



# eChapbook

Torque  
*Alison Croggon*

## Bio

Born in 1962, **Alison Croggon** is one of a generation of Australian poets which emerged in the 1990s. She writes in many genres, including criticism, theatre and prose.

Her poetry has been published widely in anthologies and magazines in Australia and overseas. Her next full collection, **Theatre**, is forthcoming from Salt in 2008. Her most recent poetry publications are **Ash** (Cusp Books, LA) and **November Burning**, published by Vagabond Press as part of their Rare Objects Series in November 2004. The poem **Mnemosyne**, was published as a chapbook by Wild Honey Press in December 2001. A book of new and selected poems, **The Common Flesh**, was published by Arc Publications in the UK late 2003, and Salt Publishing released a new collection of poems and other writing, **Attempts at Being** in early 2002. **Attempts at Being** was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Poetry Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and also was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in the US. In 2002, 2003 and 2005 she toured the UK, among other things participating in the Poetry International Festival at Royal Festival Hall in London (2002), New Writing Worlds at the University of East Anglia in Norwich (2005) and Soundeye, the Cork International Poetry Festival (2005).

Her first book of poems, **This is the Stone**, won the 1991 Anne Elder and Dame Mary Gilmore Prizes. Her novel **Navigatio**, published by Black Pepper Press, was highly commended in the 1995 Australian/Vogel literary awards and is being translated for publication in France. Her second book of poems, **The Blue Gate**, was released in 1997 and was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Poetry Prize.

2002 also saw the publication of Alison's fantasy novel for young adults **The Gift (The Naming** in the US), the first installment of the epic Pellinor quartet. It was nominated in two categories in the Aurealis Awards for Excellence in Australian Speculative Fiction in December 2002 and named one of the Notable Books of 2003 by the Children's Book Council of Australia. The series has been published in the UK and the US to popular and critical acclaim, and the final book is scheduled for release in 2008.

Alison has to date written and had performed nine works for theatre. Her theatre work includes the operas **Gauguin** (Melbourne Festival 2000) and **The Burrow** (Perth Festival, Sydney, Melbourne 1994-95 and broadcast by ABC Radio), both with Michael Smetanin, and the plays **Lenz** (Melbourne Festival 1996), **Samarkand** and **The Famine (Rules of Thumb** season, Red Shed Company, Adelaide 1997 and ABC Radio 1998). Her play **Blue** was presented at La Mama in Melbourne and the Street Theatre in Canberra in June 2001 by CIA. The text **Monologues for an Apocalypse** was commissioned for ABC Radio National and broadcast in 2001. She also wrote lyrics for **Confidentially Yours** (Playbox Theatre 1998, Hong Kong Festival 1999). Many of her poems have been set to music by various composers, including Smetanin (**Skinless Kiss of Angels**, Elision New Music Ensemble), Christine McCombe and Margaret Legge-Wilkinson (Canberra New Music Ensemble) and most recently Andr e Greenwell. With Michael Smetanin, she has completed a music theatre project, **The White Army**, and she has recently completed a commission for ABC Radio National Audio Arts with composer Sam Mallet.

She was the 2000 Australia Council writer in residence at Cambridge University, UK. She was poetry editor for **Overland Extra** (1992), **Modern Writing** (1992-1994) and **Voices** (1996) and is founding editor of the literary arts ezine **Masthead** (masthead.net.au). She runs the respected theatre review blog Theatre Notes (theatrenotes.blogspot.com) and is the Melbourne theatre reviewer for the national daily **The Australian**. More information at [alisoncroggon.com](http://alisoncroggon.com).



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## Once upon a time

He was born inside a nut which grew at the top of the highest tree in the world. The tree grew on an island in the middle of a copper blue lake. One day a blackbird came along and pecked the nutshell with its yellow beak and his eyes split open. He hadn't known there were so many colours. When the blackbird asked him if he wanted to climb onto its back he did, just like that. They flew away from the tree over the blue lake until they came to the other shore. There the blackbird set him down and he looked around. He was bigger than a crocus flower, and that seemed very big to him, but the world was bigger still. He looked at the sky and wondered if he could touch it. He touched the earth and wondered if he could fly through it. He thought the air and the water were the same thing. He didn't know anything. "What shall I do?" he asked the blackbird. "I don't know anything." The blackbird flew away without answering. He sat on a stone on the edge of the lake looking at the blue world. The wind was very cold. Something wet ran down his face, but he didn't know what it was. He started to sing.



