

Booker Prize-nominated author of *THE SEASONAL QUARTET*

Ali Smith

*Companion Piece*

a novel



*By the same author*

Free Love

Like

Other stories and other stories

Hotel World

The whole story and other stories

The accidental

Girl meets boy

The first person and other stories

There but for the

Artful

Shire

How to be both

Public library and other stories

Autumn

Winter

Spring

Summer

# ali smith

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## Companion piece



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for Nicola Barker  
and for Sarah Wood  
with love

# Contents

[Cover](#)

[By the same author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

## [You choose](#)

['Ello 'ello 'ello...](#)

[Shifting Sand...](#)

[I threw the covers off...](#)

[knock knock...](#)

[All the years later...](#)

[Death in reverse...](#)

[The day after that phonecall...](#)

## [Curlew](#)

[Goodbye v hello...](#)

[Story v lies...](#)

[Imagination v reality...](#)

[Surface v depth...](#)

[Real v fake...](#)

[Tragedy v farce...](#)

[Alive v dead...](#)

## [Curfew](#)

[Hello hallo hullo...](#)

There were three at the door at curfew...

When the girl knocks on a door...

The wolf's at the door...

Back in the 1930s in Ireland...

It's my father...

The story goes...

*Acknowledgements and thanks*

The mild valley of those who are eternally alive.  
They walk by green waters.  
With red ink they draw on my breast  
A heart and the signs of a kindly welcome.  
Czesław Miłosz

Now curlew cry me down to kiss the mouths of their dust.  
Dylan Thomas

Passive as a bird that sees all, in flight,  
and carries in its heart,  
rising in the sky,  
an unforgiving conscience.

Pier Paolo Pasolini,  
translated by Ferlinghetti & Valente

I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth  
has been so injured while we were all bemused  
by supposed monuments of value and intellect,  
vaults of bogus cultural riches. I feel the worth of my own life  
diminished by the tedious years I have spent acquiring competence  
in the arcana of mediocre invention, for all the world  
like one of those people who knows all there is to know  
about some defunct comic-book hero or television series.  
The grief borne home to others while I and my kind  
have been thus occupied lies on my conscience like a crime.  
Marilynne Robinson

By hammer and hand all arts do stand.  
Motto of the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths



**You choose**

**'Ello 'ello 'ello.** Wot's all this then?

That's the voice of Cerberus, the savage mythical three-headed dog (one 'ello per head). In ancient myth he guards the dead at the gates of the Underworld to make sure none of them can leave. He's got very sharp teeth, he has the heads of snakes rising off his back like hackles and he's talking in English music-hall comedy language to what appears to be a good old British bobby, which is an old-fashioned word for a British policeman.

This British policeman, though, is from right now, he's the latest corrupt upgrade, and he's crossed the river Styx and come to the entrance of the Underworld to show each of Cerberus's heads some fun photos of himself and other uniforms doing fun things like making V signs over and adding fun racist / sexist commentary to the pictures of the bodies of real murdered people which he's circulated on the fun police app he and his pals are using these days, in this land of union-jack-the-lads in the year of our lord two thousand and twenty one, in which this story, which starts with me staring at nothing in my front room on the sofa one evening imagining a meeting between some terrifying aspects of imagination and reality, takes place.

Cerberus doesn't even raise an eyebrow (and he could, if he wants, raise six at once). Seen it all before. Let the bodies pile high, more the merrier in a country of people in mourning gaslit by the constant pressure to act like it's not a country of people in mourning.

Tragedy versus farce.

Did dogs have eyebrows?

Yeah, because verisimilitude's important in myth, Sand.

I could have, if I'd wanted to know for sure, got off the sofa, crossed the room and had a look at my father's dog's head to check.

But I was past caring whether dogs had eyebrows.

I didn't care what season it was.

I didn't even care what day of the week.

Everything was mulch of a mulchness to me right then. I even despised myself for that bit of wordplay, though this was uncharacteristic, since all my life I'd loved language, it was my main character, me its eternal loyal sidekick. But right then even words and everything they could and couldn't do could fuck off and that was that.

