

# Luna lepidoptera

Melanie Pryor

SHE IS SPENDING the day in an underground room, pinning musty insects onto grey foam pillows. The room is dim, she has a headache from the naphthalene and a heartache that's making her feel like retching.

She has just moved house, and with every box she packed, she tucked away unwanted memories with the toothpaste, aching failures with her gumboots, and flushes of hot shame between the strings of her cello. There were stabs of searing passion under the picture frames, and as she rolled up an Indian silk, she tucked in some rare, pre-dawn moments when the blue air bit her skin and she realised how beautiful the birds sound. She is not good at moving her life. She stumbled over boxes of books for days, and her eyes ached from trying not to look at the empty walls. They were studded with Blu Tack and scuffed by dirty, summer feet.

The dead insects; people tell her it's a strange job. But she likes things that can fly — it's the ones left behind that she finds repulsive, like spiders and slugs. But there are no spiders to be pinned in the dim room. She is alone, a single lamp haloing her head, with piles and piles of moths. They float from glass boxes, occasionally losing wings and smearing her hands with dusty browns and sickly oranges. A few times, the withered bodies tear apart under her fingers and stray antennae lick the whorls on her skin; she lines them up on the steel benchtop and carefully arranges them into spiky, black names. Calliope,

Andromeda, Ursula. She tells herself that the insects she lays to rest need her sky goddesses more than she does.

Boxes of dust and a lopsided heart — she feels as malformed as the bodies she is pinning. They are colour, splayed in silence. His hair is copper, so she recoils from the autumn-coloured moths that look like pieces of an afternoon that have lost their way, and ended up in this death house. At the thought of his hair, she recalls the hour when they folded their palms upwards and outwards, again and again, unfurling accusations and entreaties. He left that day with a pot plant in his hand, and it was easy to pretend that was what he'd come for. They paused on her steps, momentarily stilled under the burn of a descending sun. She avoided his eyes and spent the next few hours on a Balyang park bench, trying to swallow heaves of sickening grief.

The tiny pins that she sinks through each velvety body feel different, every time. Sometimes the pins crunch through the miniscule layers of armour that guard the most sacred organ. It is tattooed on skin, scratched in sand, scrawled on crumpled paper. It is clutched at as it breaks. She wonders if each heart-beat is ground into millions of crystallised moments that are later held up to the light of love, to see what is transparent, and what keeps the light out.

Sometimes the pin sinks through the furry flesh of the moth like a sigh. She imagines the Lady of Shalott — pale, grave face — collapsing to lie, motionless, in layers of silver serenity and the ancient crimson of unrequited love. The remorseless, grey water that bears her boat is love in its infinite compassion. Sometimes this is the pin: sinking in an exquisite agony of catharsis and abandonment.

The last words he said to her were good luck with the hours. He didn't even say them, really. They were scribbled on the back of a receipt, fluttering under the kitchen table. The

afternoon breeze had seen them as worthless, and swept them half out of her sight. Ominous words. Threatening. Hung with the weight of an interminable bell's toll. For a while, they trailed after her through empty twilights, into even emptier nights, hanging in the curtains and sloshing in the glass of water by her bed. The hours. Even her bedside clock bore the curse of his words. Each second was scored into her skin as time heaved further around the circular plastic face.

As the piles of moth coffins rise around her, she tries to forget him.

There is a note on the cello, somewhere high up the second to lowest string. It is slightly dusty, slightly muffled, and feels like the first, achingly soft, an almost undetectable touch to the body, when existence holds its breath and every nerve in the universe sings as the skin is touched.

This is how they happen. They meet and she thinks he is too young. Probably far too young. He reminds her of a lover she used to have. She forgets about him. When they meet for the second time, she falls a little way into love. He stands slightly taller than her, and she likes that, because she is usually the tall one. It makes her feel different, fragile, like something someone could look after. She notices the first time he makes a joke about her, to her, the kind of joke that comes with familiarity. Inside her is the kind of smile that melts everything else to nothing and she laughs, and punches him gently, and he drapes his arm across her shoulder.

There is the day that leaves sand between their toes and brisk salt in their hair, and where they, in turn, leave questions on the beach and answers in the water, wordless things that the gulls take high into the sky and that they embed deep in each other's skin. She learns how to say kiss me with only her tongue and he answers her until the sun sets and the wind makes it too cold to stay outside.

Later — months, or maybe just weeks — the afternoon warms the tops of their heads and turns his hair to flame. She scrunches up the paper bag from her iced bun and says I have to get back to work. He puts down his coffee cup, picks up her hands and slowly touches his tongue to the tips of her fingers, licking the smudges of icing from them. Her breath becomes light. He lowers her hands. I love you.

She seals the lid of a hard, plastic box, carefully gluing a series of handwritten labels to the top of it. She brushes her hand across the metal desk, and reaches for the next box. A fragment of moth wing floats silently to the floor.

She used to hum the songs he played on the piano and he would add his hum to hers, and weave over and under her melody. One night, she hums a line from his current concerto before going to bed. She can hear him searching for his slippers in the bedroom, and she pauses, waiting for him to hum the piece from where she left off. He hums a tune she doesn't know. She stands in the dark. There is something cool in the pit of her stomach, and it is the first time that one of their moments, their moments that they have made, slides out from under her skin.

He goes away for three weeks. She cuts her hair very short. When he sees her he says it looks good but she doesn't believe he means it.

That moment, that note, that first touch, that first everything. She remembers the time he said it was like dreaming. She wasn't sure, even then, if he meant to say it out loud.

She loses count of the hours. The heavy door swings closed behind her with end-of-day finality, and she shivers as warmth and traffic brush the dank air off her arms. The city is humming underfoot, eager to be dropping the keys on the bench, preparing dinner, dimming the lights with muted voices. There is a bottle of something sharp and peaty waiting in the silence of her home; she intends to take it and a blanket, and

keep the company of the moon by the Barwon River until dawn's first silver bird call. She rattles the key in the front door, jamming it in her haste.

The moon looms high across the lapping water, and she holds the rug tight around her body. The cool air smells like the bright sharpness of stars. As she raises the bottle to her lips, something brushes her cheek. She lowers the amber glass. With hands that shake slightly, she traps the dusky moth that is batting its wings against her skin. She cradles it with one hand, and feels tears in her eyes. The moth wavers before her, glowing dully in the muted moonlight, a slow flutter of velvet with eyes of autumn copper on its wings. She tries to be silent because the night is so still, but as she closes her eyes, there is music reverberating in the bones of her memory, a song she used to play before she met him. It leaks from her skin and pools with the tears and whiskey in her lap. The moth stays with her until the moon sets.



**Melanie Pryor** wrote this in 2013 as a music teacher in South Australia.