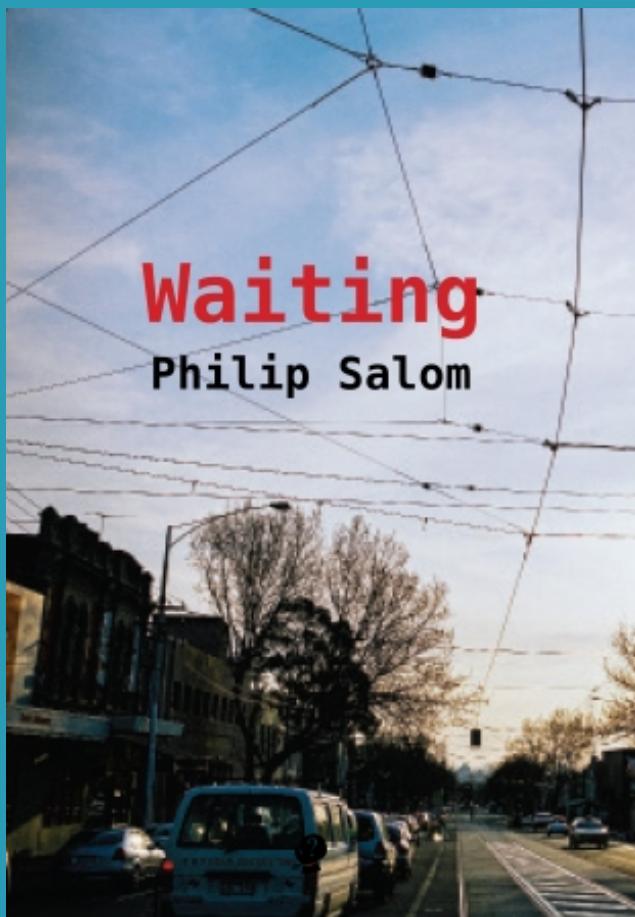


2017  
**SHORTLIST**

MILES FRANKLIN  
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



**EXTRACT**



## Big and Little

Their two figures move up and down, and onwards as always. Habit and walking and still a hundred metres from the automatic doors. Little is saying remember we must get tomatoes. Big is thinking of the calendar they want, how time divides neatly into numbered boxes, and how in those boxes, on other people's calendars, there are notes about holidays, and birthdays and appointments. Holidays! Except in his life and hers there are no holidays, or even notes on the days passing. Just the days, then more days. Every moment is itself.

They are two characters walking uphill, Big with his long steps and Little with many shorter steps. But why so dishevelled and why so muttering? How to avoid the projections, the clichés we indulge in when two odd people are walking? Which foods are the right foods when so many foods are the wrong foods. Big knows his foods. He is not a nice man to walk so forcefully but she is a whinge to do the quick quick slow slow. Mumble and mutter:

And pies. Tomatoes and pies.

These two characters are like their shopping items, as inseparable as they are in syntax: Big and Little.

She has small tears in her eyes. Big prefers to call them Little tears. Little walks on a tilt forwards and up to the shops, she is a skier leaning through the wind and the cold, like the pain in her kidneys. Her kidneys are not funny, her kidneys are as dark and unhappy as a cruel poem, all present tense and no story and cold as snow. They are Loopy, her own name for the Lupus that assails their shape. Lupus erythematosus.

Little is just that – diminutive, somewhat withered – but Big thinks she has a nice round bottom and has been known to say as much, in private, of course. Beside her, inseparable, he stamps in his big-legged big-calved way and from a distance someone might look at them and see two women, a small woman and a big woman... or a very large man in a faded dress. Sometimes he wears skirts but mostly he wears dresses. His man-boobs are bigger than Little's, they are more than considerable, they are alarming, and he dresses them tightly outlined. He is a 60 year old show-off.



Last time we went shopping you forgot the tomatoes and you know how much I like them, you know...

Not so good for the joints, Little. With her tight-bottom jeans and his waddle way of walking Big seems to be kicking her like a Little football, whingeing her way along the pavement. It is uphill, after all, downhill is much worse: when he wades downhill she looks to be pedalling a tiny, invisible bicycle. Today he is carrying a yellow handbag. His shins are tucked into tight pink socks and his feet are shod in green flat-heels. No one knows where he found them but the one thing to get right is: he is not the woman to ask. Big of the huge gut and hairy Popeye forearms. His long hair trails out in the breeze, exposing his friar's tonsure, lovely word, he says, the very Roman look of his tonsure and his large head.

