The LIFE AND LOVES of LENA GAUNT

a novel by

TRACY FARR

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For my grandmothers.

I am electrical by nature, music is the electric soil in which the spirit lives, thinks, and invents.

Attributed to Ludwig van Beethoven
from Erik Davis, 'Recording Angels', *The Wire*, January, 1999

Astronomers say they have heard the sound of a black hole singing. And what it is singing, and perhaps has been singing for more than two billion years, they say, is B flat – a B flat 57 octaves lower than middle C ... The black hole is playing 'the lowest note in the universe,' said Dr. Andrew Fabian, an X-ray astronomer at the Institute for Astronomy at Cambridge University in England.

The New York Times, 16th September, 2003

To see [her] play a piece of music on the theremin is to be reminded of a boy doing tricks on a bicycle. For, like a boy who rides with 'no hands', [she] plays this instrument without touching it – by merely waving [her] hands over it.

Mary Day Winn
from a Baltimore newspaper, 1948

COTTESLOE

1991

Transformer

THEREMIN

All of us are old at this hour, on this beach; the heads in the water are all grey, including mine. Mostly we move gently, we older, early-rising swimmers, the water buoying us in our slow choreography. But if we're all old and stale, still the water smells fresh – somehow like watermelon, and salt. It's glorious, the water in the morning, when it's calm like this, when you can just bob on the surface, like a seal, watching. How *well* it makes me feel, how calm; how light and how heavy at the same time: like heroin – a little bit like heroin.

The waves this morning are gentle, lacking the roll and boom of the afternoon, when the breeze is up and the swell catches and the great mass of water feels deeply oceanic. Now it's silky, almost still. A little wave forms and moves towards me. I concentrate on watching its path, its sinusoidal shape. It breaks on me, gently, and I let it push me under the water, then I push back up and my head breaks the surface.

Looking down – through air, through water – I see myself distorted, my black swimsuit the negative of the pale thin legs extending long below it, and I feel disconnected from the body

and legs I see under the water. From this perspective, I look the same as I've always looked; the water washes the years away, or at least hides them under its surface.

I move my arms in wide arcs in front of me, pushing water out to the sides and back again. I can feel the stretch in my shoulders, the tendons tense and twist. Bubbles form up my arms, trapped in the tiny pale hairs, tickling like the bead in champagne. Moving my fingers in the water effects tiny changes in the waves that effect bigger movements. Action at a distance; just like playing the theremin.

Muscle memory takes over from my conscious brain as my fingers and hands move under the water's cover. I know the movements, not just practised for tonight's performance, but from a lifetime of playing. Under the surface of the water my arms have dropped into the position they adopt to play – right hand raised around shoulder height; left hand dropped nearer to my waist. My hands too are in place – the left hand palm-down, flattened, to stroke volume from the theremin's metal loop; the right with fingers pinching lightly in towards thumb to form an eye, to pluck and twitch in the tiniest precise movements, like pulling the thinnest silk thread, a filament too fine to see.

I let myself sink under the water. Expelling air from my mouth and nose, I hear the waveforms and harmonic intervals of *Aetherwave Suite* rise to the surface in the bubbles, the sound waves mixing in the air and water, undulating, soothing, readying me for the performance tonight.

Music from a theremin can sound like a human voice, or an electronic scream; like an alien spaceship imagined for a B-movie soundtrack, or like the low thrum and moan of a cello, warm with wood and resin and gut. The best players can tease all of these sounds – more – from the wood and wire and electricity that is a theremin, form a limitless range of notes and sounds. And I *am* the best player – after all these years, old woman that I am, not bettered. I, Lena Gaunt, am a legend.

The inaugural Transformer Festival has been keenly anticipated, written up in *The Wire* and other music magazines, discussed in earnest tones. A music festival offering the best electronica and eclectica that 1991 can deliver, I'm told. I understand I fall into both categories.

