walker girl? Had a miscarriage,

I heard. A mixed blessing, they say. She's going to head to Anchorage for college in the spring.'

Trish nodded again. 'I brought her mother some flowers,' she said softly.

'I have to say,' said Sila before Trish left. 'These are the freshest ones this year! What have you been doing?'

Trish smiled slightly, blushing. 'Weeding.'

It was hard having such a nice garden in such a cold place, Trish knew that better than anyone. But whenever someone asked her she'd shrug and give a small smile.

'Not too hard,' she'd say. 'Not too hard if you keep at it.'

The hardest thing, they'd ask?

'Weeds,' she'd say. 'It's the weeds that'll choke you if you let them alone for even a minute. I'd have no problems if it weren't for them weeds.' Trish's face would flush, her fists clench.

'Just look at the Shaw place,' she'd sniff. 'Weeds everywhere. Filthy,' Trish would say, glaring into the sunlight past her well-kept yard. 'Just don't know a good thing when they got it, them Shaws.'