

**Conceptual**  
**By Cait Atherton**

*Trude'll be made up I've come.*

Eventually I looked it up for myself on the computer at work: *St Muriel's Graduate Exhibition: to be held at the TaCo*. The Tate Contemporary.

Oh. Tomorrow. Never mind.

Still, proud as Punch, I blabbed to Dr. Patel. He likes that sort of thing, watches BBC2, he's the one that put that picture of the melting clock up in the waiting room. Got the oldies thinking, that did. Some got a bit upset, but we told them it was just Art. Don't let it play on your mind. Anyway, Dr Patel was always impressed with Trude. Said that the clinic filing could wait a day and the trainee would cover morning reception.

-That scally trainee will probably throw a sickie, I said, but Dr Patel raised his hand. Did that little wave of his.

-Maureen, stop right there. Come what may, you're going.

Up before the Co-op shutters, flagged down the first bus into town. Empty as a lit-up graveyard but going like the clappers, it very nearly didn't stop for me, had to wave like a mad woman. After the excitement, I dozed all the way from Lime Street to Nuneaton with my head rattling against the window. Lucky I had a wet wipe in my handbag: the grot that came off! What are British Rail up to these days? The bag's new by the way, got it on my way home last night. Mum's Marksie's vouchers needed spending before they expired. Been waiting for a special occasion. Colour's growing on me, *pistachio* they said, goes with my new specs. Anyway, pulled into Euston clogged up with a British Rail Danish that could cement a wall. Stodgy's not the word.

Socked by my claustrophobia going down the Tube, those pitch-black tunnels, had to battle my way back up to daylight. Those briefcase zombies just pushed me down deeper.

Couldn't live in this place if you paid me.

Anyway. Here I am. Made it. The TaCo, or whatever they call it. Been here before of course, a good few years back. That humongous angel sculpture's still bearing down from the roof like a kamikaze coming into land. Trude'd spotted it first. We'd just been over the river to see Rif's nan, thought we'd do The Eye before heading back home. Trude had the widest hair back then, like she was plugged into her own source of electricity. Wouldn't let me near it. I used to joke with Dr Patel: could he please book a general anesthetic for an emergency hair brush procedure? It's all coming back now. She was toggled out in that pink *Boden* dress. Cost a fortune, even down the Sacred Heart Christmas Jumble, helpers' discount thrown in. She was the real angel though, she really was. Naughty enough, but something pure about her, everyone noticed. A free spirit. Anyway, this fella's gone rusty round the gills now, but he's still looming. Wings squared-off and rigid, like girders. Actually, they are girders. His pin-head's tilted, still got that grin on his face, three sheets to the wind.

Something nice about him though? Looks like he means well?

Trude'd stopped in her tracks:

-Why's he so different to the angels in church, Mum?

-He's for the artists, I said. Brings them lovely ideas.

-Oh! she said. Can we go in? Please?

Rif saw his chance to get bevvied. Made his 'lifting a pint sign' and pointed to a pub on the corner.

Oh I was a soft touch back then.

-If she wants to see an Art Gallery, I said, I'll take her.

Anyway, it had started to rain and my feet were killing me.

These doors... *rotating*, is that what they call them? Or are they *revolving*? Trude pushed hard on the brass bar, jumped in a compartment squealing: *Revoluting!* You had to laugh. Inside, outside, inside again, faster and faster until the little brushes

swished on the tiles and the whole thing hummed. The guard came over, all puff-chested. Snarled something about it not being a funfair. He looked at me.

–Would she please calm down?

*It's tax-payers' money that pays your wages, I'd thought. But I said nothing. Going inside quieted her down straightaway.*

–It's like being inside a wedding cake, Mum, she'd gasped. I saw what she meant: clicky white marble tiles, icing-sugar columns (she'd kissed one, gave it a quick lick), fancy zig-zag shapes on the ceiling. And that high dome that lets in the light. *Softly filtered.* Like a church. I hadn't realised. These places have money thrown at them. In far better nick than most of the hossies I've worked in.

It's all coming back. She did one of her ballet dances. Right here, I can see her now. Cupped up her arms, twirled. *Your wedding cake, she teased. Yours and Dad's. Wish I'd had some of it.* I didn't tell her, but in a way, she had. It was a sight that cake: three stacked chocolate sponges (Co-op deluxe), Cadbury flakes rammed in for pillars, the motley crew tucking in down the Royal Oak. Mum none too happy about Rif back then, doing her tight-lipped Mystic Meg on how it wouldn't last. And me, my seams bursting, nipping off to the toilet to throw up too often to enjoy it anyway.