I first heard of Transformer nearly a year ago via an invitation from its organiser, Terence Meelinck, to play at his festival up in the Perth Hills. His pleading, his enthusiasm for the music and the instrument – and, yes I admit it, his flattery – won me over. And so, here I am, committed – for better or worse – to play tonight at this festival of Terence's. There is my face staring at me from the programme. I look so old amongst the other faces, so old.

I close the programme and place it on the table in front of me, in the campervan that is my accommodation for the night. The van is tiny, but adequate for one. Thankfully I do not have to share it; fame and age guarantee certain comforts. It is parked in a group of vans, large and small, circled at the edge of the festival's compound, far enough for the music from the stage to reach only as a slightly dulled thudding, distorted through the evening air.

I have already dressed for the stage: silken grey trousers, voluminous and flowing, each leg so wide it could double as a skirt. A simple black tunic, sleeveless, leaves my arms free; its shape reminds me of a mediaeval knight's dress, appropriate for battle. I take a mirror and lipstick from the make-up case next to me on the divan, apply dark red to cover my old lips. My hair is short, white-grey, platinum-grey; it catches the overhead light, like velvet. I stare at myself in the mirror: I will do.

I sit on the divan. There is nothing more I can do to prepare for my performance. I place my feet flat on the floor in their rubber soles, rest my hands on my knees, breathe deeply to still my body. I think of the beach this morning, the gentle waves, the watermelon scent, muscle memory; my fingers twitch lightly on my knees.

There is a knock at the door of the van and I open it to see a young man, the minder Terence has assigned to me. I lock the van on the way out and hand him the key as we slide into the car to slowly drive the short distance to the stage.

Steroidalab have finished their set and are backstage when we arrive. They're in a post-performance huddle, a closed unit as I walk past them at the top of the scaffolding steps that lead up to the stage from ground level. The crew are on stage, busy, packing away synthesisers, computers, microphones, until the stage is almost cleared. I stand where the stage manager tells me to, out of the way, but ready.

I hear Terence on stage. He starts speaking and, even though I am waiting in the wings, even though I know I am about to walk on to the stage and perform, it takes a beat before I realise: he is talking about me.

> *She has been an extraordinary part of the electronic music scene since before most of us were born. She was at the birth of electronic music sixty years ago. She's travelled the world performing on the instrument that started it all, the theremin. She reminds us that nothing we do is new. She's playing for us tonight on irreplaceable vintage electronic equipment. We're truly blessed to have had her back in this country for two decades, and we're honoured to have her here to play for us. Join with me in welcoming to the stage the remarkable, the beautiful, our very own, Dame* (beat) *Lena* (beat) *Gaaaaauuunt.*

And so I breathe in deeply and step onto the stage to deafening, thunderous applause.

I walk from the wings, legs pushing my trousers to swirl and billow and sweep the floor. When I reach the spotlight, I bow from the waist, my black tunic swaying, the heavy

pendant around my neck hanging to almost touch the surface of the stage in front of me.

I raise my head, square my shoulders. The audience is invisible behind the bright spot that shines, reaching in behind my eyes, almost blinding, almost hurting. The spotlight widens around me, my cue to raise my arm to gesture, as if to welcome another performer onto the stage. A second spot appears at stage left and, as the light reveals it, I raise my arm towards my theremin as if in a distant embrace. The audience roars; they stamp, they hoot, they call like cats, like cattle, like owls, like mad things. This is what they've come to hear, to see: this instrument, this tangle of wire I have played for so long, made for me all those years ago, not a museum piece but a working musical instrument, that has seen more and lived longer than any of them; nearly as old as me, it is my darling, and I play it like a lover I cannot touch.

I raise my hand, palm flat towards the audience and slowly, reluctantly, they quieten. I start to move across the stage to the theremin, my arm outstretched towards it. A layer of air exists between my skin and its wire, wood and glass. A low hum issues from it, the sum of the capacitance of my body, its effect on the electric currents.

I steady myself behind the theremin, and the spotlight tightens its focus, excludes all else into darkness. I raise my hands again – one to the loop, one to the wire – and hear the deep low that is almost the sound of a cello and yet is its own thing, its own sound; this deep lowing issues from the theremin, is amplified and channelled to the speakers behind me, swells to fill the night air and I once again wring magic from the wires by simply plucking and stroking my fingers in the aether.

