

MY BOURGEOIS APOCALYPSE



**HELEN
RICKERBY**

MY BOURGEOIS APOCALYPSE

MY BOURGEOIS APOCALYPSE

**HELEN
RICKERBY**



AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

First published 2026
Auckland University Press
Waipapa Taumata Rau
University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand
www.aucklanduniversitypress.co.nz

© Helen Rickerby, 2026

ISBN 978 1 77671 210 6

Published with the assistance
of Creative New Zealand



A catalogue record for this book is available
from the National Library of New Zealand

This book is copyright. Apart from fair
dealing for the purpose of private study,
research, criticism or review, as permitted
under the Copyright Act, no part may be
reproduced by any process without prior
permission of the publisher. The moral
rights of the author have been asserted.

Design by Kalee Jackson

Cover photo by Sasha Francis

This book was printed on
FSC® certified paper

Printed in China by Everbest
Printing Investment Ltd

For L and M

‘Notebooks achieve so much of what poetry tries to achieve, but organically—they begin and end arbitrarily, in media res. Ready-made erasures with an offhand effortlessness, abstractions interspersed with specifics. Fragmentary profundity. No forced closures. The epiphanies fall where they may.’

— Elisa Gabbert, *The Word Pretty*

‘Poets, like architects, love contradiction and near incoherence.’

— Elisa Gabbert, *Any Person is the Only Self*

CONTENTS

#1 (A sort of prologue)	11	#13 (What is the new normal and what if I don't want to go back to normal?)	33
#2 (This just doesn't happen here . . . but it did)	14	#14 (The new normal)	35
#3 ('[A] poem is a thinking thing')	16	#15 (I realised I did not have a favourite tree)	36
#4 (I apologise in advance to fans of Blake)	17	#16 (Shall we try again with another year?)	37
#5 (I have learned to read over and over)	19	#17 (The past is narrative – and perhaps the future is too?)	39
#6 (Because I am a poet I wrote about it)	20	#18 (It's been a long time since I climbed a tree)	41
#7 (Sometimes even the present feels like a memory)	22	#19 (The Broken-heart Hotline did reply)	43
#8 (We don't actually have that many parties)	23	#20 (The unexpected second lockdown ruined what was going to be <i>the</i> most fun week)	45
#9 (I thought 2020 was going to be a great year – how wrong I was)	25	#21 (We find ways to connect, even during lockdowns, especially during lockdowns)	46
#10 (The summer of (The) Crying (Book))	27	#22 (Some books can save your life)	47
#11 (During lockdown I was so busy coping with my feelings about the crisis that I didn't really have time to work, but instead we wrote a blog about music from the early 90s)	29	#23 (Everywhere you go, you'll always take yourself)	49
#12 (At least at level 3 we could get takeaways delivered)	31	#24 (In poetry everything becomes metaphorical, even the wine glasses)	51
		#25 (I understand swimming in winter but, like a lot of things, I don't want to do it)	53

#26 (Lazarina goes to the big wreckers in the sky, and we get covid for the first time)	54	#38 (The freedom of randomness and chance)	69
#27 (My Italian is not really that good, even now)	56	#39 (I don't quite know how it happened, but somehow I became middle-aged)	71
#28 (Is journalling a way of speaking without making a sound?)	57	#40 (What to run from, what to work on, and what to accept)	73
#29 (Sometimes all you can do is drink from the Bridge of Sighs)	58	#41 (If this is the beginning of the end, can I call 'Disco!')	75
#30 (The theme was to come as a musical icon)	60	Notes	78
#31 (We talked about flying to Vegas)	61	Acknowledgements	79
#32 (I love my sequinned jacket)	62		
#33 (I am no longer afraid of quicksand, but is that a mistake?)	63		
#34 (When I got so panicky about the building work that we had to move out of our house for a couple of weeks)	64		
#35 (Teen angst poetry is a necessary evil)	65		
#36 (His last phone call was a mixture of comedy and tragedy – but so is life)	67		
#37 (Sometimes it is warm even in winter)	68		

#1 (A SORT OF PROLOGUE)