## Cassandra

you walk across the floor of a dead sea among  
shrill bones the dust of plankton the piping  
wind your near companion

alas alas for the towers of Ilium  
vanished in the sediment teeth excrement hair  
bloodied nails sinews bone echoes on the plain  
where grass fattens on tongues churned to rot

no syllables avail you here  
mute as the dead are mute  
language smashed still before its birth  
burst Lethe's thickening membrane

†

voices divide in millions through time's navel  
the cord binding back and forward in most  
the bloody string is cut but through you  
conduits of language open you cannot  
stanch the wound

you know  
your death is nourished  
in every place  
harbouring your footprint

this your sentence

spoken always in a new argot  
through the infinite declensions of Sparta  
the first pure state

its spawn in each unwindowed room  
where the world is scrubbed back to nothing



that inexorable bell  
widens its silence  
terrible wind that flattens  
buildings like grass  
and drives you you back  
to the first sefiroth  
nogod nobodaddy the jealousy  
concealed blasphemy

†

the limbs of a tree move across the window  
moved by invisible storm  
as if one tapped urgently  
as if to do injury as if to multiply fear  
as if one sought harbour in a lighted place  
an exhausted refugee from dreams  
as if one were curious and conversational  
and courteously sought attention  
as if one were simply a tree  
obedient to the complexities of air  
stirred by infinite intricacies  
untraceable as the eddies of a mind  
but immediately perceptible  
in the movement of a finger  
the unseen moving with clarity  
in a tangible reality

and in the surfacing tokens only  
broken scraps evidence  
winkling back towards the gates of birth  
patiently unpicking to the smallest fibre  
there to reveal galaxies  
but on the surface merely the placing of a finger

in the pained  
solace in the sweet disorder in the banishment



and meeting place the melts  
wherein thoughts circle and grow muddy  
anciently new or newly ancient  
comforts spring

the curious tongue  
might probe the fish of language to the bone  
and never find motility nor the bright scales  
scattered in the swamps of Ur  
the calm eye anatomize having forgot its pulse  
within a sea of tears -  
so hands forget caressing  
the haft in the palm the weight and vector of work  
the word's multiple speaking in the flesh  
nourished towards light

and that face still  
forever that broke a gentle soul  
to music and set a delicate fire under skin  
in the deathly exile of love



## The letters of the good mothers

(Freely constructed from a letter by Sor Juana de la Cruz)

the letters of the good mothers  
are drenched in secular eloquence  
if all the limbs of my body were tongues  
I could not publish such excellence

they do not hasten to condemn  
deformities of the human heart  
yet ambition may become a woman  
muliere in silentio discat

the properties of a hare may briefly  
make a woman handsome  
but I would rather ungreased hinges  
and the study of declensions

osculatur me osculo  
oris sui decrees the Song  
if lips were letters I could more straitly  
be given to wondering

for this pure grammar of kisses  
may express a pious verity  
that mitigates the condemnations  
of lascivious sorority

if a harp can cure a king's sickness  
then song may heal my sin  
I merely lust to follow studies  
that are celebrated in men



## Poetry on tv

yesterday I was sick as a dog  
so I took all my drugs and turned on the tv  
I don't usually watch tv because I find it too depressing  
all this stuff I am supposed to buy  
and those blow-waved commentators ratcheting up the fear meter  
cancer scares life threatening elevators terrorists &c  
but anyway there I was pasted to the sofa  
and I saw two programs with poets in them!  
one was all about counter-terrorism in Yemen  
a handsome poet whose name I didn't write down went out  
to tribal villages with his ceremonial knife in his belt  
and in a long room would speak his poems to about forty men  
who would chew mildly narcotic leaves  
while listening to the true way of Islam  
how it is a religion of peace and tolerance  
and how killing people is not Islamic  
this poet was a former army officer but was now a man of peace  
and he was greatly honoured among the villagers  
then I got embarrassed because the Australian journalist  
was interviewing some boys in an Islamic school in Yemen  
and all he would talk about was Al Qaeda  
so I switched and there was a program about The Last Poets  
and how poetry was about Revolution  
and Black Power and how poetry  
saved at least one person's life  
because it stopped this guy when he was about to drive a knife  
into another person's heart because he was a gangster  
then they talked about rap and money  
and how the whole thing had got corrupt  
and I began to feel depressed again  
because in both of these programs there was not one woman  
mentioned or spoken to  
and nobody seemed to think this was strange  
or worth talking about



## Answer

All the years you were gone, I cursed your name.