The echoes of the last notes of the final movement of *Aetherwave Suite* hang above the crowd for only a moment;

that quiet, magic moment when the sound is ringing in their ears and they are stretching to hear the low notes rise and fall in the still, dark air. Then the applause, jolting and unmusical, starts and builds in wave upon wave of sound, directed back towards the stage, to me.

I bow low, my arms hanging loose, my hands almost touching the floor, then I rise, straighten. I lift my arms to the side, to the front, as if to acknowledge the audience, but really I want to acknowledge it all – the night, the audience, the music, the air that carries the sound and hums it back in endless loops of wave upon wave of glorious, vibrating music. The audience's applause and shouting form a thunder that hurts my ears. I raise my arms, my hands drawing through the night air, raise my hands up and bring my palms together, draw them to my face so that the fingertips touch at my lips. I hold the pose – *namaste* – for a beat, *two, three, four*, nod my head, drop my hands to my sides, and walk from the stage.

Satisfied after hearing the much awaited *Aetherwave Suite*, the audience lets me retire – without an encore – with grace, with dignity, from the night's performance; how could they in good conscience call an eighty-year-old woman back onto the the stage at this hour of the night? They've watched me standing, arms raised, energised, my whole body channelling the music. They know not to expect me back on stage; I know they know. I can hear the crowd, can imagine them start to turn away from the stage, to fragment into smaller groups, to turn from being a mob, a hive, to individuals humming with the energy of what they've just heard and seen, ready to reform into a single mass of audience as soon as the Gristmonger boys step onto the stage.

Backstage my minder meets me, ushers me past the members of Gristmonger bouncing in the wings, leads me away through snaking leads and amps, down the scaffolding steps. People mill, congratulate me; I beg off, *so very tired,*

please forgive me. Of course, of course; goodnight. Thank you Dame Lena! Thank you so much! I am led to a car, handed into the rear seat. The minder drives me back; it is not far, maybe half a mile, but he drives at no more than a brisk walking speed to pass slowly through the crowds, between the tents and vehicles, back to my campervan for the night. I step up to the door and unlock it with the key the minder hands me.

From the top of the step, framed in the doorway, I thank him, remembering that his name is a pretty name, Jasper. *Yes, I am fine. No, I don't need food – it is late, I have tea, I will sleep; thank you Jasper, thank you. Good night*, we nod at each other, smiling, backgrounded by the sound of the audience roaring, music swelling in the distance. As Jasper turns to leave, I close the door, lock it, and the noise of the crowd, of Gristmonger's music, fades to a hum.

At the tiny bench that passes for a kitchen I fill an electric jug with water from a plastic bottle, flick the switch on the jug and, as it clicks and mutters, I take a teabag – Russian Caravan, appropriately – from the box on the bench and drop it into a mug. The jug boils within a minute; I pour water over the teabag, and the smoky steam rises, whetting my appetite. I transfer the mug of tea to the table, then settle myself, move a cushion behind my back for comfort, for support, for balance. I breathe in then out with a heavy expiration of breath, my palms resting on my knees, feet flat on the floor, back straight against the cushions on the divan.

From the hard-shelled make-up case next to me I take a small metal vessel shaped like a squat teapot, and place it on the low table in front of me. I take a silver tin, prise the lid off, and place lid and tin next to the pot. There are a dozen capsules in the tin, arrayed as if in some form of code, or like a photograph I recall seeing in an encyclopaedia, of bacteria under a microscope. I withdraw one capsule, twist it in a quick, familiar movement and pour the pale powder into the pot, place the lid back on the tin, the lid on the pot. There: ready.

I have only to turn slightly to my left to light the small gas burner on the kitchen bench; I can reach it without moving from my seat on the divan. I place the pot on the burner, over the hissing blue flame, and wait, not long, anticipating. I know just how long it will take to heat; can hear, almost feel, the changes occur within the vessel. And when the heat is at that point, just at that particular point, I flick off the gas, lift the pot down to rest on the trivet in front of me and, blocking my left nostril with my fingers, I inhale with my right nostril over the spout – close to the spout, but not touching it – with the smoke from the heroin spiralling up, filling the gap between my nose and the vessel. I inhale lightly at first, then deep, deep, filling myself.