To fish for something is to put out bait, or a lure. Because this is what I often do, I'm thinking about you, considering if this idea relates to us – close, but never solved, never complete, never accurate. I don't think it is what's happening with him, though I find I prefer it to my own interpretation. Is it all just chemical? We were talking about how there are those big words – insomnia, grief, love – and they are just thrown around like clichés – we feel we know what they are like, but then they happen to us, and we It's a heatwave. And so 'cool' that I almost forget how raw and confessional some of it is – she's very inspiring. It was an ok day. I want to feel my brain being able to work. He is such a simple and complicated darling man and I love him. So I told her that I'd noticed the night before, when we went out for dinner, that she'd been looking very pretty. From that window you could see the beginning of the driveway, and then some bush, and the hill on the other side of the gully (you couldn't see the narrow road at the bottom of the gully) with a few more houses, and then, beyond that, another hill planted in pine trees. When they were leaving I hugged both of them and kissed them on the cheek, and then, after he'd started walking away, he turned and blew me a kiss. I do not have precise control over my eyes, my looks. We've been swimming every day at Worser Bay in the late afternoon. Why would I have found myself holding your hand, unwilling to let go? Someone told me once that menopause was just like adolescence, and the last time I was stuck in a situation like this – well I was adolescent then. Before lockdown, when he dropped me home that last time, he said something like 'I'm happy to drive you, you know that' – but I didn't. I think my mid-life crisis, which isn't all bad, has a bit of a way to run; but I don't want to feel stuck. And then I said 'And how about you, how have you been?' and passed it on to him. Yesterday I had an obvious revelation – what I want from you is connection.

FEBRUARY 2019—

#2 (THIS JUST DOESN'T HAPPEN HERE . . . BUT IT DID)

I'm a bit afraid, and resistant, to go back to my essay. Though that doesn't mean I'm not constantly checking my emails – hoping. Turned out the shooter had filmed it all with a GoPro – like a first-person shooter game. Very often S will tell me he loves me, and quite often I will ask him 'Why?' – or sometimes 'Why do you say that just now?' That was where I started reading *Brighton Rock*. The way forward is unknown – we don't even know if it's a good idea. I had been sitting reading on my phone – actually Paula Green's interview with Anne Michaels – I think I'd just read how for her poetry was reaching out to hold another person – which is kind of appropriate because I moved over in my seat – she was across the aisle from me – and I touched her on her arm and looked concerned and said 'I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.' The one moment while we were talking and I felt a charge – and shied away – was when he was talking about blu and azzurro, and he said azzurro is used for sea and sky and eyes – and I looked at his eyes and I think he looked at mine. Ah good, I've got the fire blazing again. That was the Christmas S bought me the Roboraptor, and I wondered if he really even knew me, but I still have Fluffy and am actually very fond of him. There are too many things and I am behind with all of them – hence the panic. Thinking about why reading books can be so calming compared to reading on the internet – and I think it's the linearity – a novel doesn't have to be linear in terms of being chronological, but you know where you are with it. This isn't the kind of thing that happens here. We sat on the couch, we hugged, we held hands, we cried a bit – but not enough. I expect to be a bit inflamed and disrupted. I sent him a short email on Tuesday night – after I'd seen him that morning – telling him two alternative translations for my motto – Dignity at All Times (Dignità Sempre and Dignità in Ogni Momento) – which are both nice. I went to bed worried that I would wake up to find that there were more attacks around the world. V said that in Greek the

word for progress is connected to the word for doubt – I've been thinking a lot about doubt and the positive side of doubt – doubt that isn't crippling, but that stops you from thinking that you're right about everything all the time – the confidence to doubt. Anyway – today there are two minutes of silence – a call for prayer at 1.30 and then two minutes of silence at 1.32. The book we lost last time we were here is still here – the travel guide to Sicily. Love to me, until now, had not been a thing of wanting but of having.

#3 ('[A] POEM IS A THINKING THING')