Trude'd not do much more dancing after that trip. Rif's nan passed away poor soul, left him a bit to splash around with. Well he splashed too hard and that blank-faced Barbie-doll from phlebotomy had him hooked and fished out by the following Christmas. I blame myself. Should have put my foot down the first time. Let him off when he said it wouldn't happen again. Soft, that's me. Always thought he'd be back, tail between his legs, but after her, that day never came. Nearest I got was a year or two later, bumped into him in Hope Street of all places. An apology. Sort of:

–You know me Maureen. A handful. You deserved better. Sometimes I think I did it for you own good. Really.

My own good? *Really?*

As for Trude and me, well, there was nothing else for it. We had to pull our horns in. Get on with it.

A little cough. Out comes my poshest Wirral for the trendy lad at the desk:

-Ahem. St Muriel's? Graduate art exhibition?

He has a computer printout. Looks at a list of names.

*I didn't bank on that.*

-Mrs Maureen Zakaria, I say.

His pen trails down the page... then up...

-Zak-ar-ia? he repeats slowly. Starts with Z?

-What else would it start with? I bend to help him. The new specs slip down my nose faster than Eddy the Eagle.

-Sorry. Can't see anything like your name on the guest list.

He's giving me a funny look.

-Oh, that's our Trude for you. Forget her own head if it wasn't screwed on! I need the loo. Urgently. That Danish is on its way out.

Sheer relief, if you know what I mean. Squirt of scented soap, hands under the fancy neon-blue light... now Maureen. Mirror. Brace yourself. Thought so. Hair as flat as a chapatti. But look, the scarf is floaty and the bluey-green colours mingle like a Monet watercolour. Did Monet do watercolours? Not sure, watch what you say round here. Scarf's silk though, real Mc Coy. The old dear with the septic toenail who gave it to me was doing 'The Final Clear-out'. Didn't want the dreaded daughter-in-law getting her mitts on it. Sad, if you ask me. Would hate it if Mum and I got to that stage. Must remember to take a photo of Trude's art. Mum'll be asking to see it. Perhaps I should loop the scarf around my shoulders like this? Or this?

I'm going for the arty-mother look.

I *am* arty actually. Always up for anything to do with paintings. Old and modern, I'm open-minded. Trude must get it from me.

Told her I saw *Waterlillies* years ago when it came to Liverpool. It was before I met her Dad, I was going with that lad from the Poly, the one training to be a physics teacher. Well we did that sort of thing, him and me. My idea, but he'd follow me along: galleries, foreign films, plays. He had a stutter, embarrassed me a bit at the time, I always nipped ahead to do the ordering for him in the chippy. But

then again, he was a nice lad. Had a thing for me he did, poor sod. But I was looking for all the wrong things in those days, more fool me. Anyway, we stood in front of *Waterlillies* and he asked me what I saw in it. I was a bit miffed, said couldn't he smell the blossoms, see the sunlight through the petals, hear the slap of water under the bridge? He hemmed and hawed. A bit cross by then, I said it was *uplifting* and I meant it. That's what art's all about I told him.

Careful Maureen. Not sure they think that anymore. Things change.

These new specs are OK aren't they? Boot's latest *Spec' and Go*, purple and green frame. No. Get it right. *Aubergine and pistachio*. Nice and contemporary.

Or is it conceptual?

Now what's *conceptual* again when it's at home?

Long white galleries spoke out in three directions. Echoey, like in church. Good, trendy-lad's head's down, thumbing his iPhone. Nice work if you can get it. I'll just nip up this staircase...

Our Trude's dead clever, could have gone in for a lawyer, a doctor even. Got stuck on Art though. I wouldn't have minded, but it was the funny stuff she liked. Not funny *ha ha*. Funny *peculiar*. We'd be snuggling on the sofa, watching the BBC News. Sometimes right at the end (we always switched over when the sports stuff came on) there's be a this-or-that prize and I'd think: *here's another deep and meaningful conversation about a manky bed...* I'm sure I never actually said the word *ridiculous*, but I thought it. Trude was still filling those old notebooks with her drawings back then, just doodles really, but they were something else, beautiful. Angels with frilly wings, cheeky rabbits, big eyed owls. Lovely colours. Now *that's* what I call art, I'd told her. Not the stuff on TV. And the prize money! Mum's just been turned down for that new cancer drug. How can that be right when there's money for old rope down here? Piles of bricks worth millions!