While I endured the mockery of fools  
you sought in whorish cities an easier love  
and locked me in your jealous purity.

There were no mountains for me, no deserts,  
only a blackening kitchen, the path to church,  
the gossip of old women. Where could I  
find any comfort in this village of thorns?

I dressed in black like a widow and made my house  
with hard and bitter labour. I was the one  
of whom they whispered, the one whose lover left her.

And now you say that I should wear this rose!



## What the Glove Said

I am silken and wholesome.

Sometimes in the night I am seen shaking.

Jackals bay in the littered alleys but I pay them no mind.

Between one tooth and another, the iron passivity.

I disgorge hands and sleep. I eat and wake.

Such prey as use me never tell their names.

I am fond of wordless proverbs.

I am concerned with the skin of nearness.

Love is a roof of rain and a habitation.

Such tears I wipe would stun the bilious world.

My dance is with the air.

I hide and disclose like a poem.



## Patterns

the bees have declared an amnesty  
their dances are only lyrical effusions

and why are apricots so illiterate?  
yet they diffuse their promiscuous perfumes  
sliming the earth with rot

one has always mistrusted the language of cats  
and their devotion to hygiene

so many things slide and tumble  
churches flounder in tides of mud  
shoes dissolve in a week

and why do scissors keep disappearing?  
if you ask nature for absolution  
it senselessly posts you flowers and blood

and fronds uncurl to tinier fronds and so on  
which seem meticulous synonyms for murder

like a froth of hands on metallic surfaces  
making and unmaking  
and underneath the mindless carnivorous ocean



## Tomorrow

tomorrow the birds with yellow tongues  
will fly in the stony ground  
tomorrow the gestures of children  
will write themselves across different airs  
the play will begin again with strange limbs  
the clouds will distribute new myths  
to every class of creature

fossils with fangs and claws are hiding  
in the mineral depths of every eye -  
will they glance again through the purities?  
will they lie down together at last  
and purr in a green garden?  
or will the doctors in white coats  
put them out of their pain?



## Breakages

there are breakages certainly  
although bone can withstand more pressure than reinforced concrete  
the psyche has its own architectures which pay little heed to gravity  
an entire city can be populated on foundations little bigger than an ant  
I have often watched these insects crawling across the desolation of tables  
in such malarial humidities perception is closed to a perimeter of twenty feet  
within the circle of sight all objects are preternaturally large and clear  
and I sip again the vitreous humours of my companions  
I have detached each lunate from each wrist and woven a palace from each  
the dust from the ulysses butterfly is an excellent material for windows  
such altitudes are dizzying but easily dispersed in alcohol  
later the body will wither and every palace crash to the earth



## Goodnight, sweet prince...

Such possessions as gore me pontificate from corners.

I am no longer solid but a speech of butterflies.

How it spills, when all is said and done:

It is hard to see virtue in the cold matter

Staining the floor - frills, cups, leaves, arquebuses,

Bile - the gross litters of meaning - the new king

Knitting up this mess in his brainless sinews,

Mere presence the answer to everything, the golden

Halo of a new dawn impressing all the peasants.



## The Kingdom

no the kingdom is not yet  
laboured out of flame  
and many the heads broken  
against its borders  
beyond hope of healing

all confusion and clamour  
buying and selling  
icons and pretty stories  
words prepare our injuries  
and keep us from them

and slice now to its pith  
a fiery desolation  
raining from heaven  
deathrut in the ancient ways  
prosecutes in each again

men blister ripe on the wartree  
and women splay  
for maggot pleasures  
uniforms of bone and gristle  
haft their weapons

scouring every storied skull  
the limed charnel  
stinks with life  
which goes about its business  
eating and burning

they say the kingdom is not visible  
all circles must be broken  
inside or outside  
it shines beyond all conflict it is the agony  
some say that it will never come



## Poems for CNN

I

### Found poem

"The purpose of all coercive techniques is to induce psychological regression in the subject by bringing a superior outside force to bear on his will to resist. Regression is basically a loss of autonomy."