And as I inhale hard, the opiates rush my blood and my brain, making familiar connections. My mouth dries; I feel my skin flare red and hot; and then the wave rushes over me, the pull of it, the surge of it, buoying my heavy arms, making my mind dance. I settle against the cushion, my eyes close; I hear the music, the crowd, their voices becoming distant, buzzing and humming as the drug changes the shape of the waves of electricity forming and reforming, fluid, in my brain. My breath is shallow and on it drifts the scent memory of ocean waves: salt, and watermelon. I am on the divan. My feet are no longer flat on the floor, but curl at my side. My fingers – heavy, slow – twitch on my knees, patterning music.

SINGAPORE, PERTH

1910–1927

The symphony of her dressing table

THE SOUND

THAT BEES MAKE

If I were to write the story of my life it would begin, in a nutshell, like this: I am Helena Margaret Gaunt; I call myself Lena. I was born, the only child of Australian parents, in Singapore, where my father chased the riches of the booming rubber and export businesses after escaping the humdrum of work as a clerk in the bank in Tambellup, two hundred–odd miles – two days by train – south and east of Perth.

I was a solitary child, lacking companions my own age, but I was not lonely. I was happy in my own company, dancing to my own drum. My earliest memories are of making music, patterning music. They linger, these memories, watery, hazy, in the back of my mind.

I remember opening the door into Mother's bedroom, the dark back bedroom in the little brick bungalow in Singapore. I pulled the rattan stool from the corner, dragged it across the floor until it was next to Mother's dressing table. I clambered

up onto the stool and reached across, past the dressing table set, the crystal tray, the dish with Mother's rings, the perfume bottle with its bulbous ting-ting lid. I reached across, and took the tortoiseshell comb.

Someone must have taught me this: I took a piece of thin tissue paper, wrapped it around Mother's comb. I held the papered comb to my lips and hummed. The tissue paper vibrated, the air formed bubbles that moved as waves between the tissue of paper and the teeth of the comb.

I hummed quietly at first. The comb made the humming strange, changed it. I hummed into the comb; then I pulled it away and repeated the refrain – the sound was softer, quieter.

I could not have been more than four years old. But I remember the feeling of my lips, buzzing against the paper and the comb.

One time in my life – only one time, long ago and far away – I had a pet. Father bought him from the *pasar* in Singapore, a sweet little monkey, chattery, who when he found he liked you would settle and nestle into you, snuggling in under your arm. I called him Little Clive.

When Father brought him home and handed him to me that first day, I squealed and let go, and he was up the tree in a flash. There he stayed, peering down at us while sucking on his thumb just as a human baby would. He sat up there for three hours until Father ordered Cook's boy to shin up the tree and get him down.

Father said that Little Clive must be tied up after that. So Cook's boy, Malik, found a long piece of hemp rope, and plaited it to form a neat collar at one end, to slip firmly over Little Clive's neck. Little Clive couldn't undo it, even though his nimble fingers worried at the rope much of the day. Malik tied the other end to the verandah post. The rope was long enough that Little Clive could run, and even climb the trees closest to the house, but he could only climb so far – not far

enough to get himself tangled, nor far enough to climb onto the roof.

He would sit on the long rail at the front of the verandah and chatter at anyone who passed, like one of the old Chinamen at the *pasar*. Malik brought bruised fruit from the kitchen. Little Clive would sit and carefully peel the fruit, turning it over and over in his hands then stuffing it piece by piece into his mouth until his cheeks bulged and his eyes almost goggled from his head. At night he would wrap himself in an old sarong – against the mosquitoes, we always thought, but perhaps from watching me swaddle my doll in her blanket and hold her to me like a baby.