Then my phone lit up on the table. I saw the light of it in the dark of the room.

I picked it up and stared at it.

Not the hospital.

Okay.

A number I didn't know.

It surprises me now that I even answered it. I'll have thought it'd maybe be someone my father'd worked for or worked with who'd heard what had happened and was phoning to see how he was etc. I still felt a trace of responsibility about such things. So I got my responses ready. *Not out of the woods yet. Under observation.*

Hello? I said.

Sandy?

Yes, I said.

It's me, a woman said.

Uh, I said none the wiser.

She told me her name.

My married name's Pelf but I was Martina Inglis back then.

It took a moment. Then I remembered.

Martina Inglis.

She was at college the same time as I was, same year, same course. She and I hadn't been friends, more acquaintances. No, not even acquaintances. Less than acquaintances. I thought maybe she'd heard about my father (though God knows how she would've) and even though we hardly knew each other was maybe calling me now (though God knows where she'd've got my number) to be, I don't know, supportive.

But she didn't mention my father.

She didn't ask how I was or about what I was doing or any of that stuff people generally say or ask.

I think that's the reason I didn't hang up. There was no pretence in her. She said she'd wanted to talk to me for some time. She told me she was now assistant to the curator at a national museum (*could you ever have imagined I'd end up doing something like that?*) and she'd been travelling back from a day-return trip abroad where she'd been sent by the museum in one of the gaps between lockdowns personally to accompany home from a travelling exhibition of late medieval and early renaissance objects an English metal lock and key mechanism, a device, she explained, way ahead of its time and an unusually good and beautiful version, quite important historically.

So she'd arrived back here in the evening and stood in line at border control for the very long time it took to reach the front of the queue of people whose passports were being checked manually (most of the digital machines weren't working). Then when she finally reached the front the man behind the screen told her she'd given him the wrong passport.

She couldn't think what he meant. How was there such a thing as a wrong passport?

Ah, wait, she'd said. I know. I'm sorry, I've probably just given you the one I didn't travel out on, wait a minute.

A passport you didn't travel out on, the man behind the screen said.

I've got two, she said.

She fetched her other passport out of her inside jacket pocket.

Dual citizenship, she said.

Is one country not enough for you? the man behind the screen said.

I'm sorry? she said.

I said, is one country not enough for you? the man said again.

She looked at his eyes above his mask. They weren't smiling.

I think that's my business, not yours, she said.

He took the other passport from her, opened it, looked at it, looked at the two passports together, looked at his screen, typed something in, and she realized there were now two masked officials in uniform standing very close to her, just behind her, one on each side.

If I can just see the ticket on which you travelled here today, the man behind the screen said.



She got her phone out, scrolled it till she found the ticket, turned it and held it up towards him. One of the officials took the phone out of her hand and passed it through to the man behind the screen. The man put it down on top of her passports. Then he sanitized his hands from a bottle on the desktop.

If you'd like to step this way please, the other official said.

Why? she said.

Routine check, the other said.

They started to lead her away.

Your colleague's still got my phone. He's still got both my passports, she said.

Returned to you in due course, the one behind her said.

They took her through a door and through another door into an anodyne corridor with nothing in it but a scanner. They ran the bag with the small packing crate in it containing the lock and key mechanism, which was all the handluggage she had, through their scanner.

They asked her what kind of weapon was in the crate.

Don't be silly. It's obviously not a weapon, she said. The broader object is a lock, it was once the lock on a 16th century baronial money chest. The long object next to it isn't a knife, it's the lock's original key. It's the Boothby Lock. If you knew anything about late medieval and early renaissance English metalwork you'd know it's a very important historical artefact and a stunning example of workmanship in blacksmithery.

The official opened the packing case roughly with a knife.

You can't take it out! she said.

He took the wrapped-up lock out and weighed it in his hands.

Put it back, she said. Put it back right now.

She said this with such fierceness that the official stopped weighing it from hand to hand and rather stiffly put it back into the packing crate.