I'm allowed to think that aren't I? Am I missing something? Am I just thick? I tried asking Trude that last time she was home, begged her to help me understand what it's all about. But since she went off to St Muriel's, she'd get so het up. You'd think there was a law against asking, the way she erupted. It's called Conceptual Art apparently. Meant to challenge, she said. *Project deep meaning*.

–Are you absolutely sure it's not a joke, Trude? I said. Or at least some of it?  
Well. Mount Vesuvius had nothing on her that day.  
So, I keep the peace, say nothing.

But recently it's become more of a strain with that Alexis around. When they came up for Christmas, we caused quite a sensation when we had our night out down the Royal. Mum was only teasing when she asked him if he was related to Andy Whatsits. He's from America too, has that same 'never seen daylight' look, floppy blond hair and milky-bar-kid specs, so I knew what Mum was thinking. I thought he'd see the funny side, Mum's nearly eighty after all, but he got a real cob on. Stood up and went on and on about how, actually, he was surprised he was there was no celebration of Trude's heritage in our house. Well it's just a two-bed terraced in Crocky, did he think we'd plaster it with Bob Marley posters and African masks? Believe me, Rif was more Scouser than Somali. Other than a liking for Lenny Henry and that fruity stew his nan made, he never went on about his 'heritage'. Why would he? He was just Rif. A one off. A charmer. That teacher never stood a chance from the day Rif showed up to install the clinic photocopier. I left the poor sod waiting outside the Odeon, he's still there for all I know.

Would do the same again, if I'm honest. I'm that stupid. Still walking up Hope Street.

More fool you Maureen.

I'm getting the willies, this corridor's turned into Hammer House of Horror. Light bulbs that flash on and off, paint spilt on slashed canvases, pottery funnels shaped like ladies *you know whats*. It takes me back to that old short-cut past Psychiatry. The Old Wing, haunted it was. A Victorian nurse gave a child the wrong medicine, threw herself down a lift shaft. Nasty. They went in for those Art Therapy sessions there. Maybe that dodgy looking porter who cleaned it up made his fortune flogging the stuff down here?

Maureen. Behave. This is Real Art. You're just being thick.

There's a *curator*. Odd word really, what are they curing? She looks normal. And could it be L'Oreal Copper Sunset? Exact same shade as me last year. Maybe she'll throw some light:

-Graduate exhibition? See the lift over there, madam? Up two floors.

-Thanks. By the way... is this, er, thingy, an exhibit? Or just a table? Left upside down by maintenance or something?

Her eyes narrow, but her mouth twitches at the corners.

-Let me see. Purchased for 200,000 pounds. Entitled *Tickle my Tum*. So that makes it a bone fide exhibit.

-In Croxteth Health Centre we'd entitle it a boneyfidey trip hazard.

She snorts. We giggle. Then her head dips and she angles the toes of her shiny black shoes together. I understand. Cameras everywhere. She's got a job to do.

-Glad I'm not the only one, I whisper as I pass.

*I'm really pleased I've made the effort. Trude'll be chuffed.*

God knows she's been through hell. The last time we spoke, I mean properly spoke, was the day before she was due to go in. I'd asked her again if she was sure.

-I'm here love, I'd offered. You can move back... I'll go part-time so you can carry on studying. Don't do it. Not if it's not right for you.

There was this muffled pause on the line. Perhaps she was thinking of me, about the different decision I'd made way back when? I wanted to tell her I'd never regretted it. Not for one minute. But when she came back on, she'd obviously got her orders:

-We've decided, Mum. I'm only eight weeks gone. It's not so bad.

I said OK then. I'll go with you to the clinic. No two ways about it, my bag is packed, I'll be on the morning train. But that evening she called to say she'd had these sudden pains, and well, it was all over. Done with. For the best.

I popped into Sacred Heart, lit a candle to bless them all. I knew she'd be gutted for that poor mite, not meant to be. Lost track of time and stayed until Father Mauricio came in to lock up. He said a novena with me and I felt much better.

That was two months ago.

And she's been tied-up, working on her graduation project ever since. Too busy to speak on the phone other than to say, no, she didn't want me to come down for the Exhibition. Absolutely not. Parents weren't invited.