—From the "Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual", *CIA Interrogation training handbook*

a person's sense of identity  
depends upon the continuity in  
his  
surroundings habits appearance  
relations with others  
detention should be planned to enhance  
feelings of being cut off  
from anything known and reassuring  
threat of coercion  
weakens or destroys resistance  
more effectively  
than coercion itself the threat to inflict  
pain can trigger  
fears more damaging  
than the immediate sensation  
of pain  
if a subject  
refuses to comply  
after a threat has been made  
it must be carried out or  
subsequent threats will  
prove ineffective  
pain that he feels he is inflicting  
upon himself i  
s more likely to sap  
required to maintain  
rigid position standing at attention sitting





II

you get that bored

it's **hot** the roosters

crowing up in the air condition'd

Sub-Ordinated Perch of Power

this one that one wriggling those dollars

past the snoozing

parliamentary heads o lordy

THERE'S ANOTHER FREEDOM

we don't need to fight for any more

because

IT'S BEING PROTECTED

from us/for us it's

freedomfurnitureatdollarsavers

baby baby baby I said my eggs

are tired baby I said those wheels are **hot** I said

the heat is like suffocating inside

a chicken farmer's

Boot

so stunned you forget to notice

that those people

just got in A BOAT

and practically swam all the way to the Cape of York

feral trees the jungle

bleeding soldiers

sendem to Weipa weepers they said

it was guns but we gottem

offshore luckily they said **guns**

but we know that) in Irian Jaya

they're protecting the miners or

maybe it's **Certain**

**Maritime Arrangements** I get confused which

sea was that? it's hot

there too upstream or downstream it's all revenoo

under the sea or maybe chickens

getting hot and fluey

under those damn lights

they get so sweaty in them containers not to mention

the FILTH you gotta

midway or wake them if gitmo don't squeeze past

the signing statement we said

the DEFENCE OF SUPERIOR ORDERS WILL GENERALLY BE

AVAILABLE (Nuremberg) thank God

thank God thanks **GOD**



## O my america

I

o the ice pick sings

its hot orange

in the vendetta tree

such tales for telling

through these numb fingers

one by one

rubies such as never seen

in the caught months

of a fatal spring

sad & toxic



II

my dear america

the uranium sun

coals on your many tongues

unjust and bleeding

all these broken songs

out of the trap

beads weapons money

turn & snap

which skull split

in the berth of which paroxysmal

vision of which

oily hell

a whale of a time

america you clamp your arrogant jaw

down again that

beautiful machine

breaks breaks again breaks

September 11, 2006



## All Souls Day

The dead have come to visit.  
I don't know who they are.  
They mark the glittering streets  
With footsteps of rain.  
The last leaves of autumn  
Are their lost hands. I  
Can almost hear their voices,

A rumour of wind and water.  
My chest shakes like a window.  
I have nothing to give them.  
When I show them my hands  
They turn away, disappointed.  
Their eyes see through walls  
To irrevocable horizons. I

Do not know their names.  
Their breath beats in my arteries  
Like ash, like earth, like rain  
Which will never stop falling.  
Their injuries taint my mouth  
With a taste like blood. I  
Breathe their sour bones.

I do not know what they want.  
They seep into every cell  
The purities of their lack.  
Knowledge crumbles against them  
And pours into a vast river  
Where I am nameless.  
The dead have come to visit

Hungry as birds in winter,  
Enclosed by mortal grief  
As light encloses a gesture  
In darkness. I do not know  
If it releases them.  
Only the living are sad.  
Dona eis requiem.



