

Sara Berkeley Tolchin

# WHAT JUST HAPPENED



Gallery Books

*What Just Happened*  
is first published  
simultaneously in paperback  
and in a clothbound edition  
on 30 July 2015.

The Gallery Press  
Loughcrew  
Oldcastle  
County Meath  
Ireland

[www.gallerypress.com](http://www.gallerypress.com)

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ISBN 978 1 85235 645 3 *paperback*  
978 1 85235 646 0 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

*What Just Happened* receives financial assistance  
from the Arts Council.



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*for Connie  
and for Niamh*

## *Cracking Open*

See these lines —  
laughter wrought them  
carelessly at the corners of my eyes.

Brown skin.  
Sun bore down.  
Damage, some say. I say skin memory —

that wicker couch  
with the soft red pillows on the porch,  
noon ablaze with the songs of bees;

late afternoon's  
generous abundance:  
seven different types of light;

hummingbirds  
flickering by the bottlebrush,  
then flying off, wings a blur, into the future.

Should I grow older  
and the light more distant,  
small animals hiding under the skirts of evening,

I'd like my heart  
to be without conditions,  
to crack each day a little more open.

## *If I Met You Now*

If I met you now and you asked me  
how I was going, I would say this:  
very far and very fast.  
Poems crowd me, sometimes  
five to a page. Money burns a hole.  
All caution aside, I'm running  
with the wind aft and the sheets  
eased out. This is no close-hauled tack  
but a full sail into the eyes of the weather.  
The heart without compass.  
The journey without a map.

And if you accepted that  
I would have to add:  
I need to sail alone. Sometimes  
I look from shore to shore,  
the difference between twenty-eight  
and forty-four; my world tips up  
and they come pouring out of me,  
songs I could never have sung back then.  
The headway I'm making now  
with a true wind, it's the answer  
to a certain call among girls.

## *Sitting with the Art*

On this happy afternoon — no accounting  
for the light, the space, the storm  
of paper planes out of a perfect sky,  
the clouds hanging back because  
they haven't the heart — I'm sitting with the art  
at the Spring Art Show, watching over  
the watercolours and the oils,  
the chalk pastels and the salvaged materials.  
They're nodding together in twos and threes,  
expectant of admirers, and watching over me  
as I take out my assorted pencils, theodolite,  
compass and sextant, and prepare  
to be the draughtsman of my life.

You need a ground plan, a roughcast draft  
to be the inventor of something  
as labyrinthine as a life. You need vaults  
and cornices. You need straight lines  
where there cannot be straight lines.  
You need proofs, and when they're ready  
you need to tear them up and start again.

## *Crown of Vines*

Now and then life needs a new page  
opened flat out and white with a slight crack  
of the spine as though to show for a moment age  
is an earned reward, a shared joke, a consolation.

If you can't write just yet put the pen down  
and take up a straw, a spear, a flower.  
It doesn't matter what vines you use to weave your crown;  
it will fit, no matter. You're the bearer of the rings,

the dancer of your dreams, you play  
the music that makes the neighbours throw their windows wide  
and smile and maybe one to the other say:  
Can you hear it? Shall we dance too today?

## *Outliers*

We met on the way back down,  
the show was over, they were giving the tickets back.  
Blundering round our living room,  
the elephant was knocking photos off the walls,  
shaking the pins loose.

He had an oversize shadow.  
The way love overlays the blueprints of our lives  
disrupting the heart's own blood supply,  
the coronary arteries bleeding out,  
you would think we'd know not to pass by here again.

The locus of all pain  
has been pinpointed somewhere between 2 and 3 a.m.,  
the wellspring of tears  
hides in a seahorse store of memories  
curled up deep in the brain's hold.

No more secrets.  
Look at us now, outliers in our own town,  
there's nobody living in our living room,  
the cups hang empty on their hooks,  
glass underfoot.

But we're a late loss species.  
Shouldn't we have a few thousand more rainy afternoons  
to play with? Time to stand  
and soak in the scent of lilacs by the rain barrels  
under our eaves; time to slip a hand

into a hand, and feel  
the way love sends its shafts of light late and at an angle  
showing up the motes and all the busy air,  
and how the thunder's always there  
lying low beneath the sunlit evenings.