Then the other official demanded she prove she was who she said she was.

How? she said. You already have both my passports. And my phone.

So you have no hard copy of any official accreditation for transporting a national historical artefact? the official holding the packing crate said.

They tried to move her to what they called the interview room. She held on to the side of the scanner's belt with both hands, made her body as heavy as she could like protesters on the news and refused to go anywhere peaceably until they'd given her back the cracked-open packing crate and let her check that both the Boothby Lock and its key were still in there.

They shut her and the bag with the packing crate in a small room with nothing in it but a table and two chairs. The table was made of grey plastic and aluminium, same as the chairs. There was no phone on the table. There were no windows. There was no visible camera on any of the walls to which she could wave or signal, though there may well have been cameras she couldn't see *but God knows where, Sand, but people can do anything with a very small lens these days. Lenses are smaller than fruitflies now. Not that there was anything even remotely alive in that room other than me.* There was also no inside handle on the door and the door could not be coaxed open by any scrabbling at its sides; there were scratch signs and little gouges at its foot and along its edge from people's past attempts at this. There was no wastepaper basket, as she discovered after banging on the door produced no one to tell her where a toilet might be or escort her to one, and what happened next was that they left her in there for what turned out to be quite a long time.

Then they released her without any interview or explanation, gave her back her phone but kept her passports, to be *returned to you*, a woman at a reception desk on the way out told her, *in due course*.

I still haven't got either of them back, she told me. And I can't make up my mind. Either they put me in there and honestly forgot about me or they forgot about me on purpose.

Either way, I said. Quite a story. Seven hours.

And a half, she said. The whole of a working day, one that started at half four in the morning and was mostly spent standing in border control queues. But seven and a half hours. In a soulless room.

Long time, I said.

Very, she said.

I knew what I was supposed to do next. I was supposed to ask what she'd done in that soulless room for seven and a half hours. But I was at a

time in my life where I was past caring, I was way past politeness and social chitchat coercion.

I held back.

I was silent for about ten seconds.

Eh, hello? she said.

I don't know how she did it but something in her voice made me feel bad for holding back.

So. What did you do in there all that time, then? I said.

Ah. Thereby hangs a tale, she said (and I could hear the relief in her voice that I'd said what I was supposed to say). That's actually what I'm calling you about. Listen. This weird thing happened. I haven't told anyone else. Partly because I can't think who else to tell. I mean, I thought about it, and I kept drawing a blank. And then last week I thought, Sandy Gray. Sand from the past. From when we were at university. That's who'll know what to make of this.

Make of what? I said,

and started silently to worry, because since everything had changed, and though on the surface of things I'd kept myself going partly by pretending like the rest of us that everything was fine, if awful, in fact so much had shifted that I was pretty sure I wasn't the person I'd once been.

At first, she was saying, I sat in there doing nothing, with my hands folded in my lap. I was furious but I argued myself out of my fury. I got myself ready for whatever their interview would be about.

And then the room got quite cold, so I got up and walked around a bit, it wasn't very big, the room, I started jogging round it and because it was so small I made myself dizzy doing the jogging and turning, it's lucky I'm not the claustrophobic type.

Then I tried to open the door again. But I had nothing to open it with. I actually even thought about unwrapping the Boothby Key and using its edge, it's got an edge-prong with a little thorny hook on it, I thought I might be able to catch the underside of the door with it and see if I could persuade it. But no way, no way I'd ever be responsible for damage to the Boothby.

So then I thought, I've never really had any time alone with the Boothby, have I, or even had a chance to look at it properly.

So I got the little crate out of the bag, the crate was split open now anyway, he'd ruined it with his knife. And I lifted both pieces in their swaddling out of the crate and put them on the table, and I unwrapped the lock and put it down still in the cloth in front of me. Ah, Sand, the Boothby Lock, whoever made it had God knows what magic in his hands. Have you ever seen it?

No, I said.

Ever heard of it?

No, I said.

Google it. You'll love it. You above all people'll really get it.

