

Praise for *HOW TO CONCEIVE OF A GIRL*

‘Witty, emotionally powerful, and very crisp’

LOUISE ADLER, ABC-RN, *ARTS TODAY*

‘If you immerse yourself and let the fragments accumulate, you get a new perspective on the messy, lateral workings of the human heart and mind. It’s exhilarating.’

JENNY PAUSACKER, *THE AGE*

‘A collection of writing that defies easy definition, combining short story, essay, montage and reverie, sometimes on the same page. Spencer moves from dreamlike fantasy to acute analysis... Rewarding and engrossing reading.’

PHILLIPA HAWKER, *MARIE CLARE*

‘...will appeal to anyone with an interest in ways of breaking out of sequential narrative. Her montage or collage assembly of incidents and reflections, rearrangements of time and place, attract me enormously... The playfulness of the methods she employs and the self-questioning throughout...reflect an intellectual toughness that deserves to be encouraged and promoted.’

MICHAEL SHARKEY, *THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN*

‘This is something really special... written with an elegance and eloquence that is inspiring. Spencer writes in the grey area between essay and story and poem... Her best is quite funny and sad and erotic.’

CITY WEEKLY

‘The reworking of a classic text, mixed with contemporary theory and other elements of a common culture, is characteristic of Spencer’s style and its strengths... Spencer’s relation to history is genealogical, concerned with the web of connections that form the present and its subjectivities, tracing the complex, post-60s shifts in Australian culture and society which have affected her girls.’

PETER HUTCHINGS, *THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD*

‘Go with the flow when reading this. One connection invariably leads to another and, despite jagged edges, the prose glides.’

NADINE CRESSWELL-MYATT, *THE HERALD-SUN*

‘At times [Spencer’s stories] made me laugh, they constantly made me reflect, once or twice they made me cry... a talented and inspiring writer.’

ENZA GANDOLFO, *AUSTRALIAN WOMEN’S BOOK REVIEW*

‘Spencer writes with great verve and manages to weave together the threads of a colourful tapestry... *How to Conceive of a Girl* is an empowering, witty and incisive comment on the seventies and eighties sexual-cultural scene.’

THUY ON, *OVERLAND*

‘A prismatic and often stunningly drawn exploration of what it is to be a woman. As relevant today as it was when it was first published in the mid-90s, if not more so. Highly recommended.’

KIM KELLY, *GOODREADS*

‘A writer of exceptional sensitivity, precision and courage.’

PETER BISHOP, FORMER DIRECTOR OF VARUNA WRITERS’ CENTRE

‘By revealing that there’s nothing “natural” about being/becoming/conceiving of a girl, by bringing this into language, literature and therefore culture, Spencer makes it more possible to rethink/re negotiate the social contract... [There are] dangers involved in broadening gender definitions, in boundary crossing, in abseiling and hang-glidings from secure subject positions; that is, in bringing the unknown, the unarticulated, the disavowed into cultural consciousness. It’s a serious business... and I’m always grateful and amazed, renewed in my attempts to continue doing this when I read work like *How to Conceive of a Girl*. You could say that it en/genders courage.’

KATHLEEN MARY FALLON, *AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW*

‘Beth Spencer flings herself into textual free-fall in this strange, delightful book... the collection simply buzzes. More please.’

THE GOOD WEEKEND

Praise for *THINGS IN A GLASS BOX*

‘Beth Spencer... uses poetics to nudge fiction over an edge. Episodic, surreal, tender and tough, these poems traverse suburbs studded with the encoded artifacts or ‘things’ of family, popular culture, memory and desire... *Things in a Glass Box* is a complex, considered and fine first collection filled with mercurial imagery underlined by aptly-timed perky jokes.’

PAMELA BROWN, *OVERLAND*

‘*Things in a Glass Box* is... full of life, and love, tolerance and understanding, although many poems expose human foibles and fetishes. She exercises a rather kind humour and shows through her speaker a singular strength of self... Beth Spencer’s poems, though tightly written, are expansive, freely expressing what is often repressed, those silent most active thoughts contained within spilling out into her lines.’

LYNETTE KIRBY, *AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW*

‘The souvenirs of the everyday... are scrutinised through television screens, train windows, cameras and display cases. Apparent transparencies become splintered to create new optics: these “things” collected and contained, far from amortised, suddenly look back at the viewer. This is writing as surprising and familiar as the repressed when it erupts into life; as piercing as pleasure or pain.’