Our garden was full of insects, and among them were bees, swarming and buzzing on their quest for pollen, staying only for an afternoon, a day, then passing on, leaving silence where their humming had been. They could engulf a hibiscus in minutes; the dizzy big plates of scarlet and orange circled our house, each flower with its nodding sticky pistil a syrupy flag of welcome to the bees.

And poor Little Clive, perched there in the hibiscus with his hands and face and belly all sticky with the juice of mango and pineapple and rambutan and papaya, poor Little Clive was there one day when the bees passed through. And he was on his hemp rope and couldn't get away when the bees swarmed him. He tried to fight them off, poor thing, he squawked and screamed, he fought with his sharp little fingernails, but the humming buzzing mass of them settled on him like a cloud.

Father wouldn't let me outside, though I screamed for poor Little Clive, but the truth is, I didn't want to go, not with those buzzing, stinging bees there. We stood inside, safe behind wooden shutters, and watched.

'They will leave,' Father said. 'They always do.'

And Father was right, as Father always was. The bees passed on and left Little Clive as suddenly as they had swarmed him. One moment he was writhing, black and thick with bees; the next, just his thin bee-less self remained, drooping, barely

holding on to his perch in the hibiscus, fruit dropped to the ground below him.

Father opened the front door and we went towards Little Clive. When Father stretched his arms towards him Little Clive screamed. I could see hard, round lumps already forming on the soft skin of his belly, the size and shape of the jade beads Mother wore around her neck. The little monkey scrambled to try to climb higher, away from Father, but the rope tightened around his neck and would let him go no further.

Father got a mango – a good one, not a bruise on it – and tried to tempt him, but Little Clive just shuddered and shivered at the end of his rope, just barely keeping his balance in the V of the hibiscus branches. Even when night fell, he would not come to us. His little eyes stayed bright and watchful, not letting us close.

Before I went to bed, I watched Malik put an enamel dish of water and a banana on the ledge of the verandah, close to Little Clive – like putting a glass of sherry and a slice of Christmas cake out on Christmas Eve. I went to my bed but I could not sleep. I could hear Father and Mother in the dining room, clattering cutlery, tinkling glasses. I crept quietly down the hallway and managed to open the front door without making a sound. On the verandah, my eyes adjusting to the moonlight, I could make out the shape of Little Clive in the hibiscus, where we had left him. His outline was smooth, draped, and as my pupils widened I could see that he had wrapped himself in his old batik sarong. He held the sarong over his head, like the little old Madonna at the Catholic church, and he picked the lumps on his belly with careful fingernails, picking the beestings out of the centres of the hard lumps. He looked at me and squinted his eyes, as if to let me know it hurt, so much.

'I'm sorry about the bees, Little Clive,' I whispered. 'Good night. Get well.'

I believe he nodded at me.

In the morning he was dead, wrapped tight in his sarong, hooked like a hammock on a branch at the base of the hibiscus.

Cook's boy buried him that morning, buried Little Clive in his old sarong under the hibiscus, and I picked a bunch of flowers – orange and scarlet, magenta – and placed them on the small mound above him. I played him a tune on Mother's comb. I played him a tune like the buzzing of bees, a requiem that made my lips puff and sting.

NOT DROWNING, WAVING

I thought of my life as lived in a fairy tale. *Once there was a little girl named Helena Margaret Gaunt, who called herself Lena*. Sometimes it seemed almost as if I observed myself from a distance. Without other children to play with, I played all of the parts in my own little life story.

Lena sat on the path by the verandah at the front of her house, pouring water from pot to cup to make tea for her dolly, whose name was Enid. The girl and her doll sat in the cool of the garden, flowers around them, hibiscus big and bright and open, frangipani fragrant, moon-coloured, milk-coloured. She picked frangipani blossoms and put them on hibiscus leaves, and served them, *one for Enid, one for me*. She pretended to bite them, but didn't quite touch them to her mouth, mindful of her mother's warnings not to eat anything straight from the garden. As she pretended to eat, she nodded her head towards Enid, pursing her lips, as her mother and her mother's friends did when they took their afternoon tea. Her mother and her

mother's friends all sat on the verandah that afternoon, in the deep cool of the shade, around a low table of tea things: pretty china from Home, dainties on plates, milk in a jug. Lena could hear them, just yards away from her, tinkling china and low chattering and the whoosh and rustle and delicious slip of dress hems against ankles.