The lift door opens, and despite the crowd, Trude's the first person I see. That's a mother's instinct for you. She's gone whip-thin and she's wearing an oversized man's beige cardie, from a charity shop by the look of it, buttoned back-to-front, V-necked, with scuffed elbow patches. No leggings. She should have put leggings on – those leather quilted buttons dotting down the back only just cover her bum. The manky thing has slipped down over one shoulder. She's talking to a Black-Polo-Neck type who looms over her, and when she moves her arm, the side of her boob shows through a thin patch. He's watching for it like a twitcher in a hide. Her hair's braided tight as a ploughed field. Those earrings must weigh a ton, tribal-looking, zigzags right down to her shoulders. Only last Chrissie, and she was still begging for *Pandora* daisy studs. But the oval perfection of her head is something else. Poised. She can thank Rif for that... Could have been a model. Everyone said so.

She's *my* work of art.

She rests her hand on her flat tummy and the sight winds me. Like a thump to my guts. A hollowness like I'm the one who's lost a baby.

–Maureen! What a surprise! My elbow's being pinched, right on the funny bone. The Milky Bar Kid.

–Darling! Look who's here!

As the earrings swing round, my arms open wide. All those years, just the two of us. My baby girl. Now she's a graduate! I'm made up. For both of us.

It sounds like a scream. She claps a hand over her mouth.

His spit sprays in my ear:

–We did tell you not to come Maureen.

Suddenly I'm the exhibit. Everyone stares. Centre of attention, but no idea why. My face heats, ears buzz. I'm a force-field of shame.

Alexis steers me towards the lift, presses the 'down' button. The doors open and I feel a shove.

–It's for your own good, Maureen. We're doing this for it you.



My blood flashes. I made it so easy for Rif! I'd thought giving in would keep him. That's exactly what lost him in the end. He walked all over me – then out.

And Trude's all I've got.

I jerk my arm away.

*Do one Andy. I'm her mother.*

My heels tap towards across the floor. Black-Polo-Neck tilts his baldy head, an old crow who things he's a youngster.

–Bravo Mrs Zakaria. You have decided to stay. All our boundaries have been challenged this morning. His lips sag. But are you absolutely certain you want to view *Stilled Life*?

Trudy steps between me and him. I dodge her.

–Too right I do.

Black-Polo-Neck threads through the crowd and I follow, handbag across my chest like amour. There are loads of parent-types here, mostly well-to-do couples, glasses of fizz in their hands. Their chatter starts up again, but the drag of their stares is like plowing through mud. *Push your specs up Maureen. Keep your back straight.* I'll have to tackle Trude on this. Told me parents weren't invited? Why would she do that? God knows it was a struggle, but Trude got everything she needed didn't she? We were as close as they come. Me and my little girl. Although have to admit the last few years, we've lost track of each other. *Was it my fault?* I shouldn't have said that about Art. About it being a joke. I feel sorry now. All this means the world to her, and it's her world, the one she's chosen. I'll learn how to understand it, educate myself.

I'm so proud of her, I really am.

–Mum! Mum! Mum!

I can't turn round now, she'll see there's tears in my eyes. I want to look at what's she's made first, tell her I love it. And I will love it, whatever it is.

We pass a video showing a wan face: *Suicide Selfie*. Next a shelf of vases: *Break me and Find Only Emptiness*.

I'm brightening up. I try a little quip: anyone still like *Waterlillies* these days?

Black-polo-neck doesn't answer. He thrusts his arm out, palm raised, like a featherless wing. Points.

Very odd this. My eyes can still see, but my mind refuses the sight. It's like an inner fog's come down. I have to force myself to keep looking.

A powdery plaster-cast, a woman's legs splayed, hands between scarlet-blotched thighs cupping a gory bouquet: green apples, yellow bananas, a vase of daisies, all of them clotted with blood. There's something nestling in the middle. It's tiny, but as I lean in, its reality detonates in my mind like bomb. A glistening fleshy creature encased in glass, with its fishy see-through sac, lolling, over-sized head studded with hard, seedy eyes, like a prawn's, bloated stomach, twig-legs akimbo, perfect little fingers raised, shocked, over a black blotch of a mouth.

—Such courageous art, he is saying. We marked it down to second place only because of the title. Clever allusion to the Grand Masters, but missed the opportunity for cognitive tension between bodily rights and moral repugnance.

He glances upward for inspiration, says to me:

—Personally I prefer the simplicity of *Conceptual*.

An anger so powerful, it blows me out of my body.