ANNA GIBBS

Beth Spencer writes within and across a range of genres. Her first book of poetry *Things in a Glass Box* was published by Five Islands Press in 1994. An audio version — produced in collaboration with sound artist Stuart Ewings — was broadcast on ABC-RN's *Poetica* and released on a CD, *Body of Words*, with other ABC pieces in 2004. *How to Conceive of a Girl* (fiction) was published by Vintage/Random House in 1996 and was runner-up for the Steele Rudd Award. She is also the recipient of *The Age* Short Story Award, the inaugural Dinny O'Hearn Fellowship, and several fellowships from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. She was awarded a PhD in 2006, and a book of her previously published essays, memoir and cross-genre writing, *Telling Stories*, and a bi-lingual (English-Chinese) selection of her poems, *The Party of Life*, are both due for publication in 2015. She lives on the Central Coast, New South Wales and has a website and blog at www.bethspencer.com.

Vagabondage

Beth Spencer



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But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?
Why should the lamp or the house be an art object,
but not your life?

— Michel Foucault

Language has created the word 'loneliness'
to express the pain of being alone.
And it has created the word 'solitude'
to express the glory of being alone.

— Paul Tillich

Vag-a-bond-age — *noun* —

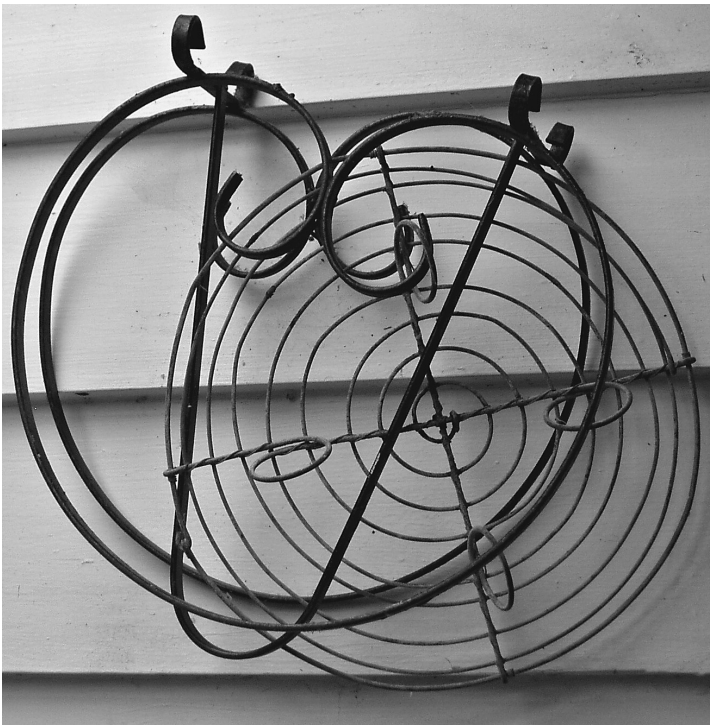
1. The state of being stateless.
2. In servitude to nomadism.
3. Bound for somewhere.

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Prologue



Dear world,

I've sold my house
my ten year sanctuary and refuge.

My garden
wrestled from weeds and clay
is in new hands.

I've bought a campervan
because it seems

I can't afford a flat, after all
(Melbourne property prices: *boom!*).

I am a whisper
of butterflies

but here I come
(please make room).

With love, xxbeth

PS I plan to leave no trace.

Circles



Leaving this house

Leaving
is like breaking something

not a single crash smash on the floor
but a long drawn out rugged
exhausting
tearing asunder

God is in the details
as I pick them apart

The fine bones
The hush

I remember that first time
 unbidden
I heard it,
as I was outside walking
with my cup of tea
 singing
'I love my house and garden'
(a frequent refrain)
and there it was

and it loves you

And I felt the pulse of it all,
strong and steady.



Dreaming home

On long Sunday drives to church
I learnt to read, sounding out the words on
real estate signs and billboards.

Up the Maroondah Highway,
over the bridge, past the paddocks,
past Dame Nellie Melba's house — that long high hedge and
(craning my neck) the caretaker's residence!
and maybe a glimpse through the gates —

braking slightly as we passed the road toll warning
(*Declare War on 1024!*)

— then zooming again and into the suburbs.

This imposing residence

Im-po-sing. Im-posing.

'What does imposing mean?'

Six in the car,
but no-one answers.

Maybe it was because
our house was already full before I arrived
that I fantasised so much
about a white cottage
and a front path
with violets up the sides
and a green door.

I'm not sure
if I recall furnishing it
with a husband and children...

Books, certainly. Lots.
And pens and a desk
and paper.

Sometimes,
my dreams went higher — more stories.
(Was that an attic window? —
Whoosh... too slow. Next time.)