I've been thinking about all the little things. I am feeling less catastrophising. I spent Tuesday and Wednesday at home – quite a bit in bed – read a lot of a biography of Charlotte Brontë – both in that and in *Shirley* – so much about love and longing. And this weekend I did hardly any of it. It was good to feel, when it was getting hard, and I had dropped the ball, that even though it was my fault, I managed to not spiral down. I was looking for reserve, but there was none. Something about how it sits on the page – makes use of the bookness, the physicality of the book. Oh, but it's fun, and makes me feel alive. P's especially were raw poems, but blunt – weirdly the bluntness sort of counteracted the rawness. S was feeling a bit secondary, but once we talked through that – made him feel secure – it was good. But I will keep all these feelings to myself. Also, unless he said something very clear, I would miss it. It's interesting noticing where resentment takes you. Or could mean. But what do I want? Andrei ovunque con te. We had such a nice weekend away. I was feeling that, if not with my actions, then with my intentions, I was behaving quite badly. If only it were that simple I would do it. I think it would be good for me to live elsewhere for a while. Sitting in the sun – I'm so sleepy. When I came home yesterday, we ended up going to bed rather than going to *The Wizard of Oz* – the traffic was so terrible – we would have been late. I'm feeling better, but confused. End with polyvocality, generosity, borrowing – quotations – collage/the quotations from – the title – borrowed from Brian Blanchfield. I think I should go to sleep, so I can have some kind of day tomorrow.

#4 (I APOLOGISE IN ADVANCE TO FANS OF BLAKE)

Hellie-Cat: continue to think about doubt and gaps. Oh dear, I feel I've fallen into the same trap. It's funny reading the journals of Susan Sontag – she writes so little each year, hardly anything – in comparison I am so verbose. I've been trying to actually get some stuff done, but I still have so many feelings. How teenage – to be nostalgic for five seconds ago! I hadn't noticed that he doesn't really have eyebrows until I tried to draw them on, and at first got them quite uneven. Oh there's a lot of doubt in that poem, or rather Doubt – I am not at all convinced that Blake was any good. They were among the last to leave, then C stayed talking until about 2, and then I went to bed, but my feet were so sore and my head was spinning – mainly about what he said about our connection. Not too long after, or before? It was lovely but, like always, I was only partly there. We are as thick as thieves, we are conspiratorial. I meant to say don't you dare think that I need you more than you need me. Enjoyed burning things – including perfection. Oh, oh, oh my little heart. A wonderful sentence, which should be several. At first it was your niceness, your politeness, your charm. I think I forgave him later. We are listening to The Cure now – maybe not the best. It's already starting to get dark and cold – it's the shortest day – or yesterday was. I've been thinking about what you said about getting to know me – finding me someone you can really talk to – and I think maybe something about that being rare at this age. I have entered the realm of doubt through another door – doubting the things I saw with my own eyes, felt with my own hands. And would that have been a good or bad thing? I wanted to say: I have a lot of people I can have deep conversations with. I am leaping around – the gap between languages – in understanding and ability to respond – in what you want to say and what you can say. I do not know how to do this. And he gave me a hug and I remembered that I should undo my seatbelt and get out of the car and oh god. I have been

quite crabby today and S told me I should come and write in my journal and have some Hellie-Cat time – so I am. Will continue writing about doubts, gaps, love, being lit up, etc . . . over years. Today I will at least go for a walk.

#5 (I HAVE LEARNED TO READ OVER AND OVER)

After playing loud music all afternoon – and writing – I am feeling better, calmer. But a little caution. It's ok, earlier in my time at home I was so keen to just be alone, but I have had a bit of that now. I have always been a confessor, and someone people confess to – not always the same people. Without boundaries how can there be connections? I think we'd gotten on to it by talking about learning how to 'read' things, and I said 'Like David Lynch films.' It is poetic because we are pretending. And bits of distance but not too much. I can't even remember the end of that sentence I was going to write. When I came it was in waves, and afterwards – unusually for me – I sobbed. Even when we are speaking English so many things get lost in translation. 'Who ever desires what is not gone?' (Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*) Something awkward. And sometimes I really do feel like that. I'm going to be completely dignified about this. I really just wanted to provoke something – I couldn't quite help it. It is a bad time for concentration. It was lovely, but I'm feeling a bit more disappointed with it – going back to normal, losing the intensity, making it seem like nothing really happened. When Wiremu died she told me that his cousin wanted to meet me, how he'd always talk about me: 'Helen this and Helen that,' and that was a big deal – a comfort – a joy? I fell in love with you when you hugged me twice, when once would do. Though I might not think that after. I am so shallow. But I don't want to lose my power. I am ready for dangerous territory. I've just turned the music off because I want to do something before I need to start making cannelloni (will I ever learn to spell it?) But yes, I have been deliberately holding back a bit – and I think he is too, because not holding back went so badly for him on Saturday, when I got so furious. Also because I hadn't slept enough since. I don't really know – a bit confused. What else do I want to remember?