—We seldom encourage joint work, he continues. But Alexis and Trudy have surpassed themselves. A brave display of co-owned visceral materiality. Biology as object, as we say.

I open my handbag and heave. A camera flashes. Somewhere Alexis is saying that no artist should be diverted by an audience's reaction.

Trudy's bare feet skid away across the marble floor.

I want to shake her. *Tell me it's not real!* But can she? Can she?

*Conceptual*. I stop and heave again.

The gallery ends in a blank wall. My heart's got a fist squeezing the life out of it. Can't breathe properly, I'm not seeing right. She disappears into a pure white wall. I follow her, my mind trying to stop thoughts before the can form. Can't think. Mustn't think.

*Need a moment. Need a moment before I can trust myself.*

It's actually two walls with a slit entrance between. She sits on a bench in a sterile white cube of a room, head in her hands. My teeth grit, like she's a hated stranger. I drop down behind her. The ear-pounding silence between us is savage.

All around us the walls light up.

It's old cine film, like Dad used to have, but every side of the cube has become the screen, even the ceiling. A toddler's plump hand scribbles with a stir-like grip: busily she sketches and colours: butterflies, owls, angels with frilly wings. I recognise them. God, those cheeky rabbits take me back. Trude's old doodles? All of a sudden I'm feeling sad for the child she was. Gutted. Where did the time go? The images take on a life of their own, move in the same jerky way cartoon figures move if you flick through the pages quick enough. But while I'm looking at all this, on one side of the cube the hand has grown bigger, the grip more adult. Fewer new images are being drawn, instead earlier ones are being overwritten, now on all sides bodies are more sensual, lines more brutal. Smiles turn to black slashes. Newly red-lacquered fingers pick up an eraser. At first it nibbles at an edge here and there, dissolving daintily, but soon everything is being vigorously rubbed out. Everything. Just streaks of grey are left. Faint as a slug-trail, the title emerges: *Self, Erased*. Then, even fainter, Trude's name, last year's date.

This means something, I know it does. Something's happened to her, this is her way of explaining. It's been such a struggle, working overtime, sending her money for her digs, her course. I thought I was doing my bit, that she was doing OK. But what did I miss?

Is it about her Dad? I was always relieved she never seemed to pine for him one visit to the next. Never said a word about him past few years, come to think of it. With his new family growing up, she seemed to accept that he was too busy to see her. That last time he canceled, she'd just put the phone down on him. Kept her thoughts to herself. I never thought to ask her how she felt.

A Pandora's Box. Best left shut.

She's sobbing, snotty. I tug off the scarf and feed it to her over her shoulder. She pulls it in, blows hard. Her neck still smells of Bodyshop green apple soap. Our old favourite.

*What does the film mean? Maureen, think!*

–What’s gone wrong love? I’m whispering, this place makes you behave like you’re in a confessional. Can’t you just draw your old self back...? You can, love, you can draw anything, you’re the artist!

I place my hand on her bare shoulder. Feel shy. *We used to cuddle all the time, on the sofa, watching TV. But that was years ago. How long since we last hugged?* I feel her muscles soften. She’s crying, but somehow that’s alright.

–It’s ok love, I’m saying. Cry it out.

–Mum...

Then a shadow blots each side of the cube.

–For fuck’s sake Trudy! The Guardian’s asking. They’re saying it’s the most shocking piece of art this century. Perhaps ever.

I beg the wonky-faced angel. *We need you now. You brought us here!*

I really think there may be a beating of girder-wings.

–Trudy! Get a grip. It’s our big break!

He places his hand low down her back, as if feeling for a switch.

I stroke her shoulder.

She pauses. An awful weighing. Then she rises.

–Love... My throat’s that dry, I can barely get a sound out.

She looks down. Mascara streaks her cheeks.

–Trude love. Is nothing sacred?

She smiles kindly, as if I’m the child.

–Sacred? Mum, sacred’s conceptual. Just an idea.

Their twin shadows magnify on all sides, then sweep away to nothing. They knock the projector as they leave, something in the mechanism catches. The film stutters, flaps, unspools on the floor.

Just the blinding bare light now, galaxies of dust held in its beam.

Does it mean something? I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.

I start a *Hail Mary* for the baby, but the words are empty.

There’s a thought so strong now, it’s making me shake, it really is.

*We’ve let it go. Nothing means anything anymore.*

I’m on my knees. *Please.*

But that angel’s not coming. Never was.

The End