A person I hardly remembered existed and wouldn't have if she hadn't phoned to remind me had kept alive enough of a version of me in her head all these years to think I'd 'get' something?

Not that Google's anywhere near, she was saying, anything like seeing it in the actual flesh, the actual metal. It's really beautiful. It's really cunning too. You could never tell by looking at it that it's even a lock, or that it has any mechanism at all inside it, never mind find how or where the key goes into it to open it. It's quite hard to find when you know where to look. It's been made to mimic a lock grown over by ivy leaves, I mean even saying the words ivy leaves doesn't do any justice, each of these metal ivy leaves looks so like an actual ivy leaf, and yet you know it isn't, and it's still as if, if you took it in your hand, you'd be able to feel it give like you can feel the give of a real leaf. And you look at it and you know all over again how amazing a real ivy leaf that's growing really is. And the tendrils, it's literally like they're actually getting longer as you watch, they're so fine, have such a, I don't know what else to call it, rhythm, it's as if they're pliable, moving. And when you try to hold it all in your eye the tendrils and the leaves seem literally to be growing as you watch out of and over whatever the Baron or whoever used it to lock. The lock part, according to lock historians, is a work of extreme toughness, and yet it looks like nothing when you open it up and examine it, I wouldn't dare try to uncover its mechanism myself but people higher up the museum ladder than me say it's one of the least pickable locks they've seen for the time it was made, or for any time actually, with an intricate original notch mechanism not found anywhere else for a couple of centuries, I mean a



work of just stunning skill for the time, and metals were generally cruder then, or they were in the part of the country it was made, and the craft needed for making something at this level, I mean almost unthinkable, the tools for cutting or forming would've been so rudimentary. Anyway I didn't dare take it in my hands, it sat there in its cloths on the table shining under the fluorescent light in that nothing of a room and it had all the centuries of colours in its metal and it was so beautiful it made me forget, for a while anyway, how much I really had to go to the toilet.

And then my bodily needs began to assert themselves for the second time, a lot more urgent than the first, and since there'd been no answer when I'd hammered on the door the first time I began to panic about what I was going to do in there, or try not to do in there ha ha if there was no answer the second time. Which is when I heard it.

She paused.

They'd finally come back for you, I said.

No, she said. It wasn't anyone. Well, it was, someone. Just not bodily. Just – what I mean is. I could hear someone speaking, like someone was there in the room. But there *was* only me in the room. It was weird. And what it said was weird.

So I reckoned someone must be in the next room and I was hearing them through the wall, the far wall behind me, but amazingly clearly, as clearly as I can hear you now. Anyway, long story short, this is what I'm phoning you about.

To tell me you heard a weird voice through a wall, I said.

No, she said, the *voice* wasn't weird. I was never any good at describing. You'll remember that. No, it's the thing it said, what it said, that was weird. Or, not weird exactly. But I don't know what else to call it, or what to make of it, of what it said.

What did it say? I said.

Curlew or curfew.

It said what?

That's it. That's all. Just those words.

Curlew or curfew? I said.

Like a question, she said. I think it was a woman's voice. Though it was quite a deep voice. But I think too high for a man's voice, unless it

was a man who happened to have quite a high voice.

What did you say? I said.

Well I went over to the wall, and I said, beg your pardon, could you repeat that please? And it said it again. *Curlew or curfew*. Then it added: *you choose*.

What then? I said.

Well, I asked whoever it was whether there was any way they could help me or alert somebody to help me get to a toilet, she said.

Then what? I said.

That's all, she said. Nothing else. And nobody came for me for what felt like at least another hour, I'm very lucky that I have the bladder control of a much younger person.

It sounds like a wind-up, I said.

I'm not winding you up, she said. Why would I? It happened. It did. Exactly like I've told you. I'm not winding anybody up.

No, I mean, like someone trying to wind *you* up, I said. Hidden speaker system?

Very well hidden if there was such a thing, she said. I couldn't see any audio-visual anything.

Some sort of psycho border control test? I said.