## Moon

this moon sings  
along the bone of me

each edge absolute

when my fingers open  
the waters spill

words curl into air  
dreaming of mouth  
scythes of muscle

and in that other sky  
a knife poises  
its black vacuum

†††

this moon pries  
all secrets open

inside is the black

inside is black

the oyster pearl  
hacked from the sea-wet  
waiting lips

absolute blade  
wait for me



†††

in the dry country  
you dream of petals  
snow and milk

under your hand  
the rock bleeds

under your hand the rock  
is learning to sing

when you wake  
from this long dream  
you will bless the stone

you will bless the word that flows  
through your mouth and your ears  
the phantom print of your hand  
that fades from the window

you will know that in the distance  
of less than a breath  
none of this exists



## Specula

### Visions of the world's surface

#### First Vision

tv antennae rake carnivorous angels hearts chime sarcomas bulge the flickering heads of saints nothing more alive than this moment

#### Second Vision

I have savaged my skin I have slept in the shadows of rotting architectures eyes backward in my head I see deep into hell I divine the salt taste squamous on my lips I pluck the neon fruits germinating over this lying city I hold myself regretless and yet my hands punish me I flew into the nucleus of the sun and eyes burned out the fumigants await me with their cheap smiles earth old and full of her rebellion seeds swell under fingernails I am florescent again the rose of leprosaria

#### Third Vision

heart bends the weight of everything I have forgotten lingering in the stink of God's breath my deathly Father walk where I am forbidden and birds speak to me darkly tongues of flame I am the black blood breaking under the scourge I write this only because I am told flame bursts over the page and dessicates hands to ash how many chimneys have called how many bones how many pyres consumed how many how many voices I am not these words I am nothing I am not I am a name

#### Fourth Vision

no nothing never not because I am the axeman skulks in the sad carolling of foreign birds I was not the death of myself so much as the agony of beginning

#### Fifth Vision

perceive how the light splices the frost trees collect themselves saints depart from their niches child's sight vanishes desire I have slept in my stench faint as an echo on the skin of night

#### Sixth Vision

might have been a voice but the owl springs out of my mind she has abandoned me wakes between the night and the incurable hurts she extrudes huge wings and departs twilight is impassible my senses vanish I am the sweetness left by god in the inimitable desert where stones never weep all beginnings and all endings whoever waits has no face and I am lost I have been mortal once again there is nothing to save me

**Of Margaret of Kempe I**

[T]he husband is his wife's head, to rule her, correct her (if she strays) and restrain her (so she does not fall headlong). For hers is a slippery and weak sex, not to be trusted too easily. Wanton woman is slippery like a snake and mobile as an eel; so she can hardly be guarded or kept within bounds. Some things are so bare that there is nothing by which to get hold of them. . . . so it is with woman: roving and lecherous once she has been stirred by the devil's hoe.

THIS CREATURE where thow she lost reson and her wyttes

a long tym

setting all

hyr trost, alle hyr lofe, and alle hyr affeccyon in hym only

he comawnded hyr and charged hir

that sche shuld wryten her **felyngys**

the creature cryed often

[his eyn myssed so that he mygth not see

to make hys [hyr] lettre he set

a peyr of spectacles on hys nose]



ANNO DOMINE 1436

[and then yet it was wretyn fyrst be a man which cows neithyr wel wryten]

she had a thyng in conscyens which sche had nevyr schewyd

THIS CREATURE

went owt of hir mende

she knew no vertu ne goodnesse

thereof

sche bot hir owen hand so vyolently

and also sche roof her skin wyth her nayles spetowsly

THAN

syttyng upon her beddys syde **lokyng** upon hir

**how the eye openyd**

as brygth as ony levyn and he stey up into the eyr fayr and esly

that sche mygth wel beholdyn hym in the eyr til it was closyd ageyn



Of Life's Mys(t)eries

no wound so deep as the mind

sweat

through menstrual stains to the brittle

skins of

I

it cracks they is

dry as dead

paper

husks

you write

down

atrocities

you write up

you mouth

the bad taste blood you

SAY

the shattered

skeleton the ripped

vagina the

burned bone the rotting brain the gashed slitted cracked slashed

evidence

of wrong sex

wronged

so many words

said uttered lipped

fleshening circles of

being and

yet



in the cockeyed courtroom amid the testaments these

un-words

have HAVE BEEN HAD

have fallen like soft petals sweet

candied rosepetals decorative as grief as

swallowable as tears as liminal as any

metaphor

howlscriesbellowsululationsgroanswailsshrieksroarsbaysyelpssobsscreams  
break

keening

lamentations

lips red lips red lips red

hands red breasts blue nails black teeth how digestible how they oil the

economies remain in

visible hole absent sweetnothings

you

**cunts**



The Unknown Language

ENGLISH	LATIN	LINGUA IGNOTA
Man	Homo	Whose
God	Deus	Mouth
Sin	Labia	Kisses
Angel	Angelus	Wholly
Language	Hymen	Without
Reason	Logos	Fear
Rationality	Ratio	Is
Trinity	Uno	Luminous
Lust	Desiderio	Delight
Devil	Diabolo	Laughing
Ignorance	Defututa	Through
Master	Magister	Darkly
Nature	Natura	Wounded
Faith	Fidelis	Flesh