As she and Enid sat on the path in the shade by the house, enjoying their frangipani dainties and water-for-tea, a butterfly appeared and hovered above them, just out of reach, as big as one of Mother's best dinner plates, but more brightly coloured. Suspended above her, it seemed to block out the sun, the whole sky. The butterfly's wings were every colour the little girl loved: mango, hibiscus, blood red; purple of the sky at night; silver of fish gleaming on Cook's plate; blue of Mother's eyes. The butterfly was so big, so very big, that its wings made a sound as they compressed the air underneath and above them with each beat. The girl stood, lifting Enid in her arms, smoothing Enid's soft mango-yellow hair.

'Look Enid, butterfly. *Rama-rama*.'

She held Enid aloft, and as she did so the butterfly moved ahead of them, just a little. She took a step closer, so that Enid could see. With each step the little girl took with Enid, the butterfly moved just out of reach, just away but staying close, as if they were attached by a fine filament that the girl couldn't see, as if the butterfly was pulling her and Enid along behind it. It stayed close enough that she could hear the sound of its wings, the waves through the air. The butterfly stayed above her head, so she was looking up, but she got tired of holding Enid up to see. So she tucked Enid under her arm as she continued to follow the butterfly, quite quickly moving far from the tinkling teatime ladies on the verandah, towards the dark jungle at the bottom of the garden. Magicked by the butterfly, she ignored the warnings drummed into her: stay close to the house; stay away from the old well; don't go near the dark trees at the bottom of the garden.

The butterfly came to rest on a twig at her eye height. She

stopped, held her breath so the butterfly wouldn't be scared. She reached out her arm, her finger outstretched, then took a step forward – just a tiny step – towards it.

And then her world dropped from beneath her, the butterfly flew up as if the filament was jerked by an angel in the sky, and the girl felt a rush and a drop and all the air above and below her pushed her down and she disappeared below water, the air replaced by water all around her and above her and below her, and she didn't know how deep it was, or how wide. She felt herself fall through the water, felt her body move through the water and make it eddy and roil, felt bubbles rise in her wake and turbulence all around. Enid was there, above her, her mango-yellow hair around her head like a halo, like a dinner plate, like a sea anemone's tentacles, like a star. Enid held her arms out towards the girl, then rolled in the water above her and faced away, her hair tentacling around her, blocking out the sun, the sky, the world, the air above. The little girl waved her hand at Enid, waved at her to turn back, to not go away, but Enid did not respond. The little girl stopped waving. The water was warm. It pushed against her ears, a pressure she heard inside her head as a single note, humming, musical, low. It sounded like the black strip near the bottom of the piano. But it wasn't played on the piano, it was a different sound, not a hammer on a wire; it was a humming, inside her head, like the sound bees make.

As the sound in her head changed, the little girl felt a clasping pressure on her chest, then a rush and then the water moved past her and she was pulled, blinking, spluttering, abruptly back into the air.

The panicking eyes of Cook's boy were above her, close to her eyes, as big as plates, wide in his face. She breathed in deep, and smiled.

'*Selamat pagi*, Malik,' she said.

'Miss, you were in the water!'

'Where's Enid?'

'Enid, Miss?'

‘Enid went with me. We were having a tea party. Enid was in the water. I saw her. We followed the *rama-rama*.’

The boy’s eyes panicked again, and he looked to the well, freezing for a moment before leaping up, imagining another pale girl, this one floating on the surface of the water, eyes open, not seeing.

He leant over the well, peering into blackness. But he turned back smiling, showing her Enid, bedraggled, hair like yellow seaweed over her beautiful face and dress.

‘Enid!’ the girl squealed, and then she coughed, and then she was sick, more water than sick, water flowing in waves from her mouth, more water than a little girl could hold coming out and coming and coming as if it would never stop.