Outside their IGA, squatting against the wall, is a daft-looking bloke who is everywhere on his edges blurry and roughened, as if from head to foot his once-ordered body has been shaken hard by storms. As people walk in and out of the IGA he tries it on with his whining voice and his almost saturated staring. Big stares back at him.

Do I look like I'm made of money? Big growls, and swings his handbag past the guy's knees. Little follows him like a pup in blue denim and looks back over her shoulder.

Don't stop and stare, come here, in here, get away from him, growls Big. The man's a swamp.

But I remember him.

She jumps in through the electric doors.

Remember him?

And you remember, she says to Big, tomatoes, sauce, calendar.

I know, I know, he says, I have a memory on my poor shoulders. Having started growling he continues growling.

Little has a smirk: I thought you said you had a memory for shoulders. His are the shoulders of a womanly fireman. Except he used to be not a fireman but a chef. Not an effing chef or a scripted TV wannabe, but a growling against the clock singlet-sweating cook. There is no money for this lack of glamour, but they labour behind the walls of thousands of cafes and restaurants, rushing or stalling to keep the rest of us averagely



fed. Before that he was way out, he was a shearer's cook. With no room to swing a handbag in, he had to wallop out a steak and veg or a chicken parma, mate, you betcha, and hack up carcasses for those cliff-sided roasts. A crash-bang of a cook.

He selects a red, plastic carry-basket and carries this on his right hand and his yellow handbag in his left. Trots along like David Suchet's Poirot. They shop to a set plan: cut left into the cross-aisle and then right alongside the meat in the first long aisle but then down and back like ploughing for the turn-both-ways ploughs. Because the old ploughs, Big has more than once told Little, the old trailing discs and mouldboard ploughs, could only turn right, and so you cut out a paddock in sections turning back on yourself by always turning right. Big announced this to a thin old lady once, in front of the cereal shelves. Little is the usual audience. She remembers ploughing every time they come in.

So they plough and bicker over the breadstuffs, the meat in packs, and handle all the fruit despite the staff staring at them. He chooses and she selects it from the shelf. Big discusses food and life and rarely stops. She selects more than he chooses. Today he raves just a bit, though, less than usual, he raves just enough to be himself, raving, but that is all. Methodically and thoroughly. They squint at calendars before choosing one with dogs and big squares for each day. And then, with the actual shopping done as slowly as possible, but disappointingly soon, they head for the check-out. It could be worse. Big sometimes get stuck in the IGA for hours. Sometimes he makes trouble with the floor staff, which embarrasses Little. The things Big and Little discuss are not ideas, they are urges, words of arousal, he insists on saying, urges, from down where all our little food folds move about.

Little is trying to work out if the check-out boys are old enough to shave when Big, who is and doesn't much, turns to her and says:

Did you see that beauty who just waltzed in?

No, she tells him, but spins around just in time to see a very attractive women turn into the first aisle.

Ah, yes. She's beautiful.

Nothing of the sort, he says. That woman...

Big has forgotten. He raises a fruity English accent:



... that woman... was never born to wear that face and nor that... set of tits. (His tits are ogreish.) No woman was. Surgery and surgeons are responsible for it. (He has forgotten the word surgery makes Little feel unwell.) Did you know in South American countries, where a few are rich and the rest are poor, the poor cannot resist wasting their saddest dollars on boob jobs and lips. Lipo fat is literally sucked from their bellies and their bottoms! They shed gallons of it, they yield, yes, gallons of it, like butter. Whole tanks of fat. Urgh! Ipso facto.

People are staring. They always do. But now they are shuddering.

Worse still, oh, way worse, all that fat is rendered down for cosmetics – can you see how ludicrously comic this cosmetic surgery is? Their poor arse fat goes back onto the faces of the rich.

He pauses.

That and dynamite.

His voice is booming.

Yes, they turn fat into nitroglycerine, or so I understand, human glycerine is that fine. One hopes their faces do not explode.