**Of Margery of Kempe II**

[sche wold not leevyn hir pride ne hir pompows aray  
gold pypys on hir hevvd

**alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of the pepul**

and was on of the grettest brewers in the town  
the ale was lost]

summe seyden sche was acursyd

**WERE WROTH WITH HIR**

sche herd a sownd of melodye so swet and delectable

the dette of matrimony was so abhomiably to hir that sche had levar  
etyn and dryken the mukke in the chanel  
punschyn and chastysyn hemself wylfully be absteyning

he used her as he had do before  
he wold not spar



Having once tasted the spirit, she held as nothing all sensual delights until one day she remembered the time when she had been gravely ill and had been forced, from necessity, to eat meat and drink a little wine

he leyd befor this creatur  
the snar of letchery and in al this tyme sche had no lust to comown wyth  
her husbond in the second year yt fel so that a man which sche  
loyd wel seyde onto her he wold ly be hir  
and have hys lust of hys body and sche schuld not withstand him  
and evyr sche was labowred wyth the other man for to syn wyth hym  
sche was ovrycoym and consentyd in her mend  
and he seyde he ne wold  
schamyd and confusyd in hirself

**boldly clepe me Jhesus thi love for I am thi love and schal be thi love**

wythowtyn ende

this creature  
hir dalyawns was so swet that sche  
gret plenté of terys boystows sobbyngys mornyggys and wepyngys

**unspekable**



## 6. The Gift

leaning into a reflection  
that my eyes do not register  
as my belly dissolves as I  
vanish into the space  
your eyes devour I have

no place to be either  
woken or alone I have  
no name and my lips  
are colder than imagining  
when I sleep on the ice

of dreams it is a vapour  
of fear that rises it is  
a cold anaesthetic fume  
rising like a goddess  
her chilly feathers

glancing on my skin  
like kisses I have forgotten  
or gestures flinching between  
one shadow and another  
I am often afraid

**Margery of Kempe III**

In vehemence of spirit, almost as if she were inebriated, she began to loathe her body when she compared it to the sweetness of the Paschal Lamb and, with a knife, in error cut out a large piece of her flesh which, from embarrassment, she buried in the earth. Inflamed as she was, however, by the intense fire of love, she did not feel the pain of her wound

the prest wech wrot this boke

thei were ryche men, worshepful marchawntys and haddyn gold enow

(wech may spede in every nede)

**rewth that mede**

**schuld spede**

**er than trewth**

**God has nowhere to put his goodness, if not in me**

**thei wer most displeysyd**

they cutted her gown so schort that it come but lytil  
sche schuld ben holdyn a fool

**ther is no gyft as holy as the gyft of lofe**

and sumtyme yf sche sey a man had a wownde er a best whethyr it wer

er yf a man bett a childe befor hir

er smet a hors er another best wyth a whippe

**hir thowt sche saw owyr Lord be betyn er wowndyd**

lyk as sche saw in the man er in the best

this creature

summe seyde it was a wikkyd spiryte      sum seyde it was a sekenes

sum seyde sche had dronken to mech wyn

sum wuld she ben in the se in a bottumless

more ful of wowndys than evyr was duffehows of holys

wondyrfully

turnyng and wrestyng her body

**alas, alas for sorwe**

sche wept

sche sobbyd

sche cryed so lowde



summe seyden that thei wold not go wyth hir for an hundryd pound

**the cawse of hys malyce was for sche would not obeyn him**

my derworthy dowtyr I schal nevyr forsakyn the

and yyf sche sey a semly man sche had gret peyn to lokyn on hym

**the manhode of Crist**









# Ahadada Books

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3158 Bentworth Drive  
Burlington, Ontario  
Canada  
L7M 1M2

Tokyo  
Jesse Glass  
Meikai University  
8 Akemi  
Urayasu  
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