I don't know, she said. It's a mystery to me. Anyway. I'm phoning because. I can't stop thinking about it.

Well, locked in the room for so long, I said.

Bullied about your passports, locked up with nothing for company except a really old, uh – lock. It's a lot.

No, not those, she said. What I can't stop thinking about is curlew. And curfew. I mean, what on earth? It's like I've been given a message, I've been entrusted with it. But what *is* the message? Sand, I can't sleep at night for thinking about how I don't know what it's supposed to mean. Worrying that I'm not up to it. I get into bed tired, really exhausted. But then all I do is lie there awake in the dark worrying that I'm missing something important, something I ought to be being way more attentive to.

You're lucky that's all that's keeping you awake right now, I said.

I mean, I know what curlew means, she said, and I know what curfew means. But I don't know what the game is here. And I lie there, and

Edward's lovely and everything, but I can't tell Edward.

Why not? I said.

He's my husband, she said.

Ah, I said.

I held the phone away from me. Someone I hardly knew was trying to involve me in some kind of marital inadequacy quarrel. I hovered my finger over the hang-up button.

And I can't tell my kids. One would laugh. The other would call me a cis terf, which apparently I am. The other day they both shouted at me for full-stopping them. I don't know what my own children mean any more. And I can't tell anyone at work. They'd never trust me with an artefact again, they'd think I'm insane. A fantasist.

I looked at the phone in my hand with her voice coming out of it saying the word fantasist. But I still didn't hang up. I found I was thinking instead, quite vividly and quite unexpectedly, about the lock she'd described, with its way into itself hidden by ivy that isn't ivy, its soft cloths splayed round it unwrapped on a cheap airport table in a windowless room. Something like that might transform wherever it got placed, revealing as a whole new kind of museum even an anodyne space like the one she'd made me imagine her locked up in for seven and a half hours.

And that's when I remembered *you*, she was saying now into my ear again. Back when we were at college and you had that party trick where you could decipher dreams and read palms –

Uh, I said (because I had no recollection of reading a palm or deciphering a dream for anyone ever)

– and you were really good at sounding like you knew what a line of poetry meant, and so on. You just knew what things meant. Generally. More than we all did. In that arts-studenty way. The way you knew how to think about things that everybody more normal would dismiss as a bit off the planet.

*Normal.*

Thanks, I said. I think.

I mean I know I was an arts student then too, she said. Of sorts. But never like you. I did it for the milk round, the jobs market. Not that I didn't

or don't appreciate things. But I was never like you. Nobody else was. You were, well, different.

Was I? I said.

And I was lying there in the middle of the night staring at the curtains and you came into my head and I thought, Sand. I'll find a number or an email and ask Sand. Someone like Sand'll know what it means.

And here someone like me is, I said.

So. What do you think? she said. What does it mean?

Which part of the experience in particular? I said.

Just the words, she said. I'm not interested in anything but the words.

Curfew or curlew, I said.

Other way round, she said.

Curlew or curfew, I said

Curlew or curfew. You choose, she said.

Well, I said. That's the key. There's a choice. And it's something to do with *time* versus *bird*. I mean between the notion or actuality of time and the notion or actuality of a bird. A curlew is a bird, and a curfew is a time of day after which people officially aren't, by authority, permitted to be out and about. By law they're supposed to be home.

Yeah but that's obvious, I know all that, she said.

So the choice, I said. If there's such a thing as a real choice between the concepts evoked by two random words whose spellings suggest they've been yoked together like – or maybe even for – a kind of joke, maybe simply because they're almost the same word save for a single consonant change that minimally but effortlessly changes the meaning of everything –

Consonant change, she said. Oh. Oh yes. See, I never even thought of *that*.

– the choice, I said, is something to do with difference and sameness. And it's something to do with the dissonance between the words' meanings –

(I could hear her writing things down at the other end of the phone)

– *and* any similarity you can find between the things the words stand for. For instance, say, birds having wings and time being supposed to fly –

Yes! she said. That's brilliant. You're such a clever clogs.