And then on Christmas trips to the city
I would devour the opulence
of the gutted terraces on Victoria Parade.

Whelan the Wrecker Was Here!
(The magic man.)

Pastel walls, staircases, fireplaces,
ceiling roses,
another world, blasted open.
Quick! Feast your eyes.

'Oh, no, you wouldn't want to live in a terrace,'
my mother says. 'Dark horrible places.'

Like libraries. Like the one I discovered
in a tall old building down a side-street in Lilydale,
but was too frightened to enter.

(This *imposing* residence.)

But I did live in a terrace (several).

I brazenly entered many libraries.

I even got to hold
(although it took a few decades)
a book with my name on the cover.

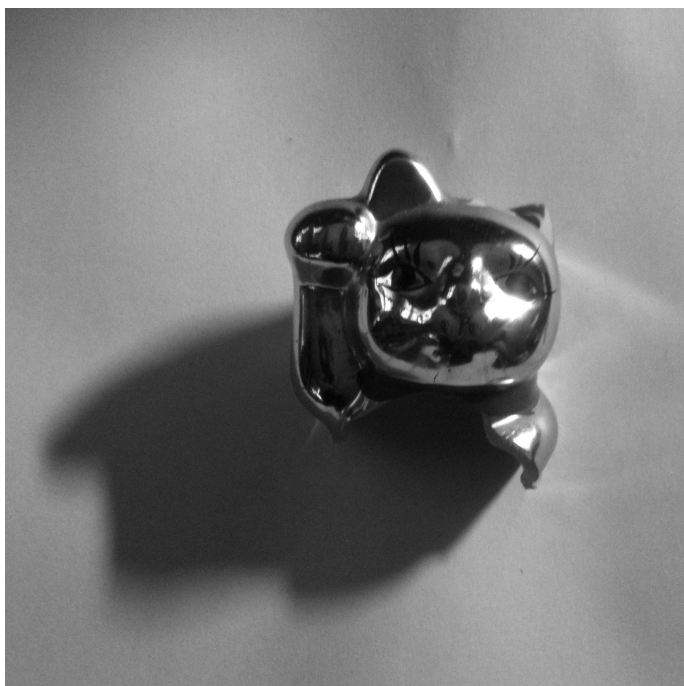
And one day (another decade)
when I'd almost given up

I put the key in the door
of my first owned-home.

A miraculous cheapie
in a country town

with a green door
and a path curving from the gate.

And later, the thrill of discovering
under the weeds
— the violets.



Loving stuff

(watching *Hoarders*)

Have I become one of those
people who
used to have people
but now have stuff?

Things
are safer
(people,
so complicated).

Things are loveable,
and *need* people
(to look after them).

Owning things means
they belong
right here.

(Right here.)

And they don't
suddenly announce one day
they are leaving.

De-possession (hauling up the anchor)

I think, I say, I'll keep
my knick-knacks and artwork,
the special favourites I've collected.

The Persian men, for instance,
rescued from a neighbour
when I was fifteen (niece of the Shah,
made the most amazing rice)
just as she was ready to turf them out.
The ones everyone thought
repulsive
and strange
for years and now love.

And my found objects,
repurposed and rejigged.

And the paintings

— that one there
swapped for two batches
of home-made muesli
and a banana cake

— that haunting
one, unsigned,
bought for five dollars
at the Trash 'n Treasure

— those ones acquired
bargain-priced from friends
at early exhibitions

— and my collages
(made-it-myselfs).

They've been
with me so long, I say,
they are part of me.

Integral to my story.

They define me, really.

Yes, says my friend, *and*

all the more reason
to let them go.



My garden, my sand mandala

In the town hall the visiting monks
trickle coloured sand
for days
in delicate, intricate patterns

And when it is perfect, spectacular,
they take out their soft fine brooms
and sweep it up

Free-fall (trust)

In between packing cleaning sorting
and scouring the web for a van

I become obsessed
with videos
of people jumping out of planes

Two favourites:

1) a woman
screaming non-stop in the plane

Blood-curdling screams
as she is methodically connected up
to her instructor-buddy
Manic screams as her buddy frog-marches her
to the open door
Blue murder as he
firmly and persistently prises her fingers off the door frame
Like a banshee
as he shoves them both
out into nothingness

no foothold no grasp

then the air catching holding her

the world just an idea (just a thought)

Laughing
as her feet touch the ground
and the parachute rolls like a magnificent wave behind her,
saying 'oh, do it again!'

And

2)

The ninety year old
whose false teeth

fly out
and are whooshed away

when she opens her mouth
in delight

